Connective Tissue

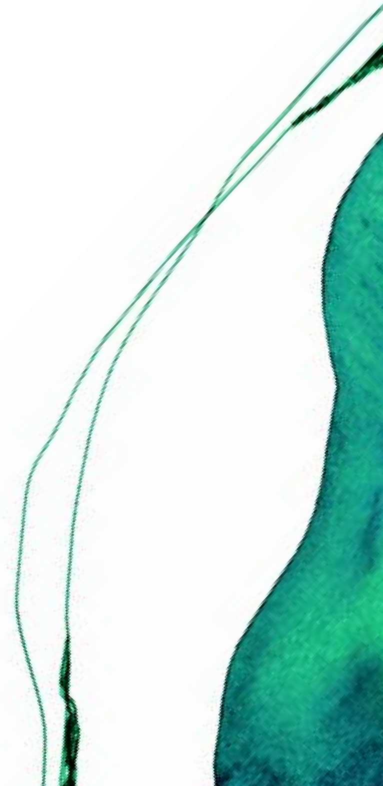
Regenerating Connection within Communities,
Reimagining the Role of Policy

The most learned of us are ignorant. The acquisition of knowledge always involves the revelation of ignorance. Our knowledge of the world instructs us first of all, that the world is greater than our knowledge of it. To those who rejoice in the abundance and intricacy of creation, this is a source of joy, as it is to those who rejoice in freedom. The future comes only by surprise. To those would be solvers of the human problem, who hoped for knowledge that is capable of controlling the world, it is a source of unremitting defeat and bewilderment ...

One thing we do know, that we dare not forget, is that better solutions than ours have at times been made by people with much less information than we have ... Let us abandon our superstitious beliefs about knowledge—that it is ever sufficient, that it can, of itself, solve problems, that it is intrinsically good, and that it can be used objectively or disinterestedly. Let us acknowledge that the objective or disinterested researcher is always on the side that pays best. And let us give up our forlorn pursuit of the informed decision. The informed decision, I suggest, is as fantastical a creature as a disinterested third party.

I got all this from my father, who's 81 now. One night, not long ago, he was sitting on the porch in the evening. He was quiet for a long time and, directly, he said, "Well, I've come to two conclusions." I said, "What?" He said, "I've had a wonderful life. And I haven't had very much to do with it." Well, I said, "Did you ever make an informed decision?" He said, "Naaa!"

- Wendell Berry in "People, Land, and Community"[1]



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Introduction

A new wave of communitarianism is emerging in elite institutions, showing up across media and culture, policy and politics, and philanthropy and associational life.[i] Its causes are multifold. The election of Donald Trump in 2016 and the outbreak of the Covid pandemic in 2020 can both be viewed as major shocks that challenged the existing sociopolitical paradigm. But these were also surface-level events, occurring atop a deeper current of decades of technological, economic, social, and cultural change that both hollowed out the core of communities and eroded trust in institutions and expertise. A half-century of conservative and liberal policymaking that elevated individualism, market deregulation, and the wisdom of experts has reached an extreme end point, leaving in its wake isolated individuals, weakened civic life, and widespread alienation and institutional distrust.

It is perhaps to be expected, then, that an interest in communitarian-inflected policymaking has bubbled up amidst this backdrop. Policymakers are beginning to realize that the antidote to isolation is connection, the antidote to distrust is participation, and the antidote to individualism is solidarity. The Surgeon General's advisory on "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation" and Senator Chris Murphy's "National Strategy for Social Connection Act" can be seen as direct attempts to use the tools of public health policy to strengthen connection. The nascent state-level efforts to create service year options for high school graduates—along with local efforts to promote participatory budgeting and citizen assemblies—can be viewed as pro-democracy interventions centered on boosting participation. Across communitarian segments of the left and right, the seeds are being planted for durable policymaking toward the common good.

However, the limitations of this incipient policy landscape—particularly, its underdeveloped and siloed nature—are also to be expected. As this new wave of communitarianism is hitting, well-intended policy actors are defaulting to existing belief systems, existing infrastructure, and existing practices. But we cannot keep doing things the same way and expect different outcomes. What is needed—in addition to meaningful civic action and cultural change—is a reimagined and fundamentally different approach to policymaking.

We created this policy framework on the premise that the institutions of American life can be structurally transformed to strengthen participation and connection within communities—and government can be an enabler of this change. This shift will demand new criteria for *why* policies are prioritized, emphasizing civic opportunity, participation, and connection in addition to narrowly defined economic and health outcomes. This shift also will require changes to *what* types of policies are proposed, *how* policies are designed and implemented relative to local citizens and community institutions, and *where* governance and decision-making is situated. These changes, in turn, will challenge us to break down our silos and develop new *foundations* for policymaking: new approaches to measurement, new personnel and ways that personnel relate to communities, and a new lens to be applied to policies, programs, and practices. This policy framework is both a tangible on-ramp for imagining the potential of this foundational and institutional change, and an invitation to challenge, deepen, and build upon it.

[i] *Communitarianism describes the idea that human identities are shaped by different kinds of constitutive communities (or social relations) and this conception of human nature should inform our moral and political judgments and our policies and institutions.*

Executive Summary

Government can and should play a role in regenerating connection within communities. Social and economic policy profoundly affects our shared lives in community—and we ignore this reality at our peril. However, with an experience as fundamental to being human as connection, a setting as expansive as community, and an intervention as fraught with risks as policy, the question is: "what role should government actually play?" That's the big, messy question we take on in this policy framework. With 150+ policy opportunities identified across 13 different policy categories, we think we have, at the very least, provided a helpful starting point.

This Executive Summary is partially a synthesis of the framework and partially a guide for navigating it in greater depth. We begin with a summary of our approach for developing it and the guiding principles that we weave throughout. We continue by briefly describing the broader context in which this project is situated, providing links to jump to the "Problem Definition," "Landscape Scan," and "Gaps & Opportunity" section, respectively. We then share an overview of the full framework, documenting the chapters and sections it entails and including links to each chapter. We conclude with suggestions for reading, applying, and building on the framework as you engage with it.

Approach

This framework is specifically focused on the role of government in strengthening connection within communities—not at home among families or in the workplace among colleagues. We prioritize communities for two main reasons. First, our communities are critical outlets for participation and connection. Outside of work, most Americans cultivate relationships in civic life: through their schools, care settings, neighborhoods, houses of worship, and community groups.[1] Second, family and workplace policy are distinctive areas of policymaking, and we determined that incorporating these policy areas would detract from the focus of this framework. However, because our experiences of work and home influence our lives in community, we include specific labor and family policies in select sections of the framework.

So, what is government's role in regenerating connection within communities? This big animating question demands a sufficiently holistic research approach. To inform the framework, we conducted 72 primary source interviews with a mix of policymakers, practitioners, and academics who collectively represented myriad disciplines, geographies, demographic backgrounds, and political perspectives. We feature quotes from our interviews to reinforce, build upon, or deepen key points throughout the report. We complemented these interviews by consulting a range of secondary sources—including relevant theory, studies, and policy recommendations—both to refine our understanding of the context and sharpen sections featured in the framework. Before finalizing the framework, each of its sections was reviewed by two to three experts who volunteered their time to offer feedback (see **Appendix A** for more on our methods).

Principles

Despite the seeming ineffability of the experience of community, there is an articulable process for cultivating connections within community. Through this research approach, we identified three primary drivers of relationship formation within communities: (1) *civic opportunities* are *where* we experience community, (2) *participation* is *how* we experience community, and (3) *connections* relate to with *whom* we experience community. To a single person participating, these steps are fully sequential. When individuals or groups create a new civic opportunity—a new club or program, a new third place, a new participatory process—people begin to participate. As they participate on an ongoing basis, they form connections with other community members.

Though simple, these drivers can be translated into a set of guiding principles for diagnosing community-level barriers to connection and targeting policy solutions to meet communities' connection needs. Because we use these principles as a guiding frame throughout the project, we define and describe how policy can advance each of them in the following table.

Table 1: Guiding Principles

Where & What?	How?	Who?
Increase civic opportunities for people to participate and cultivate relationships.[i]	**Increase participation in the civic opportunities where people build relationships.**	**Increase connection at the individual, group, and/or community levels.**
Civic opportunities are the places, institutions, groups, programs, and activities where community life is experienced. Policies can increase civic opportunities by boosting their supply, removing barriers to accessing them, and improving their experiential quality.	Participation refers to the acts and processes of participating in civic opportunities. Policies can increase participation by promoting people's freedom to participate, making civic opportunities more participatory, and targeting participation among specific groups.	Connections are the relationships that both enable and result from participation in civic opportunities. Policies can contribute to increasing connection by improving the overall quality or quantity of connections or, specifically, boosting connections across lines of difference.

Civic opportunities are the containers that make community participation possible, and the connections we form in community are the outcome of our participation in these civic opportunities. But these connections also drive further participation, providing critical information about opportunities to engage in community and the encouragement to get involved. In this way, connections complete the virtuous cycle of life in community: more accessible and higher quality civic opportunities generate higher participation rates, higher participation rates lead to more connections, and more connections drive even higher rates of participation and the creation of more civic opportunities.

[i] *While we use a slightly broader definition of "civic opportunity" than de Vries, Kim, and Han, it is informed by their conceptualization of the "supply-side" of social capital (de Vries, Kim, and Han 2023). We speak more to our definition within the Glossary section.*

Context

Policymakers looking to improve connection within communities can benefit from more visibility into the context in which they are operating. They can cultivate a better understanding of the deeply rooted, interconnected nature of the problems they aim to address, the different disciplines of thinkers competing to offer policy solutions (along with the implications of these policies), and the gaps and barriers to advancing a durable, holistic approach to connection-focused policymaking.

Before launching into the framework, we seek to situate it within its broader context—particularly from a historical, academic, policy, and civic perspective. Accordingly, the first portion of this project includes three related sections:

A **Problem Definition**, which describes the decline and sorting of American civic life, the interconnected drivers of these changes, and their downstream political, economic, and health implications.

Jump to

Problem Definition

A **Landscape Scan**, which details the emerging strands of thinkers that intersect with the work of strengthening community connection, the solution and policy landscape associated with each, and their relative strengths and limitations.

Jump to

Landscape Scan

A **Gaps & Opportunity Analysis**, which outlines the systemic gaps limiting the potential of policy and civic actors to bolster connection within communities, then articulates the opportunity for government to unlock this potential.

Jump to

Gaps & Opportunity

The Framework

The purpose of this framework is to provide policymakers with an actionable starting point for regenerating and strengthening connection within communities. To do this, we organized the framework into four chapters—"Foundational Changes," "Community Institutions," "Life Transitions," and "Enabling Conditions"—that, taken together, holistically encompass the policy priorities for bolstering community connection. Each chapter includes three to four relevant sections, featuring distinct but interrelated opportunities for policy and programmatic action. We select opportunities to feature based on their potential to advance at least one of our three guiding principles: increasing civic opportunity, increasing participation, and/or increasing connection. Within each section, these opportunities are organized by government level (e.g., federal, state, local) and philanthropy, helping to align the identified opportunities with the stakeholder groups that can pursue them. Finally, nearly every subsection includes one or more action boxes—each of which aim to deepen or bring to life a specific policy or philanthropic opportunity. This structure both clearly identifies the stakeholders who are positioned to act on an opportunity and creates tangible entry points for taking action.

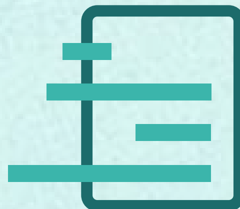
Table 2: Framework Overview by Chapter & Section

Chapters	Sections
Foundational Changes What are the foundational changes necessary to prepare government to approach policymaking with a cross-cutting connection lens? Jump to Chapter	**Measures:** Develop and adopt a set of indicators to measure the strength of civic opportunity, community participation, and individual and community connectedness. **Personnel:** Align personnel to coordinate connection-related priorities across policy, implementation, and outreach. **Connection Lens:** Repurpose relevant government policies, programs, and practices to foster connection within communities—and create the support structures to do so.
Community Institutions What are the highest potential opportunities for institutional change to strengthen connection within communities? Jump to Chapter	**Housing & Neighborhoods:** Activate the housing sector and neighborhoods to become platforms for participation, overall connection, and bridging social capital. **Civic Infrastructure & Associational Life:** Reorient government and philanthropy toward regenerating and strengthening communities' civic infrastructure and associational life. **Care & Education:** Strengthen the connectedness of care and educational settings by inviting in more peer, community, and bridging forms of participation.
Life Transitions What are the most critical transition points throughout the life course where policy can help bolster connection? Jump to Chapter	**Early Childhood & Parenting:** Bolster social support for new parents and children, easing the transition to parenting and improving outcomes during life's early years. **Adult Transition:** Reimagine the adult transition to foster lifelong relationships across difference and habits of community participation. **Community Integration:** Enhance local capacity to help all individuals—particularly veterans, immigrants, and the formerly incarcerated—integrate into new communities. **Retirement & Older Adults:** Promote the overall and intergenerational connectedness of older adults—both during and after retirement—through housing, service, and education.
Enabling Conditions What are the forces that operate beyond communities, but wield an outsized influence on how Americans experience connection within them? Jump to Chapter	**Work:** Improve the stability and predictability of work, providing workers the agency to participate in community life and cultivate stronger connections outside of work. **Big Tech & Media:** Reform the big tech and media ecosystem to enable—rather than compete with and hinder—community participation and connection. **Local News & Media:** Revitalize local news and media ecosystems to be more community-embedded, community-driven, and participatory.

The Path Forward

1. Read the framework—in part or in full

While we have designed the framework to be read in full, we have also drafted each section to be read as an independent, cohesive whole. You may start here and read the entire context and framework, selectively identify and read the chapters that are most of interest to you, or repeatedly return to this framework and revisit different sections as they become relevant.



2. Apply elements of the framework to your particular context

We encourage policy and philanthropic stakeholders to apply different elements of this framework to be responsive to their particular contexts. The purpose of this framework is not to prescribe how policymakers should act to strengthen connection within their communities, but provide guidance for where to begin, principles for application, and examples of what applying these principles could look like in practice.

3. Build on this framework as a starting point

We developed this policy framework as something that can be built on—not as the final word on policy and connection within communities. We encourage you to challenge parts of this framework, deepen existing sections, and apply this connection lens to other institutions and sectors that we did not consider.

Glossary: Defining and Using Key Terms

The language related to connection, social capital, and civic life is notoriously nebulous, fluid, and hotly contested. We make no attempt to settle these debates here. However, before jumping into this framework, we thought it would be helpful to both provide definitions for key terms and describe how we specifically use these terms in relation to each other.

Connection

Connection & Belonging

Connection and belonging are often used as interchangeable terms, especially among community groups and in the media. However, connection relates more to the objective experience of relationships, while belonging refers more to the subjective experience:

- **Social Connection:** An umbrella term that encompasses the structure, function, and quality of social relationships. The extent to which an individual is connected depends on three factors: (1) structural (interconnections among different social relationships and roles), (2) functional (functions that exist because of social relationships), and (3) quality (the positive and negative aspects of social relationships).[1]
- **Belonging:** The quality of fit between oneself and a setting. Belonging is an innate motivational drive to form and maintain positive bonds with others: when one belongs, one feels emotionally connected, welcomed, included, and satisfied in their relationships.[2]

Our Use: We mostly use the "connection" terminology throughout the framework, as we focus more on the objective presence of relationships (or lack thereof). We use "belonging" when referring specifically to the subjective experience of belonging, such as when a veteran or immigrant integrates into a community.

Isolation & Loneliness

Isolation and loneliness are frequently used as synonymous with one another; however, they have distinct definitions in the health context. Whereas isolation relates to the objective absence of connection, loneliness refers to the subjective experience of feeling alone:

- **Social Isolation:** The *objective* state of having limited or no social interactions or connections with others. While isolated people do not have many connections, they still may not experience loneliness. However, they do face a greater risk of adverse physical health outcomes.[3]
- **Loneliness:** The *subjective* experience of social and emotional isolation, characterized by feeling a lack of meaningful social connections and support. People may have many connections and still experience loneliness. Loneliness is associated with a greater risk of adverse mental health outcomes.[4]

Our Use: We draw more on the "isolation" terminology throughout this report for two reasons: (1) the objective nature of isolation makes it better-suited for use as a policy consideration; and (2) the popularization of "loneliness" in the public discourse has obfuscated its meaning.

Social Capital

Social capital and its related terms have been used for nearly a century, but were popularized by Robert Putnam in *Bowling Alone.* Throughout this report, we refer to social capital in four distinct ways:

- **Social Capital:** The resources and advantages an individual can access through their network of social relationships *and* the collective value of all social networks. Just as social capital refers to connections among individuals, social networks encompass the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.[5]
- **Bonding Social Capital:** A type of social capital that describes connections within a group or community characterized by high levels of similarity in demographic characteristics, geography, attitudes, and available information and resources.[6]
- **Bridging Social Capital:** A type of social capital that describes connections that link people across a cleavage that typically divides society (such as race, class, or religion). It is associations that *bridge* between communities, groups, or organizations.[7]
- **Economic Connectedness:** A form of bridging social capital, specifically across lines of class. Chetty et al. (2022) defines economic connectedness as the degree of interaction between low-income people (below median income) and high-income people (above median income).[8]

Our Use: While we do use "social capital" at times, we mostly use "connection" as a catch-all for social capital throughout the framework for the sake of simplicity. We frequently refer to "bridging connection," drawing on the concept of "bridging social capital" to describe connection across various lines of difference. We only use the term "economic connectedness" when referring specifically to Chetty's research.

Community

Civic Life

The language used to describe the individuals, relationships, groups, and activities that comprise community life is especially fluid. Below, we define three of the key terms we use throughout this framework, from broadest to most specific:

- **Civil Society:** The institutions and relationships that exist between the isolated individual and the state.[9]
- **Communal/Civic Life:** The social and communal aspects of daily living, where individuals interact and collaborate within a community, sharing resources and experiences. This contrasts with private life, which is concerned with the pursuit of private or personal interests.[10]

- **Associational Life:** The range of institutions, organizations, associations, and groups—both formal and informal, religious and non-religious—through which people gather to pursue joint endeavors in community.[11]

Our Use: Based on this framing, communal and civic life can be viewed as a local subset of civil society, and associational life can be viewed as a subset of communal/civic life specifically related to associations and groups. Often, throughout the framework, we will use "community organizations," "community groups," and "civic associations" interchangeably with associational life.

Social & Civic Infrastructure

Three primary terms are used to describe places within communities that are apart from home and work: "third places," "social infrastructure," and "civic infrastructure." Because the definitions of these terms are often varying and evolving, we consulted the literature and defined them for our purposes below:

- **Third Places:** Locations that are separate from the home and workplace and that facilitate social interaction outside of the people with whom you live or work (e.g., churches, cafes, bars, parks, community centers, and public libraries).[12]
- **Social Infrastructure:** Publicly operated places and organizations that support and foster social interactions and relationships within a community, such as libraries, schools, and parks.[13]
- **Civic Infrastructure:** The places that, when activated by people, groups, programs, and/or activities, undergird our social fabric. Civic infrastructure enables us to connect with each other, build community, and address shared concerns.[14]

Our Use: Though all three of these terms are often used interchangeably, we attempt to include them when their specific meaning best applies. We use "third places" when referring to physical locations separate from home and work, "social infrastructure" when referring to publicly operated places and organizations, and "civic infrastructure" when referring to the broad interaction between place and people, groups, and programs within civic life.

Civic Opportunity

de Vries, Kim, and Han conceptualize **civic opportunity** as the supply-side of social capital, specifically defining it as "the opportunities people have to encounter the experiences necessary to cultivate the capacities for collective life in pluralistic societies."[15] We draw on this supply-side definition and broaden it, describing civic opportunity as the places, institutions, groups, programs, and activities where community life is experienced. Compared to de Vries, Kim, and Han's definition, this framing speaks less to small "d" democratic participation and governance structures for the sake of ensuring simplicity and consistency throughout the framework. The ultimate purpose of this definition is to position civic opportunity as the supply-side entry point for participating and cultivating connections in community.

Care

Throughout the Care section of the framework, we reference a few terms related to care within communities that may be unfamiliar to readers. For clarity, we define our use of each of these terms below:

- **Peer Care:** Practices and activities that invite members of groups who receive social services support (e.g., immigrants and refugees, veterans, people in recovery) to provide care and social support to their peers.
- **Community/Community-Involved Care:** Practices and activities that invite neighbors and community members to offer care and social support to people who are typically involved in the social services system.
- **Social Cooperatives:** Cooperatives organized explicitly to provide services and economic opportunities to disadvantaged populations and oriented toward a defined collective good. Social cooperatives often focus on caring activities, such as elder care and child care.[16]

Social Theory

Throughout the framework, we draw on three terms from social theory that are especially relevant to this project: "communitarianism," "solidarity," and "neoliberalism." Since these terms are mostly used in academic settings, we provide working definitions for them below:

- **Communitarianism:** The idea that human identities are shaped by different kinds of constitutive communities (or social relations) and this conception of human nature should inform our moral and political judgments and our policies and institutions. Communitarianism has, at times throughout American history, emerged as a sociopolitical movement to counterbalance what it views as "excessive liberalism."[17]
- **Solidarity:** A special relationship of unity and mutual indebtedness within and across groups.[18] Solidarity involves both cultivating social cohesion and organizing to transform society to realize a shared destiny.[19]
- **Neoliberalism:** The philosophical view that a society's political and economic institutions should be robustly liberal and capitalist, but supplemented by a constitutionally limited democracy and a modest welfare state.[20]

Our Use: We use these terms sparingly throughout the paper. We specifically use "communitarianism" when referring to past communitarian movements and situating our current moment in relation to the past. We often draw on the language of "solidarity" as a contrast to individualism. We use "neoliberalism" when discussing its application to economic and social policy.

Context

Problem Definition

Changes

Civic life in American communities has declined overall while becoming highly sorted by class. Americans are more isolated today than any time ever measured, but this isolation is not experienced equally; it is most acutely affecting Americans without college degrees. Americans with college degrees—often living, working, and socializing with other college grads—are the most involved and connected group in American life. Americans without degrees, in contrast, increasingly lack the time, resources, and opportunities to participate and cultivate relationships in civic life.

Understanding the contemporary challenges affecting Americans' lives in community requires us to unpack the ways in which the *where*, *how*, and *who* of community have changed over time (see Table 3 below). Therefore, we turn to our guiding principles—civic opportunity, participation, and connection—as a lens to describe and define the evolving nature of American civic life.

Table 3: The Where, How, and Who of Community

Domain	Description	Key Question
Civic Opportunity	The institutions, groups, activities, and places where community life is experienced.	*Where do Americans cultivate relationships outside of home or work?*
Participation	The different acts or processes of participation in community life.	*How do Americans build these relationships?*
Connection	The relationships that people form as a result of their participation in community life.	*With whom do Americans develop relationships?*

Civic Opportunity: Where do Americans build relationships?

1. Associational life has declined precipitously since the mid-20th century.

When it comes to secular community, rates of social and fraternal group formation have fallen off a cliff since the early 1960s,[1] while group membership, club meeting attendance, and time investment in community are at all-time low levels.[2] A similar pattern holds for religious institutions. Since the early 1990s, the number of houses of worship has been declining,[3] while fewer Americans report being affiliated with religious groups and attending religious services than any time ever measured.[4] Unions, which both advocate for workers' rights and facilitate the social capital formation among their members, have likewise experienced significant declines in number of chapters, membership, and participation since the early 1960s.[5] This decline in community life creates a negative feedback loop: as Americans join and participate less often, institutions wither and shut down, thereby further narrowing Americans' civic opportunities.

"We live very separately from people who are not like us. This separation, which emerges from both deliberate policy decisions and personal choices, has expanded in recent decades. Today, it's rare that we interact with people who aren't just like us - whether that be socioeconomically, racially, or politically."

- Bridget Marquis, Reimagining the Civic Commons

2. America's regions, neighborhoods, and third places have become increasingly sorted by class and are still highly sorted by race.

Over the past half-century, America's regions have become polarized into superstar regions and distressed regions.[6] The same is true for neighborhoods: during the same time period, the proportion of families living in poor or affluent neighborhoods doubled (15 to 33 percent) while the proportion living in middle-income neighborhoods declined by more than one-third (65 percent to 42 percent).[7] Race and class structures are deeply intertwined in America, and de facto and de jure racial segregation has reinforced these sorting patterns.[8] As our regions and neighborhoods have sorted, so, too, has the civic infrastructure where we gather outside of home and work. More affluent geographies are rich with third places—cafes and breweries, parks and libraries—while less well-off communities are left depleted of these outlets for community.[9]

Participation: How do Americans build relationships?

1. Participation in associational life has declined since the mid-20th century, but most acutely among lower socioeconomic status (SES) people and those in more distressed places.

Participation in religious and secular communities is down across most demographic groups. However, declines are sharpest among lower SES people and Americans without degrees. Compared to college grads, those without degrees are 10 percent less likely to be members of religious groups (45 percent v. 55 percent),[10] 22 percent less likely to be active in a community group (48 percent v. 70 percent),[11] and 10 percent less likely to be members of unions (8 percent v. 18 percent).[12] Recent research from the SNF Agora Institute has reaffirmed the geographic component of this dynamic, demonstrating that lower income and less educated places have significantly lower levels of civic opportunity than more educated, higher income places.[13]

2. The declining accessibility of civic opportunity appears to be a major driver of these disparities in participation.

As places have become increasingly sorted by class and traditional civic life has eroded, civic opportunity has become "a high-end good that most people can't afford."[14] Exclusive institutions in exclusive, affluent places have replaced the more financially and geographically accessible community groups of the mid-20th century, creating a "pay-to-play" model of community participation that begins in childhood and is reinforced throughout the life course. During childhood, higher SES youth are significantly more likely to have access to extracurricular activities (e.g., sports and music)—both in school and outside of school—and participate at more than twice the rate of their lower SES peers.[15] In the adult transition, selective four-year colleges have become the domain of the top quintile of earners' children,[16] sorting and supercharging their social networks.[17] In adulthood, Americans with college degrees are significantly more likely than those without degrees to participate in "pay-to-play" adult activities (e.g., fitness and arts classes, private clubs),[18] have a third place they regularly frequent, and have activity- and place-based friendships.[19]

Connection: With whom do Americans build relationships?

1. Americans' relational lives have contracted over the past 20 to 30 years, with lower socioeconomic status people experiencing the sharpest declines.

Americans, overall, are spending less time with their friends: social engagement with friends decreased by an average of 20 hours per month since 2003, while time spent alone increased by 24 hours per month during the same period.[20] This is, in part, because Americans have fewer friends than they did 30 years ago. The percentage of Americans with two or fewer close friends doubled between 1990 and 2021, while the portion of Americans with three or more close friends declined by upwards of 15 percent. This friendship decline appears to be particularly pronounced among Americans without degrees, who, compared to those with degrees, report having significantly fewer close friends and significantly higher rates of social isolation.[21]

2. Americans' social networks have become largely sorted by educational attainment and income.

The social stratification of our neighborhood and community lives is reflected within the friendship networks we still have. High-income Americans are overwhelmingly likely to be friends with other high-income Americans.[22] College-educated Americans are overwhelmingly likely to be friends with other college-educated Americans.[23] And, as American politics have become more sorted by geography—particularly along the urban-to-rural continuum—Americans are overwhelmingly likely to be friends with other Americans of the same political party.[24] Though still highly sorted by race, the racial composition of Americans' social networks has become more integrated in recent decades.[25]

"In a rural area, if you are a kid and your parent is working, you are effectively stranded. Even if you had transportation, there is not a lot of public space or places to hang out. Historically, the answer to this has been churches, and they still provide support, but the younger generations have become more secular and push back against some of what the church represents. This is mutually reinforcing with social media: you have nothing to do so you're spending most of your time on TikTok … Teens here describe drugs, mental illness, and loneliness as the biggest problems they face. But these are all symptoms of the real problem: isolation."

- Daniel Marshall, Lamplight Camp in Guntersville, AL

Drivers

The drivers of these shifts are complex, interconnected, and multifold. Technological, economic, social, and cultural changes have all interacted with and reinforced one another, contributing to the continual fraying and sorting of Americans' communal bonds. In this section, we do not attempt to construct a single causal story for the drivers of these changes over the past century. We do not attempt to explain why each of these drivers emerged. Instead, we merely attempt to describe what happened by identifying the factors that had an outsized influence in weakening and sorting Americans' relational lives since the mid-20th century. Throughout this section, we draw on our interviews—which we opened by asking about "the drivers of the problems affecting civic life and social connection"—to develop this narrative account.

Technological Drivers

Big tech and media platforms have outcompeted community for our leisure time, sown interpersonal distrust, and disconnected us from the places we call home.

Among those we interviewed, technology was the most consistently cited driver of America's civic and social decline over the past 50-plus years. As our methods of communicating and receiving information shifted from newspapers and radios, to televisions, to computers, smartphones, social media, and streaming, our relationships to one another and our communities have been profoundly transformed. Government action enabled this technological development and adoption, and then failed to anticipate and prevent its harms.

Time displacement is potentially the greatest technological contributor to our civic decline: the business models of big tech and media platforms are built on capturing as much of our leisure time as possible, competing directly for the time we spend in community. A quarter-century ago, Robert Putnam identified the competition created by the introduction of television as the primary driver of the decline in community participation;[26] this competition with community for our leisure time has only accelerated with the proliferation of smartphones, streaming services, social media platforms, and emerging AI companions. The *content* on these platforms is another contributor to our civic disconnection. To keep us "engaged," big tech and media companies feed us content designed to promote fear and outrage, which sows distrust and adversely influences how we relate to people online and in real life.[27] Finally, the *disembedding* of media from place has contributed to weakening America's social fabric. The mass, cross-geography scale of big tech and media platforms—coupled with the rapid decline in local media sources—has collapsed our context,[28] simultaneously directing our attention to the national, reducing our attention to the local, and disconnecting us from our neighbors and communities.[29]

"The loss of local news is a critical loss for local civic and social infrastructure. It's a driver of common information and common accountability. When local media goes missing, a lot of community goes missing with it."

- Tony Pipa, The Brookings Institution

Economic Drivers

The process of economic neoliberalization has weakened the foundations of working-class civic life and contributed to the social sorting of our communities.

Many of those we interviewed pointed to the ascendance of the neoliberal economic order in the early 1970s as a turning point for rising inequality in American civic life. As policies enabled markets to become *globalized* and *financialized*, companies eliminated jobs or moved them overseas,[30] ownership shifted from local and proximate to national

and distant,[31] and regions experienced multiple, geographically concentrated economic shocks from which many still have not recovered.[32] This contributed to the hollowing out of the economic and civic core of many regions throughout the U.S., particularly in Appalachia and the Rust Belt.[33] As companies and policymakers successfully *weakened unions* and *worker protections*, jobs for low-wage workers became increasingly precarious, with lower real wages, fewer benefits, and less schedule predictability and control.[34] This both reduced the supply of unions as civic opportunities through which workers could cultivate relationships,[35] and made it more difficult for low-wage workers to participate in community.[36]

The impacts of neoliberalization extended beyond economic and labor policy to education, housing, and neighborhoods. As college opened up to the masses following World War II (WWII),[37] and the measurement-based, *meritocratic higher education* system fully took hold in the 1960s, four-year colleges became the great sorter of Americans' economic and social lives.[38] The upper middle class gamed the college admissions process to retrench their privilege in an "hereditary meritocracy" while the "best and brightest" from declining communities were filtered into these four-year schools, typically far from home and often never to return again.[39] Meanwhile, a potent combination of *residential segregation* (e.g., redlining, restrictive covenants, self-segregation) and *exclusionary zoning* (e.g., density caps, minimum lot sizes) both reinforced and accelerated the sorting of regions, towns, and neighborhoods.[40] This sorting was partially driven by parents' desire to secure their children access to "good" public schools and "selective" four-year colleges, partially driven by explicit racial animus, and partially driven by people's desire to live among neighbors with similar class backgrounds. As a result of these shifts, civic opportunity and social capital has become more concentrated in America's most thriving places and more depleted in America's most distressed places.[41]

> *"During the late 20th century ... the well-educated and the affluent increasingly segregated themselves off from the rest of American society."*
>
> *- Doug Massey, The Princeton School of Public & International Affairs* [42]

Sociocultural Drivers

Three sociocultural shifts—changing gender roles, declining religious participation, and rising hyperindividualism—have reduced civic opportunities and connection in our communities.

Our interviewees identified myriad sociocultural changes since the mid-20th century that have contributed to America's rise in social isolation and decline in civic life. However, three shifts were especially prevalent: the changing role of *women*, the decline of *organized religion*, and the rise of *hyper-individualism*. Historically, *women* have been the backbone of civic life in the U.S., participating at higher rates than men and providing much of the unpaid labor to sustain it. However, as women's labor force participation doubled between the 1950s and 1990s,[43] they had progressively less time to contribute to civic life.[44] Despite the declining rates of workforce participation among men in this period, they did not pick up the slack, and civic life withered.[45] The decline of *organized religion* can be seen as both a symptom and driver of America's fraying social fabric. As Americans turn away from religion—and houses of worship shutter permanently—communities lose one of their most accessible, cross-class outlets for civic opportunity.[46] And, because religious participation drives other forms of community participation, communities with fewer active members of religious groups become communities with fewer active members overall.[47]

The rise of *hyper-individualism* was the most explicit cultural driver of civic decline cited throughout our interviews. Hyper-individualism is "... the idea that the journey through life is an individual journey and the goals of life are individual happiness, authenticity, self-actualization, and self-sufficiency."[48] Hyper-individualism initially emerged in the 1950s and accelerated in the 1960s as a response to the perceived excessive and suffocating societal conformity of the post-war era.[49] However, it has evolved into the dominant culture of modern America, in turn shaping the design of our technological, economic, and social systems.[50] As our culture and systems have increasingly directed us to prioritize ourselves over our relationships and communities—and individual advancement over sacrifice and the common good—we have continuously turned away from collective life and inward toward ourselves.

> *"We have elevated concerns of achievement and happiness over concerns for the common good, justice, and service ... This has turned many people inward. Many people look to the self—instead of their relationships—for meaning and fulfillment."*
>
> *- Rick Weissbourd, Harvard's Making Caring Common Project*

Downstream Implications

Many of the greatest challenges facing America are downstream—at least, in part—from the decline and sorting of our communities. Whether it be increasing rates of premature mortality and deaths of despair, accelerating democratic breakdown, or declining economic mobility, the weakening of our communal and relational lives is a key culprit.

1. Social isolation and community decline are contributing significantly to premature mortality in the United States, including heart disease and deaths of despair. Life expectancy in the U.S. has been declining since the late 2010s,[51] and social isolation appears to be partially to blame. Social isolation is a major predictor of all-cause and premature mortality.[52] Isolation increases the risk of death by heart disease—the leading killer of Americans—by upwards of 30 percent.[53] Recent research has shown that socially isolated individuals have a 32 percent higher risk of premature mortality than those who are not socially isolated.[54] Isolation and the erosion of civic life have also been linked to deaths of despair—deaths by drug overdose, suicide, and alcohol-related illnesses—which have skyrocketed in the U.S. in recent decades.[55] Indeed, the brunt of these deaths of despair have been concentrated in more distressed regions of the country and among Americans who never completed college—the same groups least likely to have access to community and relationships in life. Between the early 1990s and 2017, individuals without degrees went from only slightly more likely to die a death of despair than those with degrees, to more than three times more likely to die a death of despair than their college-educated peers.[56] The decline of civic life and sorting of our communities is, quite literally, killing Americans.

2. Civic erosion and social disconnection are driving declines in trust, increases in violent extremism, and the weakening of American democracy. The story of democratic breakdown in America is, in part, a story of community breakdown, social disconnection, and rising levels of distrust.[57] The deterioration of civic life in certain places—be they neighborhoods, cities and towns, or entire regions—drives declines in social connection of residents, which, in turn, drives declines in interpersonal and institutional trust. A deep base of research—both domestic and international—has shown how interpersonal and institutional distrust undermines support for democratic institutions.[58] More recently, researchers have found that a place's level of decline in civic life is predictive of support for more authoritarian-leaning leaders, such as Donald Trump.[59] Rising levels of isolation, particularly among men, have also been linked to increases in violent extremism. In *Violent Extremism in America*, researchers identified how social isolation—along with unmet needs for social bonds, love, acceptance, and having a life purpose—leave individuals prone to become involved with extremist views and groups.[61] America's so-called "lost boys" join these extremist groups out of a yearning to belong to something or commit acts of mass violence to fulfill a desire to finally be recognized.[62] These interlocking challenges of civic decline and social disconnection have made our society less trustful and more violent, putting our democracy at risk.

3. The sorting of our regions, neighborhoods, and social networks are driving declining rates of economic mobility. Rates of economic mobility in America have declined sharply since the mid-20th century, largely due to growth in inequality.[63] Economist Raj Chetty and his co-authors have demonstrated that the sorting of our social networks—driven by the sorting of our neighborhoods and community institutions—has compounded economic inequality and hindered economic mobility.[64] Indeed, economic connectedness, the degree to which low-income people are connected to high-income people, is the greatest predictor of economic mobility identified to date. Economic opportunity is facilitated through networks, and as our networks have become increasingly sorted by class, fewer low-income Americans have been able to realize the "American Dream." We seem to be caught in a negative feedback loop of inequality: the growing separation of our social lives is contributing to the growing separation of our economic lives, and the growing separation of our economic lives is reinforcing and amplifying the sorting of our social lives.

Landscape of Thinkers & Policymakers

Our interviews surfaced a general alignment on the drivers of the problems affecting connection within communities. There appears to be a collective recognition that the economic, technological, structural, and cultural changes have interacted with one another to weaken and warp civic life, hinder community participation, and sort and shrink our social networks. The challenge of trying to address broad, interconnected problems in a siloed, specialized world is that most return to their specialties and priors when defining the particulars of these problems and designing specific solutions. The landscape of those working to regenerate connection and community—both directly and indirectly—is no different. In the following subsections, we describe the emerging strands of thinkers that intersect with this work, the solution and policy landscape associated with each, as well as their relative strengths and limitations. By design, we oversimplify these nuanced perspectives—often based on unexpressed first principles and underlying theories—both to surface them and put them in conversation with one another.

Democracy & Civil Society

Democracy researchers consider how civic opportunity, participation, and connection affect our ability to build a pluralistic, multiracial democracy in the U.S. The complex set of interconnected problems they identify include: the decline in associational life and community participation,[1] the transformation of civil society from "grassroots" to "grasstops" organizations,[2] the weakening of our civic infrastructure and the emergence of civic deserts in many regions,[3] the decline of local news,[4] and rising levels of political polarization.[5] Robert Putnam and Theda Skocpol played a critical role in elevating these issues throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, while Danielle Allen and Hahrie Han are among today's leading thinkers.

"Our Common Purpose," a report co-authored by Danielle Allen, is the highest profile recent attempt to comprehensively address the challenges facing American democracy.[6] It proposes 31 recommendations for reinventing American democracy—many of which focus on strengthening civil society by, for example, creating a "Trust for Civic Infrastructure" and establishing a universal expectation for a year of public service. At present, there appears to be more momentum in philanthropy than in policy in taking up these issues. Collaboratives of funders have coalesced to fund the Trust for Civic Life,[7] launch the New Pluralists,[8] reimagine local news,[9] and support a growing ecosystem of think tanks and academic centers. However, some state and local governments are actively experimenting with more participatory models, such as citizen assemblies and participatory budgeting. Because these philanthropic and policy efforts are largely in their nascent stages, their effectiveness remains to be seen.

Compared to the other strands of thinkers, the democracy thinkers apply the most rigor in their analysis of civic life and what it means to be an active democratic citizen. They thoughtfully consider the role of community institutions, who participates in them, how they participate, and where control and power is held. Each of these factors—in distinct yet interconnected ways—shape the health and capacity of our democracy. However, the democracy thinkers have blind spots. The quality, quantity, and function of Americans' social connections—a key concern among public health thinkers, for example, are mostly of interest if they influence democratic participation and outcomes. They also are less fluent in discussing the role of economic factors (e.g., the cost of land and the role of work) in shaping civic life and Americans' participation in it. Democracy thinkers have an opportunity to integrate these other lenses to enhance the rigor of their analysis and design more holistic solutions.

Public Health

Public health thinkers frame the challenges affecting connection through the lens of increasing levels of isolation and loneliness. The foremost researcher advancing this public health approach is Dr. Julianne Holt-Lunstad, who, over the past decade-plus, has successfully centered social connection as a key social determinant of health. Holt-Lunstad's SOCIAL Framework offers a model for promoting social connection across sectors (e.g., health, transport, housing), levels of influence (e.g., individual, interpersonal, institutional), and the life span.[10] Dr. Holt-Lunstad's research has helped catalyze an emerging ecosystem of institutions to advance social connection, including the Foundation for Social Connection and the Coalition to End Social Isolation and Loneliness.

Her work has been complemented in the policy realm by the U.S. Surgeon General, Vivek Murthy, who released an official advisory titled "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation," in May 2023.[11] As part of the advisory, the Surgeon General proposed six pillars in his "National Strategy to Advance Social Connection": (1) strengthening social infrastructure, (2) enacting pro-connection public policies, (3) mobilizing the health sector, (4) reforming digital environments, (5) deepening our knowledge, and (6) building a culture of connection. The advisory should be viewed more as a communications and advocacy document than a policy proposal, given the limits of the Surgeon General's role. Recently, however, Senator Chris Murphy (D-CT) took up the Surgeon General's call-to-action, introducing a bill that would create an Office of Social Connection Policy in the Executive Office of the President.[12] The primary goals of this bill are to require a "national strategy for social connection" and to advance research within the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) on isolation and loneliness. At present, Murphy's bill has yet to gain traction, and it is unclear whether there is momentum around similar policies and programs in the White House or Congress.

The greatest strength of the public health thinkers' approach is in their explicit focus on improving the relational lives of Americans. Due to their emphasis on mitigating adverse health outcomes, they apply significant rigor in targeting supports for specific populations at the highest risk of isolation and loneliness. However, public health thinkers experience challenges when it comes to designing solutions, since social isolation and loneliness are mostly unaddressable through typical public health approaches. Suggested interventions like social prescribing and loneliness pills, if ever implemented, both individualize the problem and only address its symptoms.[13] Social, economic, and cultural change is needed, and the other strands of thinkers may be better suited to advance these solutions.

> *"Right now if someone says they're lonely, we treat it with pills, therapy, or social prescribing. All of that can be good, but it also misses the larger frame. The connective tissue is the true frame. We need to understand that a society is something like an organism, so things that seem distant at first are actually intimately connected. It is a terrible mistake to treat loneliness as something that is merely a public health issue."*
>
> *- Ian Marcus Corbin, Harvard Human Flourishing Program & Medical School*

Economics

Economists analyze the role of social connection and civic life in shaping economic outcomes, as well as how economic systems shape connection and civic life. The most relevant strand of economists are the "economic opportunity" thinkers, led by Raj Chetty, who emphasize the importance of cross-class connection in producing economic mobility. Chetty and his fellow authors find that the class-based sorting of our social networks reinforces economic inequality, while boosting the economic connectedness of our neighborhoods and community institutions drives mobility.[14] Beyond publishing this foundational research, Chetty's Opportunity Insights team has set the table for policy and civic action by visualizing the economic connectedness of counties, zip codes, high schools, and colleges through their interactive Social Capital Atlas.[15] In terms of tangible policies, Chetty and his fellow authors propose zoning reform, affordable housing, and within-school integration efforts to increase economic connectedness at the local level.[16]

Two other groups of thinkers within economics are worth highlighting, despite having less of an explicit emphasis on connection. The "economic development" thinkers, led by academics like David Autor and Gordon Hanson, focus on the relationship between regional economic shocks and the strength of civic life in those places. They show that regional shocks weaken civic life and family structures in affected regions,[17] while the strength of local community institutions influences the degree to which regions can buffer these shocks. The "labor" lane—which includes thinkers like David Weil, Eileen Appelbaum, and Andrew Cherlin—explores how work has become more precarious and less stable with the decline of unions, fissuring of the workplace, and financialization of the economy. Accordingly, they have shown how these changes to work have contributed to weakening the foundations of community and family life for working-class and poor Americans.[18]

Economists, more than any other strand of thinkers, consider how our social systems shape our economic systems, and vice versa. To them, civic infrastructure and social connection are not spheres separate from the economy; they are embedded in and deeply influenced by the economy. Sorted social networks create sorted economic outcomes. Distressed local economies create distressed local civic infrastructure. Precarious work lives create precarious social lives. However, the rigor of their economic models can also contribute to an economic determinism. Some individuals in poverty still have robust social networks, and some distressed regions manage to maintain strong community institutions despite economic challenges. Not everything can necessarily be explained by economic models, nor should every outcome necessarily be considered in economic terms.

Urbanism

Urbanists are concerned with how place and the built environment affect our capacity to participate in community and forge relationships. Among the urbanists, two groups of thinkers are particularly focused on connection and community. The "neighborhood" thinkers, which include people like Chuck Marohn of Strong Towns and Seth Kaplan of *Fragile Neighborhoods*, are, among other things, focused on the planning of neighborhoods, cities, and towns and are critical of America's "suburban experiment."[19] They believe that the design of disconnected, car-dependent suburbs—often without walkable downtowns—contributes to isolation, loneliness, and anomie. The "third place" thinkers, such as Eric Klinenberg and Ray Oldenburg, believe that the decline of accessible third places and social infrastructure has diminished civic participation and has driven greater levels of disconnection.[20]

Policy proposals from these two strands of thinkers take complementary approaches. The neighborhood thinkers emphasize how policy can create more connected neighborhoods, both physically and socially. This entails improving connectivity and walkability, fostering local ownership and community wealth-building, delineating clear neighborhood boundaries to establish a greater sense of place, and developing the physical infrastructure that promotes social capital formation. The third place thinkers are primarily focused on this last point: strengthening and improving the accessibility of social infrastructure (e.g., parks, libraries) and private third places (e.g., coffee shops, breweries). This involves local level efforts to increase funding for third places, as well as national efforts like the Percent for Place coalition,[21] which advocates for the federal government to allocate funding toward civic infrastructure through the Community Revitalization Fund.[22] While this measure was ultimately excluded from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the neighborhood and third place thinkers have each had policy success within specific jurisdictions.

In contrast with the other thinkers, urbanists most carefully consider how the built environment, neighborhoods, and place shape our social lives. Many urbanists think from the perspective of the local, focusing on how local ownership and local participation can better connect residents to place and to one another. They are also thoughtful about the role of design—of cities, neighborhoods, public spaces, and more—both in fostering connection and in driving isolation. Still, they may not sufficiently address how places can activate the built environment to strengthen connection. Participation does not just happen. Relationships are not just formed. Spaces must be activated—through community leadership and thoughtful programming—to become the civic infrastructure that serves as the connective tissue for communities. In this regard, urbanists can take a page from the public health thinkers book in identifying *who* needs access to this civic infrastructure, and they can learn from the democracy thinkers in designing *how* individuals can participate.

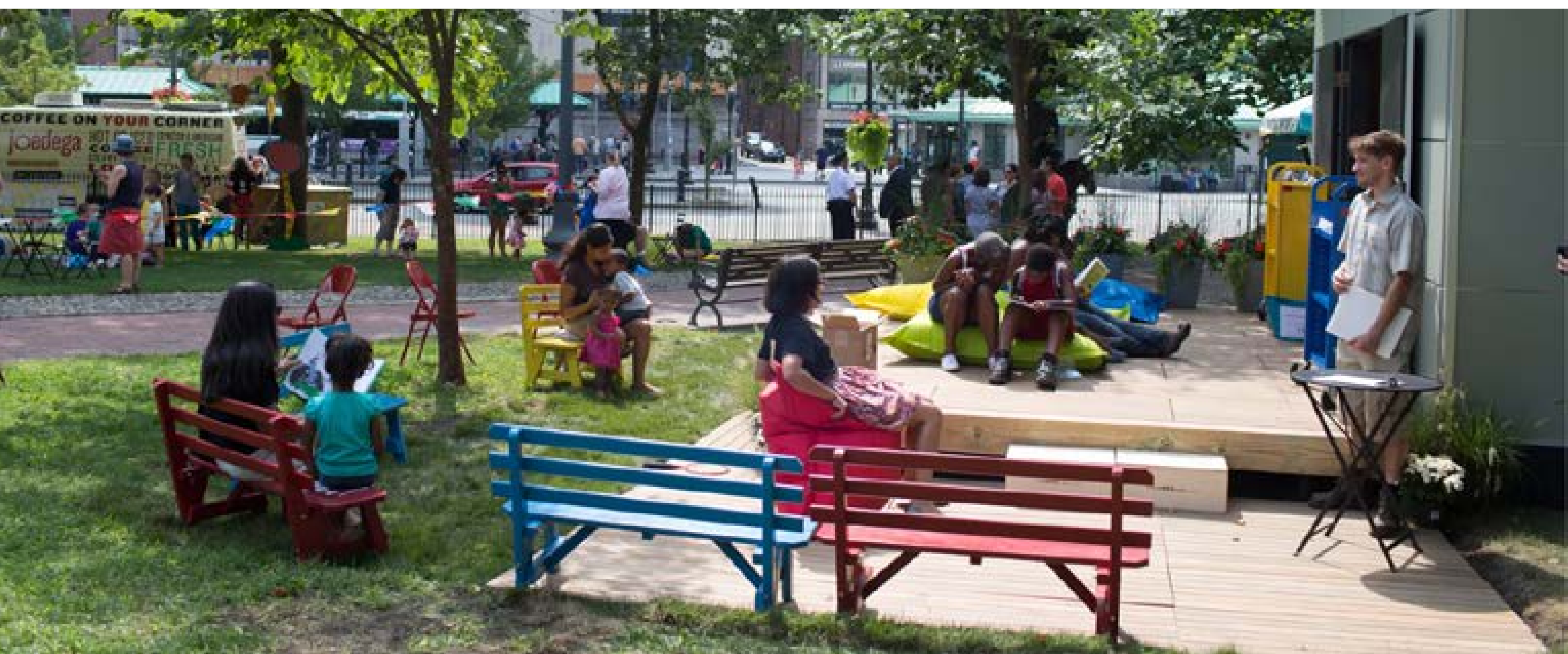


Table 4: Strengths & Blind Spots for Each Strand of Thinkers

Strand	Strengths	Blind Spots
Democracy & Civil Society	Consideration of the role of civil society institutions, who participates in them, how they participate, and where control and power is held.	Less fluent in discussing how economic factors (e.g., the cost of land, role of work) shape civil society and Americans' participation in it.
Public Health	Explicit focus on improving the relational lives of Americans, applying rigor in targeting interventions for populations at risk of isolation and loneliness.	Struggle to design solutions, since social isolation and loneliness are harder to address through typical public health approaches.
Economics	Consider how our social systems shape our economic systems, and vice versa. See civil society and social connection as embedded in and influenced by the economy.	The rigor of economists' models can contribute to economic determinism. Not every outcome should be considered in economic terms.
Urbanism	Thoughtful about how the built environment shapes social lives, and how design–of cities, neighborhoods, public spaces, and more–can both foster connection and drive isolation.	Do not sufficiently address how the different facets of the built environment can be activated and programmed to strengthen social connection.

Other Strands

In addition to these connection-focused thinkers, several other strands of thinkers have emerged, all aiming to transform institutions with their cross-cutting “lenses.” The relevance of these thinkers is twofold. First, each lens incorporates a view of civic life, participation, and/or connection—either as an input or an outcome—thereby shaping the policy and idea space around these issues. Second, these lenses can serve as an analogue for the type of social transformation that different strands of connection-focused thinkers are trying to realize. A brief overview of each strand is included below:

Equity: Equity thinkers intersect with the democracy, public health, economics, and urbanism strands, applying equity as a lens to all facets of policy and programs. They are concerned with barriers to civic participation for minorities, racial inequality in isolation and loneliness, how race interacts with class in the sorting of our social networks, and the structural segregation and depletion of minority neighborhoods.

Resilience: Resilience thinkers focus on how all levels of government, but particularly local, can become more resilient in the face of environmental, economic, and social “shocks.” Accordingly, they aim to integrate resilience as a lens throughout government programs and policies. Resilience thinkers are particularly concerned with how local social networks and institutions can promote “social resilience” to recover from shocks.

Well-being: The well-being thinkers emphasize bolstering well-being—social, economic, and environmental—as their end goal. Accordingly, these thinkers aim to apply a well-being lens across government policy and programs. For well-being thinkers, indicators of social connection and civic participation are considered key drivers of community-level well-being, but not end goals of themselves.

Belonging: The belonging thinkers promote the importance of belonging — “the quality of fit between oneself and a setting” — in advancing flourishing within communities. They view belonging as a lens that can be applied to “the design and implementation of programs and policies across all areas of life in the United States.”[23] Belonging is a similar concept to connection, but involves more psychological, subjective dimensions.

Spirituality & Morality: The morality and spirituality thinkers are mainly focused on Americans’ moral formation. They believe our failures in this realm have contributed to a society with less caring, less neighborliness, less solidarity, less connection, and less meaning. While this group has significant heterogeneity in their views, many advocate for the broadening of America’s institutions—K-12 education, higher education, the work-place—to promote the cultivation of our individual and collective morality/character.

An Interdisciplinary Future

Any typology such as this one is an art, not a science, and the lines separating each of these strands from one another are porous. Economists, such as Anne Case and Angus Deaton, have waded into the waters of public health in publishing their foundational research on deaths of despair.[24] Democracy researchers, such as Hollie Russon-Gilman, have argued for, “a stronger policy connection between civic, physical, mental, and social health.”[25] Urbanists and democracy thinkers have joined forces, launching initiatives like Reimagining the Civic Commons to demonstrate that “transformative public spaces can connect people of all backgrounds, cultivate trust and create more resilient communities.”[26]

Still, we maintain that it is useful to define these camps. The problems they each articulate and the solutions they each propose shape the contours, potential, and limitations of the policy landscape around connection within communities. Indeed, many of the current gaps and barriers to policymaking in this space involve tensions and siloes among each of these different disciplines of thinkers. Naming that these tensions still exist is a step toward learning from and navigating them—ultimately, in the service of driving more holistic policy solutions.

Gaps & Opportunity

Gaps

The emergent interest among policymakers, academics, philanthropists, and the public in strengthening connection within communities presents an opportunity to enact lasting change. However, this movement is still in its relative nascency, while America's communities have faced challenges that have been festering for decades.

Our interviews and secondary research uncovered several of these systemic gaps, roadblocks, and weaknesses. The ecosystem of policymakers and thinkers interested in advancing connection is siloed, top-down, and disconnected. Government entities at all levels lack the foundational infrastructure to integrate a connection lens into their policies and practices. Civic infrastructure and associational life has become depleted in distressed regions and distorted in most other places. All of these issues, which we describe in the following subsections, limit the potential of policy and civic actors to bolster connection and participation within communities.

Policy Ecosystem

1. The current strands of thinkers are siloed, leading to solutions that only address parts of the problem. One sentiment that came up repeatedly in our interviews went like this: you can't solve the loneliness problem without solving the democracy problem, the built environment problem without solving the economic mobility problem, the economic mobility problem without solving the loneliness problem, and so on. While all of these challenges involve connection within communities in some way, the siloing of disciplines and problem definitions is contributing to the siloing of solutions, both within and beyond policy. As one state policymaker put it, there is a danger for "people who talk about systems change" to become "stuck in silos," rather than consider how to address the "community conditions and the roots." A more cohesive approach—one that puts the democracy, public health, economics, urbanism, and other lenses in conversation with one another—will be important for building more connected, integrated, and participatory communities.

2. The policy and philanthropic landscape continues to be top-down, proposing solutions for places rather than elevating solutions and voices from them. The existing policy infrastructure in the U.S. is concentrated among a small number of think tanks, elite academic institutions, and consulting firms. They are supported by a similarly small number of philanthropic institutions, most of which are concentrated in cities like New York and Washington, DC.[1] This poses challenges for all types of policies that intend to center specific places and populations. At best, think tank practitioners and academics develop relationships with local leaders in an attempt to elevate their proposed solutions. However, these solutions are often filtered at two levels: first by the local leader, and then by the academic or think tank practitioner. At worst, policies are proposed for populations and places without any consultation with them. When it comes to the role of policy in bolstering connection within communities, these challenges are magnified, considering that most in-person experiences of connection and community are experienced locally. As Seth Kaplan, author of *Fragile Neighborhoods*, shared in his interview, we need to refocus policy and philanthropy on "place-based institutions, leaders, and relationships" over "siloed, issue-specific" ones. A reformed policy and philanthropic infrastructure—one that prioritizes, supports, and elevates place-based, community-driven solutions—will help shift resources and power to those who are most proximate to their communities' needs.

3. Policymakers have renewed interest in issues related to connection, but lack clarity on whether and how they should be addressed with policy. Beginning in 2023, there was an upswell in policy interest in connection and community at all levels of government. The Surgeon General released his Advisory on Social Isolation and Loneliness in April,[2] Senator Chris Murphy proposed his National Strategy for Social Connection in July, Governor Wes Moore launched his Department of Service & Civic Innovation in August,[3] and Mayor Matt Mahan (San Jose, CA) announced the Together SJ pilot, a neighborhood social connection program, in early August.[4] However, our interviews with policymakers

surfaced several lingering questions regarding the government's role in strengthening connection within communities—especially related to the balance between government and community groups, and the specific focus of policies. Helping policymakers understand the potential and limits of government to bolster connection could help unlock more informed, appropriate policy action.

> *"It is really important for people to both love their neighborhoods and love each other within their neighborhoods. But what's the role of government here? I am wrestling with this question right now."*
>
> *- James Wagner, Director of Tulsa's Department of City Experience*

4. Policymakers interested in strengthening community connection are largely unaware of other policymakers who share these interests. The relatively recent reemergence of these issues—along with the dearth of coalitions or networks among connection-focused policymakers—has contributed to a disconnected landscape of largely independent policy actors. These disconnects appear to be suppressing the opportunity for policy learning across jurisdictions, states, and partisan divides. Indeed, an aide to Senator Chris Murphy cited the bipartisan interest in working to improve social connection, "these are things that have shared values on the left and the right and that makes this a very compelling subject to have open dialogue and conversation across sides." Consequently, there appears to be an opportunity, both to connect the policymakers already focused on connection-related issues and promote the formation of others to become more directly interested.

Policy Infrastructure

5. The lack of established, community-level measures on the strength of civic infrastructure and connection hinders policymaking. At present, there are few established measures to assess the strength of civic infrastructure and Americans' relational lives, particularly at the community-level. Instead, there are only individual measures of connection, which cannot be generalized, and population-level surveys of connection and community involvement, which allow for minimal targeting based on place. A consistent, community-level measurement regime—with a set of comprehensive, place-based measures that can be tracked over time—can enable state, local, and community leaders to begin taking sustained action to strengthen connection within their communities. Chetty's Social Capital Atlas and Han's Mapping the Modern Agora Project are a step in the right direction, providing zip-code level data on cross-class connection and civil society density and diversity, respectively.[5] However, these measures still only represent part of the picture. More can be done to integrate other domains of connection and to ensure measures are responsive to local needs. Addressing these gaps will be integral to unlocking a more defined, consistent, and effective role for policy in bolstering connection within communities.

6. The issue-based siloing of government departments leaves few personnel, if any, to do the interagency and community coordination necessary to strengthen social connection. Our interviews and research uncovered few examples of personnel or commissions dedicated to strengthening social connection. Connecticut's Social Connection Campaign and San Mateo County's Loneliness Commission, both launched in 2024, are notable exceptions.[6] Without a set of goals and measures from which to be held accountable, and the necessary personnel to advance these goals across government and in partnership with communities, there is a limited foundation for promoting structural change in policies, programs, and practices. Monica Hutt, Vermont's Chief Prevention Officer, affirmed this point: "Integration across state government—and thinking about issues in a more integrated way—that is critical. Then, you are leading by example and avoiding working within silos." Accordingly, an opportunity exists for government entities to designate commissions and/or dedicated personnel to begin driving strategy, coordination, and execution on priorities related to connection within communities.

> *"You need to create a framework for policymaking around social connection. Then, and only then, can you start asking, 'is how we are structured right now the best way to do it?'"*
>
> *- Chris LaTondresse, Former Hennepin County Commissioner (MN)*

7. Civic infrastructure, participation, and connection are viewed as inputs rather than outcomes, and are rarely viewed as a lens for policymaking and communications. Policymakers largely view connection as inputs to the policymaking process or side effects of policy, rather than a lens to be applied to policymaking. In some cases, this is due to a lack of awareness or champions. In other cases, it is due to a lack of research, evidence, and measures. Still in others, it is due to questions about the role and limits of policy. The net result is that (a) most government entities have no integrated strategy to strengthen connection through their policies, programs, and practices; and (b) few elected officials have the language to communicate about these issues—both internally and externally. The integration of this connection lens could enable more intentional policymaking around connection, while broadening the coalition of governmental and community partners who support these policies.

Community Ecosystem

8. Associational life in certain regions is experiencing a market failure akin to the market failure of local news. Some regions of the country have become civic opportunity deserts—much like local news deserts—where economic conditions can no longer support civic life.[7] Persistent job loss and population outflows have contributed to the erosion of the civic infrastructure and local leadership capacity that help civic life function. This dynamic can create a death spiral for communities: lower levels of civic opportunity leads to fewer outlets for the community involvement that strengthens social capital, which, in turn, contributes to the further weakening of a community's civic infrastructure. As is the case with local news deserts, substantial philanthropic and policy intervention may be needed to initially jumpstart the civic infrastructure and support local leadership in these regions.

9. The business and governance models of community-building organizations reinforce economic disconnectedness and transactional relationships. In regions where economic conditions can still sustain civic life, civic infrastructure and associational life has become severely distorted. Here, nonprofits tend to be reliant on philanthropy, trapped in scarcity cycles,[8] overburdened by measurement,[9] and serve their donors rather than constituents.[10] For-profits, meanwhile, have become "privatized communities," serving premium customers at premium price points, and erecting financial and geographic barriers to entry for everyone else.[11] As a result, many communities are caught in a negative feedback loop of nonprofits transactionally serving people as "beneficiaries" and for-profits transactionally serving people as "customers," with each driving the reinforced sorting of residents' social networks. New business and governance models are needed to reverse these trends, promoting financial sustainability, cross-class connection, and community ownership.

> *"Civil society has a business model problem. All those Montgomery, AL, Black-led organizations were self-sufficient. They weren't getting grants, they hadn't shifted to a philanthropy-dominated model. Today, we need new business models for self-sustaining organizations."*
>
> *- Peter Levine, Tufts College of Civic Life*

10. The professionalization and specialization of care settings and associational life has suppressed community participation and cooperation. Community settings that have historically relied on cooperation—particularly care and associational life—have become increasingly professionalized, leading to the walling off of active participation among neighbors and other community members. As care settings have become the domain of credentialed professionals,[12] family members and neighbors have been displaced from cooperating to provide care for the young children, older adults, and those with disabilities in their communities. As associational life has become the domain of a nonprofit and philanthropic professional class, it has suppressed the participation of community members to solve their own problems.[13] Pete Davis, the director of *Join or Die*, describes the consequences of this professionalization dynamic: "When things become over-professionalized, people become alienated and conspiratorial. Participation is the medicine for this alienation and conspiracy." For communities to realize their participatory, self-determining potential, care settings and associational life must be reoriented toward actively inviting participation, cooperation, and self-governance.

Opportunity

A new wave of communitarianism is emerging in elite institutions, showing up across media and culture, policy and politics, and philanthropy and associational life. Its causes are multifold. The election of Donald Trump in 2016 and the outbreak of the Covid pandemic in 2020 can both be viewed as major shocks that challenged the existing sociopolitical paradigm. But these were also surface-level events, occurring atop a deeper current of decades of technological, economic, social, and cultural change that both hollowed out the core of communities and eroded trust in institutions and expertise. A half-century of conservative and liberal policymaking that elevated individualism, market deregulation, and the wisdom of experts has reached an extreme end point, leaving in its wake isolated individuals, weakened civic life, and widespread alienation and institutional distrust.

It is perhaps to be expected, then, that an interest in communitarian-inflected policymaking has bubbled up amidst this backdrop. Policymakers are beginning to realize that the antidote to isolation is connection, the antidote to distrust is participation, and the antidote to individualism is solidarity. However, the limitations of this current policymaking—particularly, its underdeveloped and siloed nature—are also to be expected. As this new wave of communitarianism hit, well-intended policy actors defaulted to existing belief systems, existing infrastructure, and existing practices. But the same way of doing things will not cut it. What is needed, instead, is a fundamentally different approach to policymaking.

The institutions of American life can be structurally transformed to strengthen participation and connection within communities—and government can be an enabler of this change. This shift will demand new criteria for *why* policies are prioritized, emphasizing civic opportunity, participation, and connection in addition to narrowly defined economic and health outcomes. This shift will also require changes to *what* policies are proposed, *how* policies are designed and implemented, and *where* governance and decision-making is situated. These changes, in turn, will challenge us to break down our silos and develop new *foundations* for policymaking: new measures and approaches to measurement, new personnel and ways that personnel relate to communities, and a new lens to be applied to policies, programs, and practices. The policy framework that follows is both a tangible starting point for imagining the potential of this foundational and institutional change, and an invitation to challenge, deepen, and build upon it.

Framework

Overview

The underlying premise of this framework is that government can and should play a role in regenerating connection within communities. Social and economic policy profoundly affects our shared lives in community—and we ignore this reality at our peril. However, government actions can also go too far, whether by creating disconnected and siloed programs, displacing associational life and relationships, or appointing "expert" technocrats to do the work that citizens and neighbors should do. Government actions focused on bolstering connection should, therefore, be grounded in an understanding of where they can go awry. They must tie to a broader, holistic vision for the role of policy, emphasize creating the conditions for relationships to flourish rather than replacing them, and commit to continuous community participation, cooperation, and co-governance.

As policymakers at all levels of government increasingly consider how they can regenerate and strengthen connection, we created this framework to channel the active potential of policy while avoiding its pitfalls. We begin this framework by identifying three foundational changes needed to establish a true policy vision around connection that, in Daniel Patrick Moynihan's words, "seeks to respond to the system in its entirety."[1] From there, we articulate ten priority areas for policymaking, each of which includes specific policy and programmatic opportunities. We round out each section with several examples of these opportunities in action. This holistic approach creates a framework that is applicable across sectors, geographies, and levels of government.

The framework is comprehensive, so we designed this overview section to help you to navigate it. To make the implicit explicit, we describe our perspective on the role of policy in strengthening connection within communities. We then provide an overview of how we organize the framework and the principles we use to include some policies and exclude others. We conclude with suggestions for reading, applying, and building on the framework as you engage with it.

Policy & Community: Our Perspective

We have a clear perspective on the principles undergirding how the government can strengthen connection within communities. Because others may have different perspectives on these principles, we make our implicit views explicit. To that end, we have identified four primary tensions within political theory tied to how the state, markets, and community should relate to one another. In the table below (and detailed in **Appendix C**), we briefly explain these tensions, define our perspective on each, and describe how they inform the framework.

The State: Government vs. Associational Life

What role should government play vis a vis associational life?

Crowd Out: Believe that government can "crowd out" associational life and human relationships. They hold that government programs can displace community institutions, reducing communal, neighborly, and familial ties of mutual obligation and care.

Enablement: Assert that government—within limits—can "enable" the strengthening of associational life and Americans' connectedness. They see a role for government in funding, coordinating with, and removing barriers to participation in community groups.

Our View: We fall somewhere in the middle here. We believe government programs can "crowd out" our communal and relational lives. But we also believe specific government efforts can enable more connectedness within communities.

Scale & Scope: Federalists vs. Localists

What is the optimal relationship between national and local institutions?

Federalists: Emphasize the importance of centralized power at the national level. While they generally respect the importance of local governance, they also see a need for national institutions to coordinate and deliver policies and programs at scale.

Localists: Believe that decision-making and governance should be concentrated at the local level. They hold that those closest to the problems are best positioned to design solutions, and proximate, local relationships can better foster trust and accountability than abstract, national ones.

Our View: While we believe there is a role for the federal government in strengthening connection within communities, it is primarily a support role, and more decision-making should be devolved to the state, local, and neighborhood levels.

The Market: Market Forces vs. Associational Life

What role should market forces play in relation to associational life?

Freedom of Markets: Assert that the market forces of growth and economic development are integral for thriving communities. These actors believe that individual and community prosperity are both foundational for an active and robust associational life.

Freedom from Markets: Believe that communities and individuals should be protected from market forces. They hold that these forces can dictate all facets of our lives, making community participation and spending time with friends and family more difficult.

Our View: We believe that markets, in and of themselves, are not bad and can be directed to strengthen community. But we also believe that unregulated markets—particularly related to work and tech— have harmed our family and community lives and should be reined in.

Expertise: Technocrats vs. Small "d" Democrats

Who determines what is best for communities?

Technocrats: Assert that qualified experts are best positioned to make decisions for communities, holding that governance should be led by individuals with the knowledge and skills to make "evidence-based" and "data-driven" decisions.

Small "d" Democrats: Believe in the importance of community-driven decision-making—from a moral and utilitarian perspective—and advocate for more participatory, cooperative, and membership-driven forms of governance that distribute power among the public.

Our View: We are largely aligned with the Small "d" Democrats. A core principle of this framework is that all institutions should be made more participatory, cooperative, and community-involved. While there is a role for measurement and specialized personnel, they should be in service of enabling community connection, not replacing it.

Framework Organization

With an experience as fundamental to being human as connection, and a setting as expansive as community, we needed to create a tangible way to think about organizing, devising, and implementing policy. We make the breadth of this framework accessible by structuring it into four discrete and complementary chapters, each including three to four related sections. But we also make it actionable: offering tangible policy opportunities within each section, organizing them by the stakeholder group who can take action, and complementing them with specific case studies, resources, and big ideas to inspire such action.

Chapters & Sections

The organization of this framework provides policymakers with an accessible starting point for strengthening connection within communities. To do this, we first structure the framework into four chapters: "Foundational Changes," "Community Institutions," "Life Transitions," and "Enabling Conditions." We then break down every chapter into three to four relevant sections, each containing specific policy and programmatic opportunities. Taken together, these four chapters and 13 sections holistically encompass the policy priority areas for strengthening connection within communities:

Foundational Changes: What are the foundational changes necessary to prepare government to approach policymaking with a cross-cutting focus on connection?
This chapter includes three sections—"Measures," "Personnel," and "Connection Lens"—each of which complements and builds on the other, establishing the foundation for durable policymaking on connection.

Community Institutions: What are the highest potential opportunities for institutional change to strengthen connection within communities?
This chapter includes three sections—"Housing & Neighborhoods," "Civic Infrastructure & Associational Life," and "Care & Educational Settings"—which, if oriented toward connection, can have an outsized impact on strengthening the social fabric of communities.

Life Transitions: What are the most critical transition points throughout the life course where policy can help bolster connection?
This chapter recognizes the unique potential and vulnerability of four specific transitional periods—"Early Childhood & Parenting", the "Adult Transition," "Community Integration," and "Retirement & Older Adults"—and the role of social support in helping us flourish through these moments of change.

Enabling Conditions: What forces operate beyond communities, but wield an outsized influence on how Americans experience connection within them?
These enabling conditions—"Work," "Big Tech & Media," and "Local News & Media"—shape the nature of our civic opportunities, our agency to participate in them, and the quality of the connections we form.

Policy Opportunities

Each section includes a set of distinct but interrelated opportunities for policy action, including subsections addressing different levels of government as well as philanthropy. We used this structure—organizing proposals by levels of government and philanthropy—to align the opportunities we identify with the stakeholder groups that can act on them. Within each subsection, we feature up to policy, programmatic, or philanthropic opportunities. While the opportunities we identify for each level of government and philanthropy are not comprehensive, they reflect our view of high potential priorities (more in "Principles for Inclusion" below). These subsections typically relate to one another, often with the federal government and philanthropy playing a role in supporting local and state government actions.

Action Boxes

Nearly every subsection includes one or more action boxes—each of which aim to deepen or bring to life a specific policy or philanthropic opportunity. We include three types of actions:

1. Case Studies are examples—either from government or civic life—of what these policy and philanthropic opportunities look like in practice.[i]

2. Resources are guides, toolkits, and other materials designed to promote practical action related to these policy and philanthropic opportunities.

3. Big Ideas are exactly what they sound like: not yet-tested ideas for translating policy and philanthropic opportunities into action.

We sourced all case studies and resources from our interviews, secondary research, and examples others have shared with us through our day-to-day interactions. As such, they neither represent a comprehensive list nor endorsements of the best possible examples we could include. Instead, these examples should be viewed as a starting point that can be built upon and an opportunity to better catalog government actions to regenerate strengthen connection within communities.

[i] *Most of the action boxes included throughout the framework are case studies.*

Principles for Inclusion

Given the lack of defined, agreed-upon measures on connection—especially those that can be applied across sectors and disciplines—we developed a set of first principles for including some policy opportunities and excluding others. We start with *capacity*, particularly that of individuals, groups, and government, to bolster community connection. The remaining three principles deconstruct community life into its constituent parts, focusing on access to *civic opportunities*, the process of *participating* in these opportunities, and the *connections* that both result from and encourage this participation. We define each principle—along with their typological drivers—in the table below.

Principles			
Capacity	**Opportunity**	**Participation**	**Connection**
Policies that bolster the capacity of individuals, groups, and/or government to strengthen connection within communities.	**Policies that increase access to and/or the quality of civic opportunities.**	**Policies that enable, invite, and/or encourage individuals to participate in civic opportunities.**	**Policies that boost individual- and/or community-level connectedness.**
Type			
People: Policies that empower, equip, and/or connect people—within and beyond government. **Process:** Policies that create, improve, or reform institutional processes. **Funding:** Policies that provide funding to individuals, groups, and/or government.	**Boost Supply:** Policies that boost the supply of civic opportunities. **Improve Quality:** Policies that improve the experiential quality of civic opportunities (e.g., facilitator trainings, program improvements). **Remove Barriers:** Policies that remove barriers to accessing civic opportunities.	**Promote Freedom:** Policies that increase people's freedom or agency to participate in civic opportunities. **Make Participatory:** Policies that make civic opportunities more participatory in nature. **Target Groups:** Policies that target boosting participation among specific demographic or geographic groups.	**Overall Connection:** Policies that improve the overall quality or quantity of connections. **Bridging Connection**: Policies that increase connections across lines of difference.

Throughout the following sections, we "tag" each specific policy or philanthropic opportunity with up to three principles that best apply to it. For example, a recommendation to provide micro-grants for neighborhood programming would be tagged as *Capacity - Funding* and *Opportunity - Boost Supply* For policies that feature multiple principles, we apply multiple, relevant tags. Though each tag could merit its own explanation and analysis, this approach allows us to accommodate the significant breadth of this document while providing a simple framework for contextualizing our choices for policy inclusion.[ii]

[ii] *Note: While we do not apply a comparative evaluation of the policy opportunities we feature, we do suggest potential dimensions for this comparative evaluation within Appendix D.*

Using the Framework

How to read it

Read the framework—in part or in full. A 13-section policy framework on a question as big as, "What is the role of policy in regenerating connection within communities?" does not make for a short read. While we have designed the framework to be read in full if your interest permits, we have also drafted each chapter and section to be read as an independent, cohesive whole. To that end, you may start with the "Foundational Changes" chapter and make your way through the entire framework, selectively identify and read the chapters and sections that are most of interest to you, or repeatedly return to this framework as a resource, revisiting different sections as they are relevant to you.

Jump to **Foundational Changes**

Jump to **Community Institutions**

Jump to **Life Transitions**

Jump to **Enabling Conditions**

Apply elements of the framework to your particular context. Considering the geographic, demographic, and political heterogeneity across local contexts, we do not propose one way of applying this framework, especially for state and local policymakers. Instead, these stakeholders should apply different elements of this framework to be responsive to their particular contexts. For example, policymakers in urban and suburban settings may find the "Neighborhoods" section more relevant than those in rural settings, and policymakers in more conservative places may prefer a more hands-off approach to supporting civic life compared to policymakers in more progressive communities. The purpose of this framework is not to precisely prescribe how policymakers should strengthen connection within their communities but to provide guidance for where to begin, principles for application, and examples of what applying these principles could look like in practice.

Build on this framework as a starting point. We designed this policy framework to be built on—not as the final word on policy and connection within communities. Over time, we intend to launch an interactive platform to facilitate continuous and collaborative policy development, the cataloging of case studies, and the sharing of tools and resources. The nascency of this policy space—along with its collectivist, place-based, and participatory nature—demands that we approach its development by promoting open participation and centering local, community-embedded practitioners.

Whether you are a policymaker, academic, think tanker, or community practitioner, we encourage you to challenge parts of this framework, build on existing sections, and consider applying the connection lens to other institutions and sectors we did not consider. Take the Housing section and develop an entire policy agenda focused on housing and connection. Identify a different sector, like transportation, and draw on this framework to create a policy strategy for transportation and connection. A core contention of this framework is that a connection lens can be applied to all sectors and institutions within American life. By approaching this framework as a starting point—and building on it further—we can begin to collectively realize this vision.

Foundational Changes

Policymakers at all levels of government are ill-equipped to strengthen connection in America's communities. Government entities lack consistent community-level measures on the civic opportunity, participation, and connection that contributes to social capital formation.[i] This hinders policymakers' ability to design policies and programs to bolster connection among specific populations, geographies, and institutions within communities. Moreover, the issue-based siloing of government departments leaves few personnel, if any, to do the interagency and community coordination necessary to strengthen connection. Without these consistent measures and dedicated personnel, policymakers are on shaky grounding to embed a connection lens within their policies, programs, and practices.

Foundational change is needed across all levels and departments of government to establish the theoretical and operational underpinning to durably foster more connected communities. This involves developing a new set of community-level measures that enable the holistic assessment of civic opportunity, participation, and connection over time. It involves the creation of new offices and staff positions—or the adaptation of existing ones—to focus on strengthening connection within communities. Finally, it means altering existing policies, programs, and practices within government, as well as creating new ones, to better center connection. Such foundational changes would shift connection-related policymaking from a scattershot of disconnected, one-off policies and programs to an integrative, holistic lens that can be applied across all levels of government and all institutions.

Precedent exists for this type of foundational change to government institutions. The environmental movement has shifted the measures for which the government is held accountable, the personnel that the government hires, and the design of their programs and practices. State and local governments alike have adopted climate action plans that have enabled and institutionalized this type of change. The same type of change is possible for strengthening Americans' relational lives. This section speaks to three of the most significant opportunities for foundational change that could unlock and undergird a vision for broader policy change. Measurement serves as the backbone, personnel drives strategy and execution, and policies, programs, and practices are the conduits for impact.

[i] *For the purpose of simplicity and concision, we often use the term "connection" throughout this section as short-hand for civic opportunity, participation, and connection. We view "connection" as both the outcome of civic opportunity and participation, and a driver of further civic opportunity and participation.*

Measures: Develop and adopt a set of indicators to measure the strength of civic opportunity, community participation, and individual and community connectedness.

"To enable community-driven policymaking, communities need to holistically measure the strength of civic life, individuals' participation in it, and social connection at the population and community levels."

Government entities do not have a consistent set of community-level measures on civic opportunity, participation, and connection. This limits their ability to assess the current state of these indicators and track changes over time, which, in turn, limits their capacity to develop relevant policies and programs. To enable community-driven policymaking, communities need to holistically measure the strength of civic life, individuals' participation in it, and social connection at the population and community levels. This will better facilitate the targeting of resources, programs, and policy for specific demographic groups and geographic locations, as well as the monitoring of program- and community-level progress over time.

Within the past decade, several efforts have emerged to track community-level indicators that are non-economic in nature. Spurred by advocacy from groups in the justice and equity movement, many regions and cities now monitor community-level equity measures—both through public dashboards and within policy and programs. Moreover, an increasing focus among policymakers and philanthropy on the threat of environmental, economic, and social shocks has led to the creation of several community-level indices of resilience and vulnerability.[1] Most recently, similar efforts have been launched within and outside government to track community-level well-being, such as Santa Monica's Wellbeing Index and Green Bay's Wello initiative.[2] Though none of these measurement regimes focus on social connection or social capital as ends in and of themselves, they comprise the emergent landscape of which a connection measurement regime would be a part.

Since 2020, researchers have produced a myriad of geographically focused measures related to civic opportunity, participation, and connection. The Social Capital Project, led by Senate Republicans' Joint Economic Committee, created state- and county-level indices of social capital.[3] The Social Capital Atlas, developed by Raj Chetty's Opportunity Insights team, measures economic connectedness at the zip code-level throughout the U.S.[4] AARP's Connect2Affect initiative measures the geography of social isolation and loneliness among older adults.[5] The Mapping the Modern Agora project is beginning to measure the geography of civic opportunity in the U.S., connecting existing measures of connectedness to new measures of civic infrastructure.[6] An opportunity exists to integrate and build on these measures, thereby equipping policymakers and community groups with the information they need to take sustained action to strengthen connection in their communities.

All levels of government, along with philanthropy, can help facilitate the adoption of community-level measures of civic opportunity, participation, and connection. Local and state government can drive these efforts, advancing a participatory design process, developing public dashboards, and incorporating measures into programmatic monitoring and evaluation. Philanthropy and the federal government can assume an important support role, funding the aggregation of existing and new measures as well as measurement pilots within communities. These collective efforts can create momentum toward establishing community-level measures of civic opportunity, participation, and connection to serve as the bedrock for broader policymaking.

What Local & State Governments Can Do

The experience of civic opportunity, participation, and connection happens on the ground at the local level. As such, local and state governments are best positioned to establish, measure, and be held accountable to community-level indicators of connection. In particular, local and state governments can take four steps to create the foundation for community-level measurement:

Conduct a scan of existing measures. Because local and state government likely capture some measures related to connection, mayors and governors can start by conducting a scan of these measures that are already integrated into program/policy assessments and community-level indicators. This can provide a community with an initial inventory of what they already measure around connection and how they measure it, as well as where their gaps lie.

Capacity - Process

Pursue a participatory design process. Local- and state-level leaders can pursue a participatory design process to identify the most important quantitative measures for a community and determine the role of ongoing qualitative data collection. Measuring community can take many forms, ranging from the supply of civic opportunities to the outcomes of connection and trust. A more participatory process will allow the measurement approach to both feel owned by and responsive to the community's needs.

Capacity - Process *Participation - Make Participatory*

Develop a community connection dashboard. Once baseline measures are established, local and state policymakers can develop a community connection dashboard, made public and accessible on the website of the local jurisdiction or state, that displays agreed upon and up-to-date community-level measures on civic opportunity, participation, and connection.

Capacity - Process *Participation - Make Participatory*

Create a monitoring and evaluation strategy. The final step for state and local government is to incorporate these agreed upon measures into their policy evaluation approach. To that end, government entities can create a monitoring and evaluation strategy that integrates prioritized measures of civic opportunity, participation, and connection into relevant government programs and policies.

Capacity - Process

RESOURCE

Action Guide for Building Socially Connected Communities

The Foundation for Social Connection's "Action Guide for Building Socially Connected Communities" includes a helpful section on how to measure connection at the community-level. The social connection measurement tools are particularly useful for state and local governments looking for a place to begin in developing measures.

Access the action guide here

What Philanthropy Can Do

Given the relatively recent reemergence of policy and academic interest in measuring connection, philanthropy can play a significant role in kickstarting these efforts. We have identified three opportunities for national and local philanthropy to advance the development and adoption of this measurement infrastructure:

Aggregate community-level measures of connection. National philanthropy can support the development and aggregation of current, emerging, and new community-level measures of connection into an integrated dataset with zip code-level data that can be tracked over time. This data should ultimately be made accessible to interested local and state governments to inform needs assessments, policy targeting, and ongoing evaluation.

Capacity - Process

Fund measurement design and implementation. Because local government may not have the resources to support these initial measurement projects, local philanthropy can fund both the participatory design process for establishing community-level connection measures and the dashboards that reflect the community's preferences and needs. National philanthropy could also play a role, funding local- or state-level pilots to facilitate experimentation and learning. Over time, such pilots could derisk and promote broader adoption, both by local philanthropy and state and local governments.

Capacity - Funding

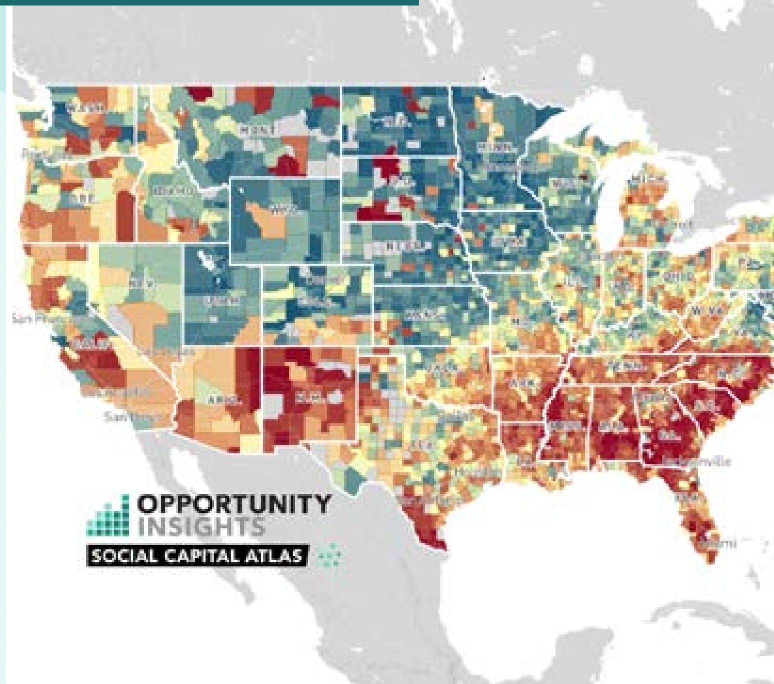
Encourage a participatory and interdisciplinary measurement approach. All levels of philanthropy can encourage the state and local governments they interact with to (1) engage in a participatory design process for measure development; and (2) undertake a more interdisciplinary measurement approach, rather than an approach that is predominantly rooted in one lens (i.e., public health, democracy, etc.). This is a constructive opportunity for funders to use their financial leverage to promote community participation and break down silos.

Capacity - Process *Participation - Make Participatory*

BIG IDEA

Aggregating Data for Policymakers & Community Members

Funders have the opportunity to help aggregate community-level measures of connection—both existing and new—into an integrated dataset with zip code-level data that can be tracked longitudinally. For example, this could involve creating an integrated dashboard that links current geographic datasets, such as the Social Capital Atlas and Social Capital Project indices, with emerging datasets like the Mapping the Modern Agora Project. This dashboard can be continually updated as new geographic datasets emerge. Such an effort would equip policymakers and community members to make more informed decisions on connection-related policies and programs.



What the Federal Government Can Do

Much like philanthropy, the federal government has an opportunity to encourage the development and adoption of connection-related measures at the state and municipal levels—both through its funding and convening powers:

Provide pilot funding for measurement development. Similar to the role of philanthropy, the federal government can provide pilot funding—focused on developing holistic connection measures—for policymakers and academics alike. This could include offering funding to state and local governments to experiment with community-level measurement approaches. The federal government can also provide research grants to academics to develop new methods and tools for measuring and aggregating community-level connection data. As part of the funding criteria, the federal government can encourage interdisciplinary and participatory design processes wherever relevant.

Capacity - Funding *Participation - Make Participatory*

Leverage convening powers to facilitate interdisciplinary measurement approaches. The federal government can leverage its convening power to encourage a more interdisciplinary approach for defining and measuring connection. Within the federal government, this could involve engaging agencies beyond HHS—where most activity around measurement is currently housed—to include agencies that consider the built environment (e.g., HUD, DOT), civil society and communities (e.g., AmeriCorps, USDA, ED), and economic development and work (e.g., DOL, DOC, SBA). The White House, executive agencies, and Congress can also convene interdisciplinary groups of academics, practitioners, and state and local policymakers, promoting learning and collaboration to improve and facilitate the adoption of community-level measures of connection.

Capacity - People

Develop more holistic federal measures of isolation and connection. The federal government already collects a significant amount of data through the Census, CDC, and other federal entities. Consequently, it can play a role in identifying existing connection-related measures included within these surveys, determining new potential measures to be incorporated into existing data collection efforts, and integrating them into more holistic measures of isolation and connection. Citizens have good reason to push back against the government collecting data on their relational lives; as such, federal agencies should exercise caution in these efforts—both in terms of the specific data they collect and how they collect it.

Capacity - Process

CASE STUDY

Improving Measurements for Loneliness & Isolation Act

In November 2023, Congressman Mike Flood (R-NE) and Congressman David Trone (D-MD) introduced the **"Improving Measurement for Loneliness & Isolation Act,"** [7] **calling on the Secretary of Health & Human Services to establish a working group to formulate recommendations for standardizing measurements of loneliness and isolation.** While the bill has not yet advanced out of committee, it is an example of the federal government leveraging its convening power to advance measurement tied to connection. Future versions of the bill could be strengthened through the inclusion of agency stakeholders beyond the health field.

Personnel: Align personnel to coordinate connection-related priorities across policy, implementation, and outreach.

"Government entities … would benefit from establishing a full-time, executive-level position—along with an interagency working group—focused on cross-departmental and cross-level coordination of strategies to strengthen connection."

The siloing of government departments leaves no personnel to do the coordination necessary to strengthen connection within communities. Without a set of goals and measures from which to be held accountable, and the necessary personnel to advance these goals across government and in partnership with communities, there is a limited foundation for promoting structural change in policies, programs, and practices. Therefore, government entities, especially at the local and state levels, would benefit from establishing a full-time, executive-level position—along with an interagency working group—focused on cross-departmental and cross-level coordination of strategies to strengthen connection. Together, this role and working group could lead efforts to develop governmental connection action plans, ensuring communities are incorporated into decision-making, solutions are represented in the strategy and budget, and the relevant policies/programs have appropriate management and accountability.

Over the past 15 years, many state and local government entities have established analogous positions focused on driving coordination and strategy on equity, resilience, and well-being. Many mayor's and governor's offices have created Chief Equity Officer positions,[8] which often lead Offices of Equity and Justice within local and state government.[9] Similarly, cities and states have established Chief Resilience Officer and Chief Climate Officer roles to coordinate state- and local-level resilience policies.[10] In recent years, a few states have funded Innovator-in-Chief and Chief Prevention Officer roles, which integrate more holistic, well-being-centric approaches into policy, programming, and practices.[11] These positions are complemented by an emerging set of roles more directly focused on civic life, including Chief Democracy Officers and Chief Engagement Officers, Offices of New Americans, and Offices of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.[12] Due to the proliferation of these horizontally focused positions, any policymaker looking to create a new role focused on advancing connection within communities will encounter a crowded, fragmented landscape. Accordingly, they will need to determine where a connection lens—applied to personnel—fits in alongside these existing lenses that have already been integrated into government.

In light of this fragmentation, local and state governments have a range of options for incorporating a connection lens into their personnel strategy, including launching a committee or working group, integrating connection-related responsibilities into an existing role, or creating a standalone role or office focused on connection. Philanthropy can support the experimentation with and refinement of these new state and local personnel positions by funding pilot initiatives. At the federal level, The White House can repurpose its Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships to foster interagency and intergovernmental coordination to strengthen civic opportunity and social connection. Establishing new connection-oriented personnel roles will involve navigating a complicated landscape and require experimentation, coordination, and learning—both within communities and across place.

What Local & State Governments Can Do

The appetite and need for personnel with a connection focus will vary by place. Therefore, jurisdictions and states can consider a spectrum of options for integrating a connection lens—from as small of a lift as standing up a committee or working group, to as big of a lift as launching a new office. We describe each of these options, step-by-step, below:

Launch a connection committee or working group. As an initial step, mayors and governors can stand up a "Connection Cabinet"—a committee or working group composed of relevant agency heads, community liaisons, and civic leaders—with the charge of advancing connection efforts within and government. This could create momentum and buy-in within government, surface strategic and operational gaps across existing efforts, and inform the scoping of part- and full-time roles focused on connection. Such a Connection Cabinet could also become a durable piece of government infrastructure, facilitating ongoing coordination around connection.

Capacity - People

Incorporate connection responsibilities into existing role. To begin institutionalizing this connection lens, mayors and governors can identify an existing role within government—such as a Chief Equity Officer, Chief Resilience Officer, or Director of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives—and add the responsibility of coordinating and driving strategy around connection to that position. This approach would draw on what local or state government is already doing, and incorporate a connection lens within that ongoing work.

Capacity - People

Create a new standalone role focused on connection. Mayors and governors who are ready to make the connection lens a priority within government can establish a new standalone role: the "Chief Connection Officer" or "Chief Community Officer." This position would exclusively focus on connection-related responsibilities—including strategy, coordination, engagement, and evaluation—both across government and within communities.

Capacity - People

Establish a standalone office centered on connection. For local- and state-level leaders who want to make connection the overarching approach under which all others fall (e.g. equity, resilience, well-being, immigrant inclusion), they can create a standalone Office of Connected Communities. This office would be led by a Chief Connection or Community Officer and could have leads focused on equity, resilience, immigrant belonging, faith-based partnerships. The launch of this type of office would establish connection as the primary horizontal throughline considered for all policies, programs, and practices.

Capacity - People

BIG IDEA

Translating the Chief Resilience Officer Role to Connection

Rockefeller's "100 Resilient Cities" initiative is credited with refining and popularizing the "Chief Resilience Officer" role across city and state governments. According to Rockefeller's article on "What a Chief Resilience Officer Does,"[13] the role has four primary responsibilities: (1) intergovernmental communications and coordination; (2) stakeholder engagement within government and in communities; (3) leading the resilience strategy development process; and (4) serving as the "resilience point person" to apply a resilience lens across government activities. **Drawing on this template, cities and states can design and test what a standalone "Chief Connection Officer" role would look like. While the lens would be different, many of the key responsibilities would remain the same.**

Read the full Rockefeller article here

What Philanthropy Can Do

Considering the experimental nature of integrating a connection lens into the responsibilities of government personnel, philanthropy can play an important role in facilitating, testing, and preparing government employees to implement these initial efforts. Both local and national philanthropists have an opportunity to fund and pilot these preliminary activities and positions, contributing to learning and broader adoption:

Provide seed funding for connection personnel. Local philanthropy can fund the activities of an initial committee/working group and/or part or all of a standalone role. This philanthropic support would ensure that taxpayer dollars are not used to fund these activities until there is sufficient resident buy-in and evidence for the effectiveness of these activities and roles.

Capacity - Funding

Fund pilots of Chief Connection Officer roles. National philanthropy could provide funding for pilots of Chief Community Officer-type roles at the state or local levels. Such pilots can start at places that already appear to be at the forefront of innovation on connection, such as San Jose, CA and Vermont. They would involve testing out and streamlining the role, creating a template for what the role could look like in other states and jurisdictions, and, eventually, encouraging other places to establish such positions.

Capacity - Funding

Support trainings for local government employees. Considering the nascency of efforts to strengthen connection within communities, philanthropy can fund relevant trainings for local government employees. Trainings could cover specific skills (e.g., community engagement, participatory design) and competencies (i.e., connection concepts, problem definition, etc.). This could apply to workers across local government, both those directly involved in connection-related work and those who are less directly involved. This could help level up the capacity of local officials to boost connection within their communities.

Capacity - People

CASE STUDY

Engagement & Connection Trainings for Local Government Employees

Academic institutions across the country offer a range of professional development trainings for government employees, particularly around community engagement. Examples include Duke's "Community Engagement & Participatory Design" intensive and Pepperdine's "Davenport Institute for Public Engagement & Civic Leadership."[14] Most of these programs are structured as executive education initiatives for more senior-level officials. **There is an opportunity for philanthropy to support the development of new programs focused more specifically on promoting connection, and to fund access to these programs for mid- and lower-level employees.**

What the Federal Government Can Do

Reorient The White House Office of Faith-Based & Neighborhood Partnerships to help bolster civic life in communities. The White House can broaden the aperture of the Office of Faith-Based & Neighborhood Partnerships from a narrow focus on church-state issues to a broader emphasis on coordinating efforts to support faith-based and non-religious community groups. Rather than launching a new White House office focused on civic opportunity or social connection, bolstering the Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships provides several advantages:

1. The office already has relationships with—and is focused on supporting—faith-based, community, and neighborhood groups.
2. The office is uniquely situated to facilitate interagency coordination, both given its home in the Domestic Policy Council and its sister offices in nine of the largest domestic-focused federal agencies.
3. The office has the potential to assume more of an orientation toward public engagement and intergovernmental coordination, allowing it to convene and cultivate relationships with local community groups and local and state government stakeholders.
4. The office benefits from bipartisan support and the potential for continuity across administrations, having been launched by President Bush, continued by President Obama, and re-established by President Biden.[ii]

Such a shift could transform the Office of Faith-Based & Neighborhood Partnerships into the federal home for strengthening civic opportunity in America, facilitating coordination and support across the federal government, with state and local governments, and with on-the-ground community groups. This change in orientation would mark a return to the original intent of the office: to leverage the convening and capacity-building powers of the federal government to bolster civic life in communities.

Capacity - People *Capacity - Process*

[ii] *Notably, the Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships was discontinued during the Trump Administration, from 2017 to 2021.*

Connection Lens: Repurpose relevant government policies, programs, and practices to foster connection within communities—and create the support structures to do so.

"A connection lens … should reflect the fullness of both human relationships and the practices that shape them. This will require an approach to design that is interdisciplinary and participatory in nature, rather than one that is siloed and technocratically imposed on communities."

By establishing the foundation of connection-focused measures and personnel, government leaders can begin applying a "connection lens" to their programs, policies, and practices. Steered by personnel and guided by established measures, this connection lens would involve orienting government activities toward the outcomes of strengthening civic opportunity, participation, and connection. Incorporating such a lens would enable policymakers, particularly at the state and local level, to adapt their programs and practices to bolster connection. Moreover, new policies could be designed and implemented using this connection lens, thereby allowing for the proactive promotion and evaluation of connection through policy. These changes could be a true unlock for the role of policy in strengthening connection, shifting it from the current state of one-off, seemingly incohesive programmatic recommendations, to a future state defined by a comprehensive and holistic approach that considers connection in all government policies, programs, and practices. This would be a step toward realizing Daniel Patrick Moynihan's vision of establishing "policy" that "responds to the system in its entirety" instead of "programs" that "relate to a single part of the system."[15]

The clearest analog to this approach is the environmental movement, which has effectively facilitated the operationalization and application of an environmental lens within government policy. What started with the development of measures and the creation of committees responsible for coordinating cross-governmental efforts related to the environment, has evolved into government leaders adopting statewide and citywide environmental action plans that touch most facets of government policy, programs, and practices. This evolution has unfolded in blue states *and* red states, in large cities *and* rural counties. The environmental movement successfully shifted environmental priorities from the background to the foreground: while they were once solely justified based on their economic or health outcomes, they are justified today as priorities in and of themselves.

When it comes to developing and applying this connection lens at the state and local level, the wheels already appear to be in motion. The "Action Guide for Building Socially Connected Communities" offers a helpful starting point for local leaders across sectors to "develop tailored social connection strategies" for their communities.[16] However, the action guide can be expanded beyond its public health frame, which limits the breadth and focus of policies, programs, and practices toward which it can be applied. A connection lens for policymaking should reflect the fullness of both human relationships and the practices that shape them. This will require an approach to design that is interdisciplinary (e.g., incorporating democracy thinkers, urbanists, economists, humanists, and more) and participatory in nature, rather than one that is siloed and technocratically imposed on communities.

In practice, all levels of government can facilitate the orientation of policies, programs, and practices to strengthen connection within communities. This connection lens will likely be most applicable at a state and local level, given the proximity of state and local government to the residents they serve, their understanding of local culture and context, and their responsibility to deliver most programs and services. State and local leaders can begin by operationalizing the connection lens, move to auditing their existing government activities with this lens, and, ultimately, apply the connection lens to pilot relevant programs and practices. The federal government and philanthropy can largely play an enablement role for state and local governments, offering funding, planning, and technical assistance support for more proximate policymakers to integrate a connection lens into their activities. They can also develop support structures, such as learning networks and policy labs, to serve as the backbone for experimenting with and replicating connection-related policies and practices.

The application of this connection lens to programs and practices would be both an endpoint and new beginning—marking a culmination of this foundational stage of development, and a starting point for testing, deepening, and sharpening policies to strengthen connection within communities.

What Local & State Government Can Do

Local and state government leaders committed to integrating a connection lens into their programs and practices can take a crawl-walk-run approach. This should start with operationalizing the connection lens, transition to auditing government activities, and advance to designing and implementing pilot projects that incorporate this lens. State governments can both facilitate and supplement these efforts by hosting statewide learning networks. Each of these steps is described below:

Operationalize connection lens across government. With measures, personnel, and strategy in place, local and state leaders can approach government efforts with a connection lens, just as many have done with an environmental lens. This would necessitate operationalizing the connection lens—both in theory and practice—so that it can be applied by government stakeholders across policies, programs, and practices. In particular, this could include defining and prioritizing what types of connection are most important, how those forms of connection can be affected by government action, and what the limits on government actions should be.

Capacity - Process

Conduct a connection audit of government activities. Once state and local leaders operationalize the connection lens, they can conduct an audit of existing government activities. The purpose of this audit could be to identify: (1) where government is already fostering connection, (2) where they have gaps, and (3) where they may have opportunities to promote connection in the future. This kind of audit can also be an effective forcing function for encouraging all departments to begin thinking with a connection lens.

Capacity - Process

Pilot the design and implementation of the connection lens. With an audit complete, state and local leaders can begin to integrate a connection lens into the design of new or existing government policies, programs, and/or practices. Rather than rolling this new lens out across the board, officials can start with pilots that align with the priorities identified in the audit or by their connection personnel. After these initial pilots are complete, leadership can identify opportunities for improvement—both from a design and process perspective—and apply a connection lens more broadly across new and established government efforts.

Capacity - Process

Convene statewide connection learning network. Governors' offices and state agencies often convene local leaders—whether they be mayors or other government officials—in statewide learning networks. State leaders can begin by meeting people where they are, integrating a connection lens into existing learning networks, including those focused on specific policy areas (e.g., housing) or those for certain types of leaders (e.g., mayors). They can also create new learning networks specifically focused on connection, much like those described in the philanthropy section.

Capacity - People

CASE STUDY

Connecticut's Social Connection Campaign

Connecticut's governor and lieutenant governor launched a Social Connection Campaign in February 2024 to explore how the state could best address loneliness and social isolation.[17] A primary facet of this campaign is to partner with municipalities "to identify gaps, opportunities, and ideas related to improving social connection." **Through this initiative, Connecticut is using the convening and funding powers of the governor to facilitate learning and collaboration among local leaders to strengthen connection within their communities.**

Learn more about CT's Social Connection Campaign

CASE STUDY

Increasing Parents' Social Capital through Head Start

In 2016, a team of researchers ran a pilot project to promote parents' social capital formation tied to one Head Start center, and, in turn, promote their children's attendance. Parents were first assigned to a classroom where all of the children were residents of the same neighborhood. The researchers theorized that sharing a neighborhood might make it easier for parents to coordinate and assist one another with getting their children to the center. Second, they were given the opportunity to form a partnership with another parent to help maximize attendance (an "attendance buddy"). The intervention dramatically increased access to social capital and led to sustained improvements in attendance. **This pilot is an example of how a connection lens can be applied to existing government programs, with the effects of both boosting connection and improving other related outcomes.**[18]

What the Federal Government Can Do

The federal government can both adopt a connection lens and encourage state governments and municipalities to do so. Beyond pursuing all of the steps described in the prior section, the federal government can enable a connection lens locally through flexible and experimental funding, incorporate this lens into its existing funding criteria, and offer planning resources and technical assistance to support grantees. They can also launch communities of practice (CoPs) to promote connection, learning, and idea sharing across their portfolios of grantees, offering a high potential support structure to help policymakers and community practitioners integrate a connection lens into their policies and practices:

Enable state and local governments to apply connection lens. The federal government has the potential to better enable state governments and municipalities to apply a connection lens. This could involve offering more flexible funding sources for state and local governments (e.g., block grants), rather than restrictive funding streams. It could also include the funding of pilot or demonstration projects explicitly focused on promoting connection-related policies, programs, and practices at the state and local levels. Such changes could create the conditions for the further integration of a connection lens closer to the ground.

Capacity - Funding *Opportunity - Boost Supply*

Incorporate connection lens into funding evaluation criteria. Federal agencies can incorporate a connection lens into their Notices of Funding Opportunities (NOFOs) and funding decisions. Agencies could “signal” connection as a priority by incorporating it within their evaluation criteria for these funding opportunities, evaluating funding requests based on how applicants meet these criteria, and administering funding accordingly. To do this, agencies will need to be clear about how they define connection to facilitate clarity rather than confusion among applicants.

Capacity - Funding *Opportunity - Boost Supply*

Fund planning and technical assistance support. If the federal government prioritizes connection in its funding decisions, it will likely need to support grantees—state and local governments as well as community groups—in applying this lens. Here, agencies can provide funding support in the form of (1) planning grants to help grantees prepare to incorporate a connection lens, and (2) technical assistance funding to facilitate the implementation of connection-related programming and practices.

Capacity - People *Opportunity - Improve Quality*

Integrate a connection lens into existing and new CoPs. The federal government runs several CoPs—such as the Thriving Communities Network and Rural Partners Network (RPN)—that can become support structures to encourage grantees to incorporate a connection lens into their work.[19] This could range from creating a learning cohort focused on connection, to providing connection-oriented technical assistance, to layering a connection lens into existing pilot projects. The federal government can also launch new CoPs—at the agency or interagency level—with the explicit emphasis on connection. For example, the Appalachian Regional Commission could create a connection-oriented CoP for grantees receiving funding tied to its goal of “building community leaders and capacity.”[20] Or, the Domestic Policy Council could facilitate the creation of a new interagency network, similar to RPN, that is specifically focused on the local cultivation of civic opportunity, participation, and connection.

Capacity - People *Capacity - Funding*

CASE STUDY

Federal Funding for Demonstration Projects

For frontier areas of policy and practice, the federal government will often provide funding for demonstration projects that can help disseminate learnings across communities. Since 2020, the federal government has funded demonstration projects ranging from the social to the scientific, including preventing hate crimes,[21] supporting students' mental health needs in schools,[22] and testing carbon capture technologies.[23]

The federal government could launch similar demonstration projects for community-driven approaches to strengthen connection.

RESOURCE

The HHS Social Capital Handbook

In 2020, HHS created a handbook to help human services providers integrate social capital-building practices into their programs.[24] The handbook first describes five principles undergirding these practices, and then details eight emerging social capital practices. Examples include using peer groups and creating environments to foster organic connections. The handbook is structured for practical use by human services providers, including examples of practices in action and worksheets to facilitate reflection among practitioners. While the full handbook is not comprehensive, it offers an example of how the federal government has already considered integrating connection into policies and programs.[25]

Access the handbook here

What Philanthropy Can Do

As local and state leaders consider integrating a connection lens into their activities, philanthropy can facilitate the initial preparation and experimentation phases. Philanthropy could provide seed funding to operationalize a connection lens, conduct internal audits, and run pilot projects. Philanthropy can complement these efforts by establishing the policy structures to link, strengthen, and replicate these state and local pilots to bolster connection. These policy structures can become the containers for building a new field, enhancing the rigor of nascent policy ideas while facilitating the diffusion of practices across states and jurisdictions:

Fund capacity-building efforts to apply connection lens. Local and state government attempts to operationalize a connection lens and conduct internal audits will likely require resources, both in terms of internal staff time and outside advisors. As such, local and national philanthropy have the opportunity to fund these initial activities—either in part, or in full—to encourage and lay the groundwork for applying a connection lens to programs and policies.

Capacity - Funding

Provide seed funding for connection lens experimentation. Philanthropy can provide seed funding for local and state government efforts to incorporate a connection lens into their programs, policies, and practices. Given the experimental nature of these activities, national and local funders can support demonstration projects and pilots, helping to generate evidence for their effectiveness before policymakers apply taxpayer dollars fund them.

Capacity - Funding

Launch connection learning network and policy lab. Philanthropy can launch a connection learning network for state and local policymakers—particularly those interested in bolstering connection within their communities—to discuss their challenges, offer helpful resources, and identify and share promising practices. To support more intentional policy experimentation and diffusion, philanthropy can coalesce a policy lab with cohorts of local and/or state leaders to pilot, refine, and replicate policy solutions focused on strengthening connection. This approach could build on the learning network, evolving from a focus on peer learning and support to activating an ecosystem of policymakers committed to driving tangible action around policies and programs.

Capacity - People *Capacity - Funding*

Help amplify success stories. As local and state governments begin running experiments, philanthropy can help amplify stories of impact that emerge from the qualitative and quantitative data on these policies and programs. Such stories have the potential to emerge from within and beyond a learning network or policy lab. By elevating such positive deviants, funders can marry experimentation, data, and storytelling to inform and accelerate adoption of connection-strengthening practices.

Capacity - Process

CASE STUDY

Children's Cabinet Networks[26]

Children's Cabinets include the heads of all government agencies—especially those at the local and state levels—that have child- and youth-serving programs. These interagency groups meet regularly to coordinate services, develop a common set of outcomes, and devise and implement plans to promote young people's well-being. **The Forum for Youth Investment has supported learning networks for Children's Cabinets across the country**. **A similar approach could be applied to accelerate state and local efforts to strengthen connection within communities.**

Learn more about Children's Cabinet Networks here

Community Institutions

Every institution in American life has the potential to be transformed to facilitate participation over alienation and connection over isolation. Just as the environmental movement has succeeded in applying an environmental lens to shape policies and practices across all institutions, a connection lens can be applied to similar effects institutionally. However, we believe there are three layers of institutions that, if oriented toward participation and connection, can have an outsized impact on strengthening the social fabric of communities: (1) housing and neighborhoods, (2) civic infrastructure and associational life, and (3) care and educational settings. The neighborhoods where we live are the building blocks of communities, shaping who we interact and cooperate with in the places we call home. The civic infrastructure and associational life of communities are the containers that make participation and relationship formation outside of home and work possible. Care and educational settings—institutions embedded within communities, but often walled off from them—have the potential to become platforms for civic opportunity, participation, and connection.

While there appears to be increasing attention to the importance of strengthening the connectedness of neighborhoods, associational life, and care and education settings, each institution has trended toward isolation and sorting over the past 50-plus years. A mix of suburban sprawl,[1] intentionally segregative policies,[2] and exclusionary zoning have contributed to neighborhoods that are highly isolating and increasingly sorted by class.[3] The associational life in these neighborhoods has both declined and become distorted: Americans have fewer civic opportunities than they did in the mid-20th century,[4] and the civic opportunities that still exist are more likely to be in top-down, corporately structured nonprofits than bottom-up, participatory membership organizations.[5] Care and education settings, meanwhile, have become more bureaucratized, specialized, socially sorted, and separated from communities.[6]

By applying a connection lens to these institutions we can imagine and begin working toward possibilities for a more participatory, connected future. Zoning reform and social housing can contribute to more integrated neighborhoods, while funding for neighborhood leadership and programming can help make these neighborhoods more cooperative and connected. Municipalities can reorient themselves as platforms for cultivating local associational life, and philanthropy can help regenerate civic life in the places that have become civic deserts. Policymakers can remove barriers to community involvement in education and care, while promoting connection across class, age, race, and geography within educational settings.

Notably, this connection-focused approach to policymaking and philanthropy is about creating the conditions for civic opportunity, participation, and connection—not directly facilitating these connections. In the end, it is on us—as neighbors and community leaders—to show up and contribute to making our communities more integrated, participatory, and connected.

Housing & Neighborhoods: Activate the housing sector and neighborhoods to become platforms for participation, overall connection, and bridging social capital.

"American neighborhoods can be places for participation not withdrawal, connection not isolation, bridging not sorting."

Where we live fundamentally shapes the places we frequent, the organizations and activities we participate in, and the people with whom we interact and form relationships. Housing and neighborhood policy, therefore, wields a significant influence on individual connectedness and the connectedness of communities. The recipe for neighborhood community-building is fairly simple. More mixed-income housing can lead to more demographically diverse neighborhoods, more safe neighborhood spaces can lead to more interaction between neighbors, and more neighborhood groups and programming can lead to more participation and relationships among neighbors. So, a neighborhood with more mixed-income housing and more spaces and programming to interact with neighbors will likely have higher levels of connection—both overall and across lines of difference—than a neighborhood with less mixed-income housing and less programming.

America's approach to housing and neighborhoods in the 20th century was defined by sprawl and sorting—both of which have significantly contributed to our contemporary challenges of social isolation and socioeconomic segregation. In the years following WWII, the federal government created the Interstate Highway System and subsidized a major housing boom through generous loans to returning veterans,[7] each of which drove the patterns of suburbanization and sprawl that continue to typify most U.S. metropolitan areas.[8] These car-dependent, poorly planned suburbs often lack community spaces, walkable downtowns, and clearly defined neighborhood boundaries, contributing to reduced interactions and increased isolation among residents.[9] Meanwhile, Americans' desire to enroll their children in good public schools and maintain their home values—along with their fear of demographic change—has driven myriad "Not in My Backyard" (NIMBY) and exclusionary zoning policies (e.g., single-family zoning and minimum lot sizes).[10] Such efforts have contributed to neighborhood-level socioeconomic sorting that is higher today than it was 50 years ago and racial segregation that remains persistently high.[11] Americans are isolated and sorted, in large part, because their neighborhoods are isolated and sorted.

But it does not have to be this way: American neighborhoods can be places for participation not withdrawal, connection not isolation, bridging not sorting. Housing policy—particularly zoning reform and social housing—can help create more mixed-income neighborhoods. Local leaders can enable and subsidize more neighborhood spaces, both communal (e.g., community gardens and tool

sheds) and commercial (e.g., micro-pubs and cafes), to encourage more neighborhood interactions and cooperation. Local policymakers and philanthropists can fund more neighborhood-level programming to facilitate more connectedness among neighbors. And local government can develop more neighborhood leadership roles, helping to establish a positive feedback loop of neighborhood coordination, cooperation, and connection.

This vision of the future positions policy as the enabler and neighbors as the drivers of more connected, participatory neighborhoods. Local and, at times, state policymakers must lead the way on most policy changes, including zoning reform to enable more mixed-income housing and more community spaces and governance changes to establish more neighborhood leadership. Philanthropy and the federal government can play a support and amplification role, providing funding for neighborhood programming and promoting connection, learning, and policy diffusion across housing and neighborhood practitioners. Ultimately, however, it is the responsibility of neighbors and neighborhood groups to do the work of cooperating, connecting, and building the neighborhoods they want to see.

> *"Neighborhoods with higher collective efficacy have more intergenerational activity happening in public spaces—community gardens, intergenerational sports leagues, and the like—and more programmatic resources to support them ... When it comes to mixed-income neighborhoods, we tend to over-index on the physical dimensions, and we underindex on the social dimensions, like programming and governance."*
>
> *- Erika Poethig, The Civic Committee and Commercial Club of Chicago*

Housing: Advance enabling legislation and community programming to promote the development of mixed-income neighborhoods and bridging social capital.

What Local Government Can Do

Local government has the most potential to influence housing policy that facilitates overall and bridging social capital. Government changes to local zoning laws and support for social housing can help create more mixed-income neighborhoods, while government funding for school programming can promote more connection across difference:

Reform zoning regulations to enable the development of "middle housing." Local policymakers can reform zoning laws to enable the development of "missing middle" housing, such as cottages, duplexes, multiplexes, townhouses, and accessory dwelling units (ADUs). Policymakers can complement this reform with shallow subsidies (e.g., down payment assistance) to support broader financial access to middle housing. The current middle housing push is largely framed as an opportunity to increase local housing supply and housing affordability. However, it is also a significant opportunity to boost bridging social capital. By creating more affordable housing within neighborhoods, these policies have the potential to increase both the class-based integration and cross-class connectedness of these neighborhoods.

Capacity - Process | *Opportunity - Remove Barriers* | *Connection - Bridging*

Build new mixed-income social housing developments. Local public housing authorities (PHAs) can shift their orientation from maintaining existing public housing to building new social housing developments—that is, housing that is mixed-income, publicly owned, democratically controlled, and permanently affordable. Much like middle housing, the primary promise of social housing is long-term affordability. However, the purposeful mixed-income nature of these developments—which couple market-rate rents with below market-rate rents—can boost neighborhood-level cross-class connectedness.[12]

Participation - Target Groups | *Connection - Bridging*

Create community programming for neighbors and cohort-based programming for parents. As neighborhoods become more integrated, neighborhood programming and cohort-based parent programming both present meaningful opportunities to cultivate cross-class bonds. Local governments can provide micro-grants to neighborhood leaders to host block parties, neighbor circles, community dinners, sports leagues, and other local gatherings and programs. Parent programming should be oriented toward helping parents support their children and encouraging parents to support and connect with one another. Such programs can be structured as social clubs for parents—meeting one or more times per month—and tied to the graduating year of their child or to their classrooms for larger schools. As middle and social housing are being developed, leaders within city hall and local public school systems can create and fund such programming to promote cross-class bonds.

Opportunity - Boost Supply | *Participation - Make Participatory* | *Connection - Bridging*

CASE STUDY

NeighborCircles in Lawrence, MA

Lawrence CommunityWorks (LCW), a Community Development Corporation in Lawrence, MA, recognized a significant challenge of neighbor-to-neighbor disconnection in their mixed-income neighborhoods.[13] **So they launched NeighborCircles led by a resident "host" and a trained facilitator, who gather 8 to 10 families to come together a total of three times over the course of a month for dinner and conversation**.[14] As LCW puts it, "[neighbors] get to know each other, talk about the neighborhood or the city, and decide as a group if there is something that they can do together to help build community in Lawrence." The model has since been replicated in neighborhoods across more than 10 states.

Read about LCW's NeighborCircles here

What State Government Can Do

States are playing an increasing role in shaping housing policy. In states where NIMBY forces are preventing the development of mixed-income neighborhoods, state governments can pass legislation to preempt local zoning ordinances. And for states where the political dynamics can support social housing, state governments can create the conditions for more social housing to be developed within communities. States can help set the table for more mixed-income neighborhoods, while local governments and philanthropy can fund the programs that promote connection within these neighborhoods:

Pass enabling legislation to require middle housing in select municipalities. Given NIMBY-driven local efforts to block the development of affordable housing, state governments can pass legislation to preempt local zoning laws and require the creation of middle housing within select cities and towns. These can be complemented with state-level subsidies to promote cross-class access to middle housing. The state-level middle housing policies passed in Oregon and Montana offer a template for other state policymakers to boost middle housing, integration, and cross-class connectedness within their states.[15] Notably, support from local government and philanthropy will still be necessary to create the type of programming that would foster cross-class connection.

Capacity - Process *Opportunity - Remove Barriers*

Connection - Bridging

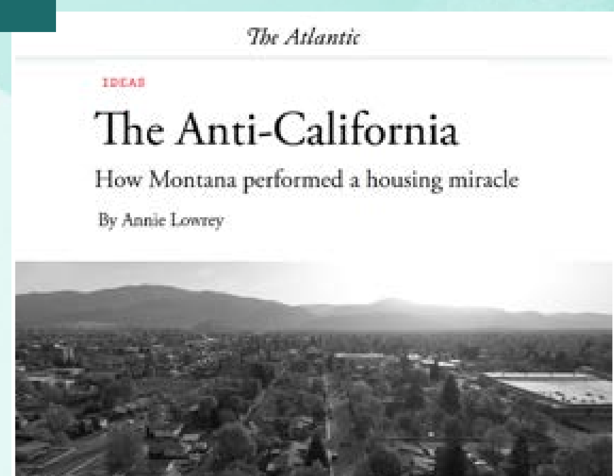
Promote the development of mixed-income social housing. States are best positioned to drive the development of a mixed-income social housing sector within American communities. This could involve developing a statewide social housing authority, which would primarily focus on building social housing across the state. States could also assume a financing role for social housing developments, drawing on revolving loan funds, bonds, and grants to fund the sustainable development of social housing within communities.[16] Similar to the case of middle housing, local government and philanthropy can fund programming to facilitate cross-class connection in neighborhoods with mixed-income social housing.

Participation - Target Groups *Connection - Bridging*

CASE STUDY

State-Level Zoning Reform in Montana

In 2023, Montana passed a suite of bipartisan zoning reform laws that preempted local exclusionary zoning regulations and promoted middle housing development.[17] This includes legislation to legalize multifamily and mixed-use building in commercial zones, allow ADUs to be built on all single family lots, enable attached or detached duplexes anywhere single family homes are permitted, and limit discretionary approval and design review processes. Montana's legislative victory has been called a "housing miracle" and a template for other states by housing advocates.[18]


The Atlantic

IDEAS

The Anti-California

How Montana performed a housing miracle

By Annie Lowrey

What Philanthropy Can Do

Funders can pursue a mix of activities tied to housing and connection. As a starting point, philanthropy can complement local and state policy efforts to promote mixed-income communities and supplement funding for neighborhood and school programming. Funders can also play a leading role in incubating a more established cohousing sector in the U.S. to directly promote connection through housing. Taken together, philanthropy can accelerate existing momentum while encouraging innovation for a more connected housing future:

Support organizing campaigns to create mixed-income neighborhoods. Considering the magnitude of the housing affordability crisis—and the success of state and local legislation in blue and red communities—these campaigns have significant momentum. Though not explicitly focused on connection, this funding can be viewed as setting the table for the formation of more bridging social capital within communities.

Capacity - Funding *Capacity - People*

Fund neighborhood and school-based programming. National and local philanthropy can fund the neighborhood and school-based programming that promotes the cultivation of bridging social capital in places that are building more mixed-income housing. Here, philanthropy can complement existing funding for neighborhood programming provided by local government, or offer pilot funding to demonstrate the effectiveness of such programming. This would be a new role for philanthropy in the housing space, layering in a connection lens on top of one of the most urgent and salient policy issues currently facing state and local leaders.

Capacity - Funding *Opportunity - Boost Supply*

Incubate the cohousing sector. Cohousing—intentional communities of homes organized around a shared communal space, typically with shared activities, responsibilities, and decision-making—has the potential to significantly bolster overall connectedness as well as connection across difference. However, the cohousing sector is fairly fringe in the U.S., with just over 300 cohousing developments established or in development nationwide.[19] Considering the relative nascency of this movement and its potential to improve connection in American life, philanthropy can help lead the incubation of the cohousing sector. Part of this could involve funding cohousing pilots, part could involve supporting zoning reform efforts to enable more cohousing development, and part could involve investing in awareness-generating activities to facilitate broader cultural adoption. Transforming cohousing from marginal to mainstream could change the way connection and community is experienced in the U.S.

Capacity - Funding *Opportunity - Boost Supply* *Participation - Make Participatory*

BIG IDEA

Expanding Cohousing in the U.S.

Intentional, cohousing communities exist in cities and suburbs throughout the U.S. Some cohousing developments are focused on promoting connection and social support for seniors,[20] such as the Oakcreek community in Stillwater, OK. Others intentionally emphasize bridging forms of connection, such as the intergenerational EcoVillage in Ithaca, NY and the mixed-income Aria Denver community in Denver, CO.[21] **The potential for expanding cohousing will depend on generating awareness for its existence and normalizing it as a way of living, broadening it from a niche arrangement for largely white, educated progressives to a practical strategy for affordable, connected living that could benefit all types of people.**

The New York Times

In Retiree Housing, Talking About Multigenerations

Neighborhoods: Create and bolster neighborhood identity, leadership roles, and programming to foster overall connectedness and bridging social capital.

What Local Government Can Do

Local government has the potential to transform how neighborhoods—and connection within them—are experienced by residents. This role can emphasize the spatial elements of neighborhoods, including more clearly demarcating neighborhoods to create a stronger sense of collective identity as neighbors, and reforming zoning to allow for more communal micro-spaces. The role can also focus on the human side of neighborhoods, such as creating neighborhood-oriented leadership positions within government and neighborhoods, offering micro-grants for neighborhood programming to facilitate more cooperation and connection, and reorienting more government activities to be done government-to-neighborhood instead of government-to-individual. Each of these activities can help neighborhoods become a more cohesive, connected, and participatory ecosystem.

Improve the demarcation and collective identity of neighborhoods. Local government can help to clearly demarcate neighborhoods, aligning official neighborhood boundaries with the catchment area of a primary school and what residents view as their neighborhood's boundaries.[22] These changes can begin cultivating a stronger sense of collective identity within neighborhoods and connection among neighbors. In cities and towns that do not yet have clearly demarcated neighborhoods, local officials can initiate this process from scratch. For places where neighborhood boundaries are already established, local officials can lead a process focused on aligning current boundaries with residents' preferred ones. Whether local policymakers are adjusting neighborhood boundaries or creating new ones, they should take steps to ensure this process is not used to reinforce socioeconomic or racial sorting.

Capacity - Process

Help create more neighborhood micro-spaces. Local government can create more communal spaces within neighborhoods, both through funding and zoning. Local governments, potentially with support from philanthropy, can purchase homes or lots in neighborhoods and convert them into communal spaces. These communal spaces could range from microparks and community gardens, to community clubhouses and kitchens, to workshops and tool libraries. Local policymakers can also reform zoning laws to both allow for more community-oriented small businesses within residential neighborhoods and increase housing supply. This could be as simple as adjusting zoning laws to enable a select number of micro-pubs and micro-cafes to be built within each neighborhood, to creating a new zoning classification specifically for "third spaces" or "community spaces." Creating more of these communal gathering places can generate more interactions and connections within neighborhoods.

Capacity - Funding *Capacity - Process* *Opportunity - Boost Supply*

Promote more neighborhood-oriented leadership. Local policymakers can play a role in facilitating neighborhood-oriented leadership, both within government and among residents. This could include establishing an Office of Neighborhoods or a staff member dedicated to (a) coordinating government efforts to strengthen neighborhoods and (b) supporting neighborhood leaders and groups. It could also include creating neighborhood leadership positions for local residents—such as DC's Advisory Neighborhood Commissions and Philadelphia's Block Captains—to serve as a mediating layer between government and residents.[23] These neighborhood leaders would coordinate within the neighborhood, connect neighbors to one another, and advocate for their neighborhood's needs.

Capacity - People *Participation - Make Participatory*

Provide micro-grants for neighborhood programming. To facilitate connections and cooperation within neighborhoods, local governments can provide micro-grants for neighborhood-focused programming. Local governments can offer funding exclusively for connection-oriented initiatives, such as block parties, barbeques and dinners, and other community gatherings. Local micro-grants can likewise be applied to neighborhood-level violence interruption programming, both to make neighborhoods safer and create new neighborhood activities. Micro-grants can also support block and neighborhood improvement initiatives, contributing to cooperation among neighbors, the betterment and beautification of neighborhoods, and the further cultivation of collective neighborhood identities. To simplify the process of starting and leading these initiatives, local government can provide residents with community-created toolkits (e.g., "how to" guides, templates) for running neighborhood programs.[24]

Capacity - Funding *Opportunity - Boost Supply* *Participation - Make Participatory*

Shift activities from government-to-individual to government-to-neighborhood. In addition to launching new neighborhood programming, local leaders can identify where activities that are being done from government-to-individual can be converted into activities that are done from government-to-neighborhood. For example, instead of launching a program that gives residents money to plant trees as individuals, local government can give the money to neighborhood captains for tree-planting to be done as a neighborhood effort. These activities, much like neighborhood programming, would help to improve connection and identity within neighborhoods.

Capacity - Funding *Capacity - Process* *Participation - Make Participatory*

CASE STUDY

Neighborhood Micro-Grant Programs

Cities across the country run neighborhood micro-grant programs to foster connection and cooperation within communities. Cities like Boston and Cambridge offer funding of up to $750 to host block parties and celebrations.[25] Philadelphia offers grants of $500 or more for block beautification and service efforts.[26] And Atlanta provides grants of up to $5,000 to help Neighborhood Planning Units for beautification and community-building.[27]

Read about Boston's Block Party grants here

What Philanthropy Can Do

Philanthropy can supplement the efforts of local government to bolster connection within neighborhoods. Funders can support neighborhood leaders directly by providing micro-grants and hosting CoPs, and indirectly by supporting cities to foster neighborhood leadership. With these neighborhood leadership networks in place, funders could facilitate programmatic experimentation and the diffusion of promising approaches—both within cities and across different regions:

Provide experimental funding for neighborhood programming and micro-spaces. Much like local governments, local philanthropy can provide funding to support connection programming within neighborhoods and the creation of communal micro-spaces. These initiatives can be structured similarly to the local government micro-grants and micro-spaces described above. Here, local philanthropy can be helpful with experimentation, demonstrating the potential of these micro-grants and micro-spaces to encourage local government adoption, actually funding these initiatives within local governments, or complementing existing government investments.

Capacity - Funding

Support cities to cultivate their neighborhoods' identities, leadership, and programming. National philanthropy can play a leading role in supporting cities to develop their neighborhoods' identities, leadership, and programming. This support can include funding for cities to enhance their capacity, invest in local leaders, and provide grants for neighborhood programs and activities. This support can also involve the provision of hands-on technical assistance and establishment of peer-learning networks for city and neighborhood leaders to diffuse policies and program models. Bloomberg's "Love Your Block" program, described in the case study below, is one example of this approach in practice.

Capacity - Funding *Capacity - People*

Launch CoPs to support neighborhood-level leaders. Local and national philanthropy can also fund and launch CoPs to directly support neighborhood leaders. These CoPs can cultivate connection among neighborhood-level community-builders, both within a city or town and across place. They can host in-person conferences and convenings—along with a digital community platform—to facilitate the dissemination of promising practices. And they can help elevate the work of neighborhood leaders, celebrating their efforts through awards and other recognitions.

Capacity - Funding *Capacity - People*

CASE STUDY

Bloomberg's "Love Your Block" Program

The Bloomberg Center for Public Innovation at Johns Hopkins runs the Love Your Block program, which "supports cities to partner with community groups and activate resident volunteers to repair, remediate, and address blight in their neighborhoods."[28] The program offers grants to cities for volunteer-led neighborhood projects, capacity support from a local Love Your Block Fellow, and technical assistance and peer learning alongside other Love Your Block grantees. The program aims to cultivate connection among neighbors and between neighbors and city hall, which, in turn, contributes to overall collective efficacy.

Learn more about Love Your Block here

What Federal & State Government Can Do

Despite being further removed from neighborhoods, the federal government and state governments already support them. Both levels of government have an opportunity to approach their relationship with neighborhoods more creatively, expanding eligibility for what they fund within neighborhoods and assuming a more intentional convening role for neighborhood leadership:

Fund neighborhood-level "soft investments." The federal government can expand eligibility for their neighborhood grants, such as HUD's Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) and DoT's Reconnecting Communities and Neighborhoods Program, to fund neighborhood-level programming. Currently, these funds are only applicable to hard investments, like acquiring properties or building sidewalks. Broadening eligibility to include soft investments—including neighborhood leadership roles, neighborhood programming, and micro-spaces—could enable local governments to better develop connectedness and collective efficacy within neighborhoods.

Capacity - Funding *Opportunity - Boost Supply*

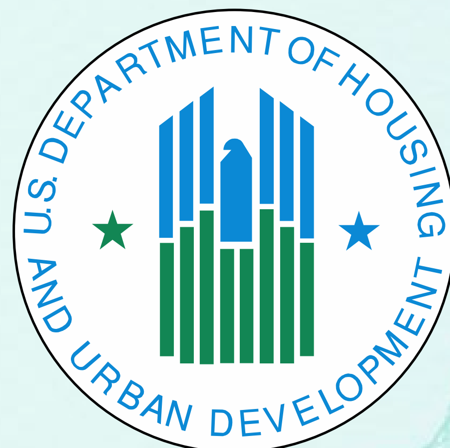
Convene and connect neighborhood leaders. The White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships and the Office of Public Engagement (along with similar offices at the state level) can play a greater role in convening neighborhood leadership. This could involve hosting conferences for neighborhood leaders at The White House and in state capitols, along with bringing together ongoing working groups. Such convenings could elevate the needs of neighborhood leaders to policymakers, help them connect with and learn from one another, and increase awareness of the role of neighborhoods in strengthening connection.

Capacity - People

CASE STUDY

CDBGs and Soft Investments

The HUD's CDBG program is considered one of the most flexible federal funding sources available to local leaders.[29] Eligible municipalities receive annual grants on a formula basis to provide "decent housing, a suitable living environment, and expanded economic opportunities."[30] Cities may then apply this funding at their discretion to specific, eligible activities. **Considering the program's emphasis on strengthening neighborhoods and its flexible nature, Congress and HUD have the opportunity to clarify and expand eligibility requirements to explicitly permit spending on various forms of neighborhood programming.**



Civic Infrastructure & Associational Life: Reorient government and philanthropy toward regenerating and strengthening communities' civic infrastructure and associational life.

"The revitalization of the civic infrastructure and associational life in this country—and government's role in it—should be based on an affirmative vision for the future that is informed by the past."

The civic infrastructure and associational life of communities are the containers that make participation and relationship formation outside of home and work possible. Though associational life often goes unrecognized—or is narrowly characterized as the nonprofit sector—it should be viewed as a societal institution in and of itself. A thriving associational life requires several ingredients to work:

1. Accessible third places for community members to gather;
2. Religious and non-religious institutions, groups, programs, and activities to bring these places to life; and
3. High levels of sustained participation in these institutions, groups, programs, and activities.

The types, quantity, and quality of relationships we form in community, therefore, are the outcome of our participation in our associational life. But these relationships also drive further participation, providing critical information about opportunities to engage in community and the encouragement to actually get involved. In this way, relationships complete the virtuous cycle of associational life: more accessible third places and programming generates higher participation rates, higher participation rates lead to more relationships, and more relationships drive even higher rates of participation.

Unfortunately, associational life has both declined and fundamentally transformed since the mid-20th century. Americans have less access to associational life, participate in it less often, and are less likely to join organizations.[31] This is true for all Americans, but especially lower SES Americans, those without degrees, and those living in more distressed regions.[32] These shifts are the result of multiple forces interacting with each other, including more accessible religious and non-religious groups being replaced by those with higher financial barriers to entry (or not being replaced at all),[33] the change in community groups' revenue and governance models from member-driven and bottom-up to funder-driven and top-down,[34] and competition with technology (TVs, computers, phones) for Americans' leisure time.[35]

> *The answer is more local stuff. If you participate in a local organization and you participate in local government, you might develop … a sense that you can understand your community and government and influence their direction. This stands in contrast to the way society feels right now, which is like me as an individual and then the national government, and we don't feel embedded in any institutions in between.*
>
> *- Aaron Horvath, Stanford Center on Philanthropy & Civil Society*[36]

The revitalization of the civic infrastructure and associational life in this country—and government's role in it—should be based on an affirmative vision for the future that is informed by the past. Cities and towns can begin to view themselves as a platform for associational life, much like residential colleges do, and orient their activities to promote community participation. Philanthropy can plant the seeds for regenerating associational life, both in the places that have become civic deserts and for the business, program, and governance models that have become misaligned. The federal government can enable the creation of more containers for associational life, particularly as a funder of civic infrastructure in the places where it has eroded most. Even with these government and philanthropic efforts, residents need to show up—participating in, joining, creating, and leading the renewal of their communities.

What Local Government Can Do

Local government can start thinking of promoting civic life for residents of their cities, towns, and neighborhoods similarly to how residential colleges think about fostering campus life for their students. This reorientation of government can lead to myriad adjustments to their programs and practices. We highlight some of the most promising ideas below:

Reimagine local government as a site for participation. Local government can reimagine itself as a site for participation and connection. This could involve establishing a participatory "community board" focused on connection and supported by a community liaison from each government agency. This could also include creating more citizens' and community assemblies, more participatory commissions, more open meetings, and more opportunities for residents to serve in government.[37] By turning outward and inviting the community in, local government can become an extension of civic life within communities, opening up another avenue for cultivating cooperation, connection, and interpersonal trust.

Capacity - Process *Opportunity - Boost Supply*

Participation - Make Participatory

Help offer welcome packages to new residents. Cities, towns, and neighborhoods can consider offering new residents—both owners and renters—locally focused welcome packages to help them get started in their new homes.[38] Among other things, these welcome packages can spotlight opportunities for new residents to become involved in their communities, including community groups to join, service projects to engage in, and events to attend. These packages can help new residents answer the question, "where do I begin?"

Capacity - Process *Opportunity - Remove Barriers*

Participation - Target Groups

Host activity fairs to encourage participation in local community groups. Much like colleges, cities and neighborhoods can host semi-annual activity fairs to assist local residents with identifying community groups with which to get involved. These activity fairs can serve as a platform for local groups to highlight their offerings and local residents to explore new opportunities to participate. Activity fairs can be especially helpful to new residents—just as they are helpful to college freshmen and transfer students—while also supporting long-term residents who are interested in becoming involved with something new.

Capacity - Process *Opportunity - Remove Barriers*

Ease process of accessing and reserving public community spaces. In places where third spaces are limited or inaccessible, local governments can make their public buildings more accessible as meeting and gathering spaces for community groups. This can extend beyond libraries and community centers, which already tend to be accessible to residents and groups. For example, local governments can repurpose their public schools to be schools during the day and community centers on nights and weekends. Local governments can likewise implement easy-to-use, unified reservation systems for public and community spaces to replicate the campus reservation model at the municipal level. By promoting the availability of such space to local organizations and creating a simple integrated reservation system, local government can help ensure that their community's spaces are effectively and fully utilized.

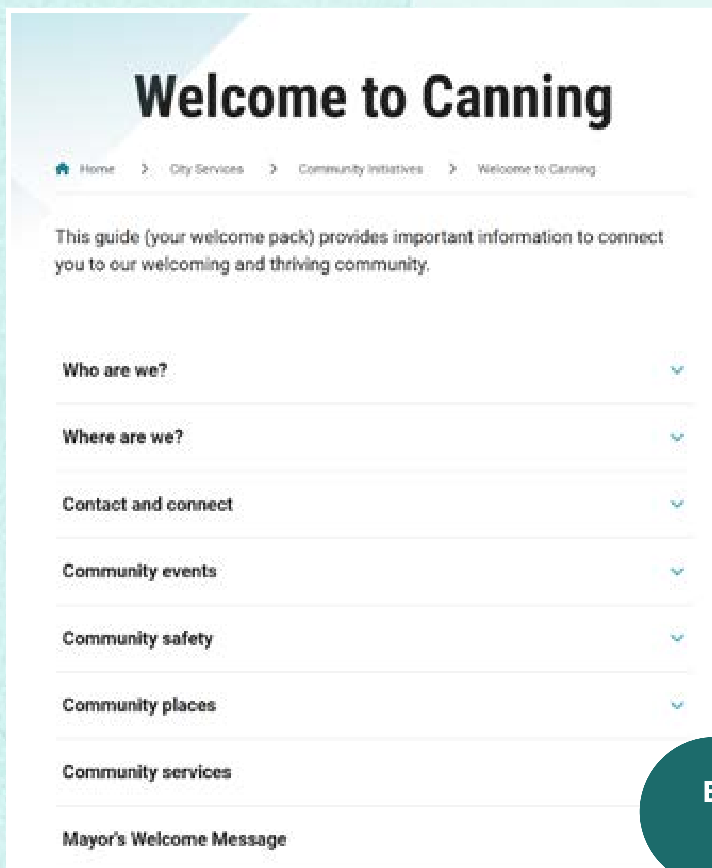
Capacity - Process *Opportunity - Remove Barriers*

Conduct a census and create a directory of local civic life. Cities and towns can conduct an annual census of local civic life—both formal and informal—and compile this information in a directory that is promoted to all residents. This directory can serve as a central repository for civic happenings within a city or town, reducing information gaps for residents about what is going on in their community. Further, the inclusion of informal groups can expand the definition and potential of civic life, providing legitimacy to the many local groups that may not have a 501(c)3 designation.

Capacity - Process *Opportunity - Remove Barriers*

CASE STUDY

New Resident Welcome Packages in Australia



A few communities provide new residents with welcome packages when they move in. Some places in the U.S., like Brookhaven, PA share the basics (e.g., When is recycling day? Who are your council members?) with residents in their welcome packages.[39] However, Australian cities and towns have a much more comprehensive approach to welcome packages. **Canning, a city home to 99,000 residents in Western Australia, exemplifies this holistic community approach to their welcome packet, which includes an interactive directory of community events, places, and services along with opportunities to volunteer and connect with community ambassadors.**[40]

Explore what it could look like to translate the Canning model to the U.S.

What Philanthropy Can Do

Philanthropy has an outsized role to play in shaping and strengthening civic infrastructure and associational life, given its explicit focus on doing just that. Funders can shift the *what* of their investments to help bolster connection within community, help revitalize associational life itself, and help spur innovation in the business and program models of community groups. They can also shift the *how* of their work, incorporating connection as a lens into all of their funding decisions and reforming their practices that inadvertently weaken civic life:

Fund community connection coordinator roles. Local philanthropy can fund community connection coordinator roles, embedded within a local civic institution like the YMCA or United Way—or, potentially, within local government—who are focused on identifying opportunities for community involvement and connecting local residents to these opportunities. These coordinators can partner with local case workers, identifying a community's most isolated individuals (or those most at risk of isolation) and helping them become involved in appropriate community groups. Such community coordinators would act as the connective tissue between community groups and local residents.

Capacity - People *Opportunity - Remove Barriers* *Connection - Overall*

Invest in the Trust for Civic Life. In regions that have become civic deserts—where economic conditions can no longer support civic life—funders can play a major role in helping to kickstart local community life. The recently launched Trust for Civic Life,[41] which aims to invest in third places, programming, and local leadership in small towns and rural areas where associational life has foundered, is a meaningful starting point. However, significantly more philanthropic investment and wraparound support will be necessary to address the scale of the challenges in America's most distressed places. Here, the investments committed and strategies used to rebuild local news ecosystems can provide a useful roadmap for philanthropic involvement (see "Local News" section).

Capacity - Funding *Opportunity - Boost Supply* *Opportunity - Improve Quality*

Incubate a "community lab" to strengthen the models of community-building groups. Philanthropy can help create a "community lab" to systematically strengthen the business, program, and governance models of community-building groups. The lab could be for the groups involved with gathering community members—both nonprofit and for-profit—to experiment with (1) business models that are more accessible across class and financially sustainable, (2) program models that better support the relational lives of their members, and (3) governance models that are more federated, participatory, and driven by their members. Launching such a lab would be an important step toward aligning the business, program, and governance models of community-building groups with the needs of their constituents.

Opportunity - Improve Quality *Participation - Make Participatory* *Connection - Overall*

Apply a connection lens to funding community groups. Funders at all levels can incorporate the connection lens as they consider supporting local community groups. This lens could be applied to how philanthropy assesses their investment decisions and how they support their grantees. For example, funders could encourage community groups to focus on incorporating general relationship-building practices within their programs, applying participatory principles to governance and decision-making, and identifying opportunities to facilitate different types of bridging social capital. Such a lens could also emphasize investing in more place-based groups—formal and informal, particularly at the neighborhood and municipal level—that break down issue and population silos and prioritize community participation and governance.

Capacity - Funding *Opportunity - Improve Quality* *Connection - Overall*

Reform philanthropic practices that weaken civic life and connection. In addition to applying connection as a lens for investment, funders can identify how their practices weaken associational life and social connection, and then reform these practices. For example, funders can take a more trust-based approach to investment, reducing the monitoring and evaluation requirements that can distort community programming and overburden community groups.[42] Moreover, rather than pursuing a narrow problem-solution approach to assessing funding decisions—which can inadvertently silo-ize solutions—they can invest with a more interconnected and holistic lens. Another opportunity is to approach grantmaking in a more participatory fashion,[43] engaging community members to deliberate and decide on where funding should be distributed. Funder reforms like these, applied community- and system-wide, can make a significant difference in how community life is experienced locally.

Capacity - Process *Participation - Make Participatory*

CASE STUDY

Trust for Civic Life

The Trust for Civic Life, a grantmaking collaborative launched in February 2024, is focused on "[connecting] national philanthropy with rural and local efforts to strengthen community bonds, civic engagement, and everyday democracy."[44] The Trust is specifically committed to reducing the funding gap between philanthropy and rural america, investing in rural programs that help people gather, actively improve their community, and shape the future of local civic life. **The Trust, which will invest $10 million per year, offers a useful example for how other funders can contribute to strengthening the civic infrastructure in communities where it has eroded.**

Learn more about The Trust for Civic Life

What Federal Government Can Do

The federal government can approach its work as a more intentional catalyst of civic life. Much of the federal government's potential influence in this domain could be realized through its spending powers: they can provide funding for hard infrastructure like third places (e.g., parks, libraries, community centers) along with the soft infrastructure (e.g., organizations, programming) that bring these places to life. At a time when many communities are struggling to sustain the civic infrastructure that fosters civic opportunity, federal resources can offer much needed injections of capital:

Incorporate a "Percent for Place" lens into infrastructure investments. The federal government should incorporate a "percent for place" lens into their infrastructure investments, allocating a portion of that spending to be used for local civic infrastructure, like libraries, community centers, parks, and community gardens.[45] Local leaders who access these resources should partner with residents in a participatory manner to determine how it can best meet their community's civic infrastructure needs. If implemented, this funding would equip communities to fill gaps in their civic infrastructure that hinder civic opportunity, participation, and connection.

Capacity - Funding *Opportunity - Boost Supply* *Opportunity - Remove Barriers*

Launch a National Endowment for Community. As an extension of philanthropic efforts to bolster associational life like the Trust for Civic Life, the federal government can consider creating a National Endowment for Community. The focus of this endowment would be to strengthen civic infrastructure and associational life in places where it is struggling or failing. Such an endowment could be funded through a one-time congressional appropriation, governed by a Senate-confirmed board, and disburse a percent of its endowment each year as grants.

Capacity - Funding *Opportunity - Boost Supply* *Opportunity - Improve Quality*

Reimagine the National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC) as a "Red Cross for civic life." The NCoC could be reimagined to serve as a "Red Cross for civic life"—a federated model with local chapters committed to strengthening associational life and participation within communities. This would align the NCoC with its original Congressional charter, which stated it must host an annual "national conference on citizenship" along with "local, state, and regional citizenship conferences" to "contribute concretely to a more active, alert, enlightened, conscientious, and progressive citizenry in our country."[46] Considering that the NCoC is a congressionally chartered organization—and that it continues to receive funding from government-granted educational broadband spectrum licenses—Congress and the Executive Branch could call on the NCoC to recommit to its original mission at a time when a "Red Cross for civic life" is needed.

Capacity - Process *Opportunity - Boost Supply* *Participation - Make Participatory*

Reform federal funding criteria to prioritize participatory, self-governed organizations. Federal funding criteria can be reformed to prioritize participatory, self-governed, and, potentially, self-sustaining organizations as funding recipients, rather than the traditional top-down nonprofits and associations that typically benefit most from government funding. This could provide the benefit of leveling the playing field for and incentivizing certain organizational forms that promote civic opportunity—such as cooperatives and member-driven groups—without explicitly prioritizing some forms over others. Over time, such funding reforms could both nudge existing groups to become more participatory and self-governing, while encouraging new organizations to embed these principles from the start.

Capacity - Process *Capacity - Funding* *Participation - Make Participatory*

CASE STUDY

Opportunity & Resilience Centers in Richmond, VA

When Richmond, VA received $155M in American Rescue Plan (ARP) funds in 2021, Mayor Levar Stoney's team launched an in-depth community engagement process asking, "how would you spend $155M on your city?"[47] **What they heard, time and again, is that many neighborhoods within the city lacked third spaces where youth and adults could safely gather. So they applied $78M of this ARP funding to build two new community centers and renovate two existing ones—all in historically disinvested neighborhoods in Richmond's east, south, and north sides.** When complete, all residents of these neighborhoods will be within a 10-minute walk of one of these community centers, each of which will provide programming to local youth, adults, and seniors. Richmond's approach offers an example of what local governments could do with federal "Percent for Place" allocations.[48]

Care & Education: Strengthen connectedness of care and educational settings by inviting in more peer, community, and bridging forms of participation.

"Both care and education settings have been profoundly shaped by policy decisions—oftentimes, walling themselves off from their local communities. But policy can, likewise, shift these settings in the opposite direction, inviting in participation and encouraging human connection."

Care and educational settings occupy a distinct space as borderline institutions within communities—spanning a spectrum from wholly separate from communities to fully blended into them. Care settings are concerned with responding to people's needs early in life (e.g., child care), late in life (e.g., elder care), and during certain transitional periods (e.g., community integration). K-12 educational settings are concerned with the formation of our children—and, in part, responding to their needs—until they reach adulthood. Depending on how these settings are structured and oriented toward community, they can invite community participation or wall it off, facilitate connection or create barriers to it, encourage solidarity or reinforce sorting.

Contemporary care and educational settings have followed similar trajectories, becoming more bureaucratized and specialized, more sorted across various lines of difference, and more separate from communities. Throughout the 20th century, care shifted from the responsibility of family members and neighbors to the domain of the large-scale care bureaucracy.[49] As it is currently structured, this bureaucratized model—often managed by specialized professionals with advanced degrees and staffed by lower-wage workers—risks disembedding care from communities, hindering families and neighbors from supporting their loved ones, and transforming care from a loving, dignified experience to an isolating and alienating one. Within education, the prioritization of narrowly defined and universally measured standards of academic performance have forced public schools to elevate test scores above all else,[50] including the formation of active, caring community members and the cultivation of spaces that promote connection.[51] Meanwhile, the increased socioeconomic sorting of our neighborhoods and public schools go

hand-in-hand, with neighborhood sorting driving school sorting and school sorting reinforcing neighborhood sorting.[52] The net result is entire schools, tracks within schools, and extracurricular activities that are highly sorted along class and race lines.[53]

Of course, not all of this change has been for the worse. Professionalization and specialization within care settings has, on the whole, contributed to better health outcomes across the life course. The focus on educational standards has contributed to some increases in educational outcomes. But we also seem to have reached a tipping point, where bureaucracy and measurement have been prioritized at the expense of human connection and flourishing. Caregivers and teachers are burning out, as too few people are shouldering too much of the burden of care.[54] Students are experiencing the highest rates of isolation and lowest levels of meaning and purpose ever measured.[55] Something has to give.

> *"Care is more than a service. It's a relationship. But it's also our deepest longing. Part of the reason care has become so isolating and so hard is because it hasn't been socialized. It's not just about pay and benefits; it's about inviting people to be part of relational networks where we can care well for one another."*
>
> *- Elizabeth Garlow, New America Foundation's New Practice Lab*

What would it look like for care and education settings to become more community-embedded, participatory, and integrated? This would involve incorporating significantly more opportunities for peer- and community-based care within existing care settings. It would also involve creating new care settings, such as social cooperatives, to shift care's center of gravity away from the care bureaucracy and toward community-embedded care. Within education settings, it would entail reorienting schools and classrooms toward the social: fostering the formation of students to become caring friends and neighbors, creating environments that cultivate connection and belonging, facilitating more participation and connection across difference, and promoting greater connectivity between schools and their broader neighborhoods and towns.

We can realize this vision for care and education, and policy change can help enable it. All levels of government can be activated to strengthen the care ecosystem—better subsidizing family and community caregiving, funding and embedding peer and community-involved care within the existing care ecosystem, and promoting the creation of social cooperatives through regulatory reform and technical assistance. Meanwhile, local government can reshape K-12 education settings to become more connected. They can facilitate connection across difference within schools through magnets and in-school mixing initiatives, and do the same outside school by eliminating "pay-to-play" extracurriculars and creating opportunities for between-school extracurricular activities. Local government can also transform schools into hubs for civic opportunity by creating cohort programming for parents and by inviting community members into schools to serve as mentors. Both care and education settings have been profoundly shaped by policy decisions—oftentimes, walling themselves off from their local communities. But policy can, likewise, shift these settings in the opposite direction, inviting in participation and encouraging human connection.

Care: Transform care settings into avenues for participation and connection by actively encouraging more peer-based and community-involved forms of care.

What Federal, State, & Local Government Can Do

Considering the interconnected nature of America's care infrastructure, all levels of government have a role to play in making these experiences less individualized and more social. This could include expanding family and community care initiatives that already exist, channeling existing and new funding for peer and community care activities, and enabling new forms of social care to develop:

Expand access and eligibility for family and community caregiving subsidies. Federal and state governments can expand access and eligibility for family and community caregivers, allowing them to be compensated for providing care to their family members and neighbors. State Medicaid systems can allow for consumer-directed personal assistance programs,[56] which directly pay loved ones for the provision of care to qualified beneficiaries. States can also consider expanding a version of the "Veteran-Directed Home & Community-Based Services" program beyond veterans, leveraging Medicaid dollars to help provide recipients with a flexible budget to compensate family members, friends, or neighbors for care support.[57]

Capacity - Funding *Opportunity - Remove Barriers*

Increase eligibility and funding for peer and community care. All levels of government can broaden the definition of the activities that are typically defined as care—including the practices of peer and community care—and increase funding for these programs. For example, states can allow Medicaid funding to be allocated toward peer care programs for those in recovery or those integrating into communities. Federal, state, and local corrections agencies can consider applying dollars toward community circles for returning citizens. Social services agencies can prioritize supporting peer and community care models, such as hiring peer support specialists and embedding peer-based support throughout the behavioral health system. Beginning to reorient care as a community activity—both in definition and in resourcing—can encourage more people to participate in the care ecosystem.[58]

Capacity - Funding *Opportunity - Remove Barriers* *Participation - Make Participatory*

Lower the credential barrier for certain types of care work. The current care infrastructure is restrictive in defining who can provide care, often limiting care work to those with certain credentials (e.g., social workers, counselors). State and local governments can lower the credential barrier for who can provide certain types of care work, reducing the burdens placed on burned out caregivers while opening up opportunities for community members to participate in peer and community care.[59] Much like local fire departments offer extracurricular credentialing for volunteer firefighters and court systems train and certify volunteer court-appointed special advocates, other forms of extracurricular and apprentice-based credentialing can create pathways to invite community members in to provide care work. The federal government can help enable this credential expansion through its support role: hosting convenings for community practitioners, providing toolkits and guides to promote implementation, and, possibly, offering funding for state and local pilots.

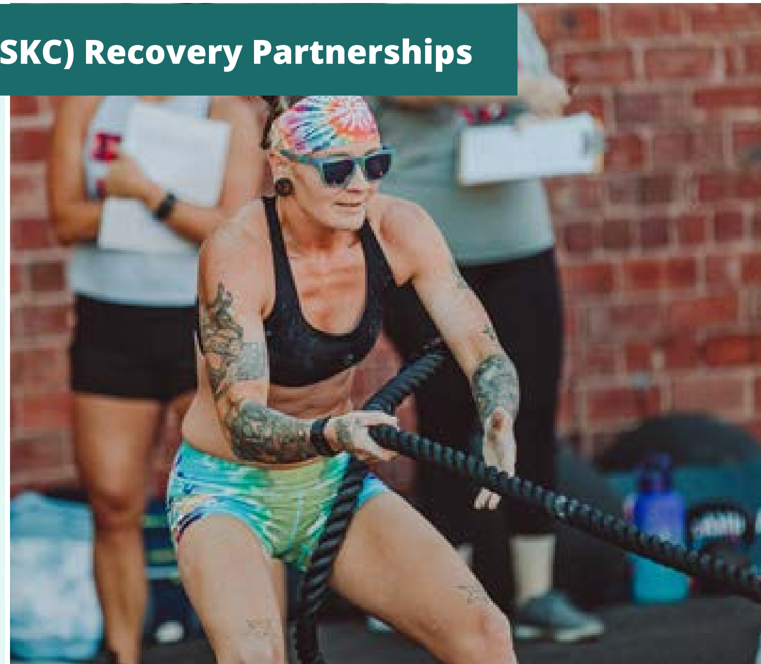
Capacity - People *Opportunity - Remove Barriers* *Participation - Make Participatory*

Support the creation of more social cooperatives. All levels of government have the potential to foster more ownership, agency, and community participation in care by supporting social cooperatives. To start, states can pass inclusive general incorporation statutes, enabling the formation and operation of all types of cooperatives, including social cooperatives.[60] The federal government and state governments can provide grant funding and technical assistance—directly and through local partners—to support the creation and development of social cooperatives. Moreover, when the federal and state governments provide funding for child care and care for older adults, they can set aside a portion of this funding to support social cooperatives. While the development of social cooperatives will likely be driven by communities, government can help enable the process of formation through policy change and funding.

Capacity - Process | *Opportunity - Remove Barriers* | *Participation - Make Participatory*

CASE STUDY

Portsmouth Spartan Kettlebell Club (PSKC) Recovery Partnerships



PSKC, a CrossFit gym based in Portsmouth, OH, partners with a local behavioral health agency and a community-based correctional facility to offer weekly CrossFit classes for clients in recovery and incarcerated individuals. The partnership entails in-patient CrossFit classes for those in rehab and classes at the correctional facility along with part-time employment opportunities for those who are living in Portsmouth. The behavioral health agency is primarily funded by the state of Ohio via Medicaid dollars to provide services, including PSKC's classes, for addiction treatment. The correctional facility is also funded by the Ohio Department of Public Safety.[61]

RESOURCE

NGA Toolkit for Behavioral Health Paraprofessionals

In this toolkit, the NGA details strategies states are taking to reduce the credential barrier for peers and community members to offer behavioral health care. NGA explores various state approaches to credentialing of "Behavioral Health Support Specialists," which includes roles such as peer specialists, community health workers, and behavioral health technicians/aides. Examples of strategies include adjusting regulatory standards, creating pathways toward financial viability, and establishing opportunities for interstate viability. The development of such roles has the potential to invite community members to provide critical care while addressing critical workforce shortages.

Access the full toolkit here

What Philanthropy Can Do

The nascency of these social care-related activities presents an opportunity for philanthropy to facilitate experimentation, refinement, and development within this field. Philanthropic efforts can range from applying a funding lens to promote more local outlets for peer and community care, to advancing social cooperatives as a pillar within U.S. communities:

Fund peer and community care activities. Funders, particularly those already focused on supporting care-related activities, can prioritize investing in more efforts that promote peer and community-involved care. This could involve creating grant programs for these particular activities, or applying peer and community care models as a funding priority within their existing grantmaking. Funders can also encourage their current grantees to incorporate more community- and peer-based practices into their existing programming. Collectively, this could begin to nudge contemporary care organizations and initiatives in a more participatory direction.

Capacity - Funding *Participation - Make Participatory* *Opportunity - Boost Supply*

Pilot new extracurricular certification programs. As government enables expanded access to care credentials, private and social sector organizations can begin designing and delivering different extracurricular certification programs for people to gain these credentials. Philanthropy can fund and help refine pilots of new certification programs that must be developed and tested. Where relevant, they can also play a role in promulgating these programs across states and municipalities, launching learning networks, supporting toolkits and guides, and elevating success stories.

Capacity - Funding *Capacity - People*

Support training of community members to better provide emotional and spiritual care. As more community members become involved in care-related activities, there will be an increasing need to equip them to better provide emotional and spiritual care. Philanthropy can fund these efforts to prepare both the staff of frontline community groups and ordinary community members to offer care in community settings. This could include formal training programs, community learning networks, and apprentice and mentor initiatives, to name a few. Such activities would help unlock the capacities of community leaders and neighbors to practice the principles of emotional and spiritual care as they assume more care-related responsibilities.

Capacity - People *Capacity - Funding* *Opportunity - Improve Quality*

Promote social cooperative model experimentation and diffusion. The nascency of social cooperative efforts in the U.S. demands an orientation toward testing and learning. Philanthropy can foster this sort of experimentation by seeding community-driven pilot experiments, supporting learning and best practice diffusion networks within and across communities, and creating policy feedback loops to identify further opportunities for local, state, and federal support. This experimental approach can begin to shift social cooperatives from the fringes to the mainstream of America's care infrastructure.

Capacity - Funding *Capacity - People* *Opportunity - Boost Supply*

CASE STUDY

Visible Hands Collaborative

visible hands
COLLABORATIVE

The Pittsburgh-based Visible Hands Collaborative offers what it calls "Integrative Community Therapy," which relies on guided conversations between community members.[62] The incipient model is based on Brazil's Terapia Comunitária Integrativa, which has scaled community-involved care throughout Brazil. Visible Hands has received seed funding from the JPB Foundation to pilot and prove its community care approach in Pittsburgh, with the intent of receiving government funding in the future.[63]

RESOURCE

The Social Co-op Academy

The Rocky Mountain Employee Ownership Center (RMEOC) hosts an ongoing Social Co-op Academy, which is focused on advancing the field of social cooperatives in the U.S. The academy explores the history of social co-ops, their importance in the broader care infrastructure, and the strategic and operational challenges for launching and growing them in the U.S. context.[64] Over time, the academy intends to spin out a community of practice modeled after Australia's Social Care Community of Practice.[65]

Learn more about the Social Co-op Academy here

BIG IDEA

Team Up for Social Care

Team Up is an emerging initiative—led by Interfaith America in partnership with the YMCA, Habitat for Humanity, and Catholic Charities—to train 10,000+ bridgebuilders within communities nationwide.[66] The model focuses on tapping into the existing civic infrastructure of these three translocal organizations, and equipping their frontline leaders with the essential skills of bridgebuilding. **Though the focus of Team Up is explicitly about bridging, elements of the model are translatable to care in communities. With additional funding support, these partners can build on this approach, incorporating the practices of spiritual and emotional care into their trainings, learning networks, and pilot programs.**

Learn more about Team Up

Education: Refocus K-12 education settings to cultivate students' relational skills, facilitate bridging social capital, and promote community involvement.

What Local Government Can Do: Within Schools

Local government has a leading role to play in fostering connection within school settings. Schools can help students cultivate the skills to become better friends and neighbors, create the conditions for more cross-class and cross-race relationships, and facilitate mentorship opportunities between students. Each of these policies can help schools realize their potential as venues for connection and belonging rather than sorting and isolation:

Cultivate students' identity and skills as friends and neighbors. Schools can help their students practice and cultivate the identity and skills of being a good family member, friend, significant other, neighbor, and community member. Intentionally developing students' moral identity could involve cultivating classrooms where attention is paid to students helping each other, that students view as a community in which they have obligations, and where teachers value and know each student. When this is expected of students in their daily interactions, they can start to see themselves as good friends and neighbors. The focus of relational skill-building could involve helping students learn how to effectively relate interpersonally (e.g., asking good questions, listening well), develop close friendships (e.g., being reliable and trustworthy, venturing into emotionally difficult territory), cultivate generosity (e.g., serving others), and participate in community (e.g., running a meeting, organizing). By approaching schools as spaces to build the identity and skills of friendship and neighborliness, schools can bolster the long-term connectedness of their students.

Opportunity - Improve Quality | *Connection - Overall*

Create magnet schools to promote bridging connection. Magnet schools are public schools that offer special forms of instruction that are typically not available elsewhere and are designed to attract a socioeconomically, racially, and geographically diverse student body. Municipalities, counties, and regions with high levels of socioeconomic and racial segregation can leverage magnet schools to promote more connection across various lines of difference. Such magnet schools can range in focus—from the performing arts, to science and technology, to leadership and service—and can be intentionally designed to cultivate an integrated student body. Within these bridging magnet schools, school leadership can implement programming, both inside and outside of the classroom, to orient students toward community participation and foster relationships across relevant lines of difference.[67]

Participation - Make Participatory | *Connection - Bridging*

Adjust size and tracking to facilitate connection across difference. Schools can modify their perceived size and adjust how they "track" students to facilitate more cross-class and cross-race connection during the school day.[68] Currently, even the most integrated places tend to segregate students within schools, with higher SES students in more advanced classes and cohorts and lower SES students in less advanced ones. Moreover, research shows that, the larger the school, the more students experience within-school segregation. Schools can begin to reverse these dynamics by creating more opportunities for in-school mixing, from establishing intentionally mixed cohorts of students (e.g., Berkeley High School's "houses"),[69] to ensuring all students participate in a certain number of non-tracked classes, to eliminating tracking altogether.

Opportunity - Remove Barriers | *Connection - Bridging*

Create interage mentoring programs. Schools, from elementary school through high school, can create and run interage mentoring programs between older and younger students. Such programs have the potential to bolster interage connectedness within schools, while helping the older students cultivate the skills of mentorship and support. While most youth mentorship programs involve adult mentors, this approach acknowledges that young people can be mentors too—and this form of mentorship can promote overall and bridging connection within schools.

Capacity - People *Participation - Make Participatory* *Connection - Bridging*

CASE STUDY

Queens' Civic Leadership Academy

The Civic Leadership Academy is a Queens, NY-based public magnet school which "uses the real world as a classroom [to develop students] as leaders who take initiative, solve problems, work as a team, and demonstrate their abilities while addressing real community needs."[70] The school both centers community-building as part of its curriculum and facilitates connection across difference through its orientation as a public magnet. The Civic Leadership Academy also produces educational outcomes that place it in the top quartile of NYC public schools in terms of performance.

What Local Government Can Do: School & Community

Local government can also facilitate stronger bonds between schools and their broader communities. This could involve making extracurriculars more accessible, inviting community members in to support students, and creating opportunities for parents to connect with one another. Notably, considering the burdens teachers and administrators already experience, all of these efforts would benefit from the coordination support of a full-time staff member.

Eliminate "pay-to-play" extracurricular activities. Local governments can voluntarily eliminate "pay-to-play" school sports and clubs, which hinder low- and middle-income students' ability to participate.[i] Sports teams are especially effective at fostering connections—both overall and across lines of difference—and promoting long-term habits of participation. Further, even if schools offer fee waivers for low-income students, the evidence suggests that the very existence of fees hinders participation. As such, removing these financial barriers altogether has the potential to strengthen the relational lives of lower SES students who would not otherwise participate in sports and clubs.[71]

Opportunity - Remove Barriers | *Participation - Target Groups* | *Connection - Overall*

Invite community members into schools as mentors, instructors, and coaches. Schools have the opportunity to invite community members into schools to serve as mentors, lead specific classes and workshops, and support extracurricular activities. This type of approach lowers the barrier between schools and their communities, creating a new avenue for participation and service for neighbors, while providing students with meaningful mentor and community relationships. Nonprofits, such as Citizen Schools, have helped advance this model across California, New York, and Massachusetts.[72] Meanwhile, cities like Chicago have piloted the model with success and are starting to scale it citywide.[73]

Opportunity - Remove Barriers | *Participation - Make Participatory* | *Connection - Bridging*

Offer "between-school" extracurricular opportunities. Considering the socioeconomic, racial, and geographic sorting of districts, schools can leverage extracurriculars between schools as an opportunity to promote participation and connection across various lines of difference. For instance, a majority rural high school and a majority urban high school could partner to host a joint musical. A majority low-income school could collaborate with a majority high-income school on a shared series of service projects. Extracurricular partnerships like these could break down the barriers between districts—often created by exclusionary zoning policies—and facilitate bridging connection outside of schools.

Opportunity - Remove Barriers | *Participation - Target Groups* | *Connection - Bridging*

Launch cohort-based programming for parents. As described in the "Housing" section, schools can launch cohort-based programming for parents—beginning in elementary school, but potentially lasting through high school—to cultivate relationships and social capital development among parents. Such programs, structured as social clubs attached to children's graduating class or classroom, should be oriented toward helping parents support their children and encouraging parents to support and connect with one another. This programming can also be an entry point to equip parents to better support the relational lives of their children through partnerships with initiatives like Making Caring Common.[74]

Opportunity - Boost Supply | *Participation - Make Participatory* | *Connection - Overall*

[i] *Note: State governments can also eliminate "pay-to-play" fees for sports and extracurricular activities. However, most of these bans have been advanced at the local level.*

Create a personnel position focused on promoting connection within schools. The addition of connection-focused programming—both within schools and between schools and communities—will likely require additional staff capacity to develop and coordinate, as teachers and administrators will already be overburdened with existing work. Much like local government can consider hiring personnel focused on connection, so too can local districts. These staff members can coordinate interage mentoring, community mentoring and partnerships, and parental cohorts, and they can help lead the refinement and development of these initiatives over time. They can also play a role in integrating approaches to measuring school performance that center connection and belonging, rather than just academic performance measures.

Capacity - People *Capacity - Funding*

CASE STUDY

Local Districts Eliminating "Pay-to-Play" Activities

In recent years, several school districts across the country have eliminated activities fees for school sports teams and clubs. Examples include Chippewa Valley Schools in Michigan,[75] Loudoun County Public Schools in Virginia,[76] Lake Local Schools in Ohio,[77] and Uxbridge Public Schools in Massachusetts.[78] With intentional budgeting strategies focused on promoting sport and club access, each of the school districts were able to offset the lost revenue from fees.

What State Government, Federal Government & Philanthropy Can Do

While the policies and practices of schools are typically shaped at the district-level, the federal government, state governments, and philanthropy can support experimentation, adoption, and implementation. From setting measures and standards, to providing pilot and ongoing funding, to supporting implementation, government and philanthropy can be enablers and accelerators for improving connection within schools and between schools and communities:

Help measure connection and belonging within schools and districts. States can play a leading role in signaling the importance of connection and belonging within schools by measuring districts' school climate on an ongoing basis. This approach to measurement—administered on a consistent basis—can ask students about their overall social well-being, their sense of connection and belonging within school and in extracurriculars, their sense of connection to place, and more. Such a measurement approach would be a foundational change, helping to shift schools' priorities away from an exclusive focus on test scores and toward students' relational lives. Because students' social well-being and belonging are strong predictors of positive life outcomes (i.e., education, economic, health, etc.),[79] this reorientation toward belonging will also be a more effective approach than exclusively emphasizing student performance.

Capacity - Process

Encourage schools to become phone-free environments. States can play a leading role in advancing legislation encouraging schools to become phone-free environments. States can either outright ban phones within schools or incentivize local districts to promote phone-free environments by providing them with the resources to do so. Not only does the usage of smartphones in schools distract students in class and make them more self-conscious and anxious about speaking up, they also hinder students from interacting with each other outside of class during lunch, free periods, and in the hallways.[80] Many states across the political spectrum are advancing phone-free school policies, including Utah, Florida, and Vermont. While some are mandating districts to ban phones, others are focusing more on incentives, such as providing funding for phone lockers and support for teachers and administrators.[81]

Capacity - Process *Capacity - Funding*

Participation - Promote Freedom

Set standards to help cultivate students' skills as friends and neighbors. States can set standards for districts to help their students practice and cultivate the identity and skills of being a good family member, friend, significant other, and neighbor. Standards tied to social-emotional learning have already been implemented in a majority of U.S. states. Such standards and guidelines can be amended to be less individualistic and have more of an explicit emphasis on approaching the classroom as a neighborhood or community to be stewarded. Adjustments to these standards could enable the broader adoption of these practices—both in states that already have social-emotional learning guidelines and in new states.

Capacity - Process *Capacity - People*

Opportunity - Improve Quality

Provide pilot and long-term funding for within-school and community initiatives. The federal government, state governments, and philanthropy can all play a role in providing funding—both pilot and long-term—for within-school and community initiatives at the local level. Pilot funding opportunities, such as the Department of Education's Full-Service Community Schools Program,[82] can be used to prove models on the ground and encourage local government to sustainably fund such efforts. Government and philanthropy can also fund such initiatives on an ongoing basis—whether that be to build a new magnet school, or fund a specific initiative within or outside schools (e.g., interage mentoring, between school extracurriculars).

Capacity - Funding *Opportunity - Boost Supply*

Convene and equip stakeholders to advance connection within K-12 education. The federal government, state governments, and philanthropy can facilitate the strengthening and proliferation of practices to advance connection within K-12 education—largely through their capacities as conveners and capacity-builders. This could take the form of local, statewide, or national CoPs to convene relevant stakeholders (e.g., administrators, teachers, parents) to learn from their experiences implementing the proposals in this section and distribute promising practices across the network. It could also involve creating toolkits and guides—co-created by local practitioners—to simplify the launch of these initiatives. And, relatedly, government and philanthropy could support technical assistance programs to facilitate the ongoing implementation and improvement of these efforts.

Capacity - People *Opportunity - Improve Quality*

CASE STUDY

State Standards for Relational Skills

The majority of U.S. states—both blue and red—have state-level standards for cultivating social-emotional learning among K-12 students.[83] The purpose of these standards is to set expectations for districts on skills that should be learned at each grade level, and provide guidance to help students gain these skills. After proliferating throughout the 2010s, social-emotional learning has received significant pushback from conservatives, who have critiqued its focus on identity and its therapeutic nature.[84] However, the relational skills component of social-emotional learning still receives broad support. **As such, this relational element can (1) be prioritized within state standards to emphasize the skills of being a good friend, family member, and neighbor; and (2) ensure flexibility for districts to cultivate these skills in a manner that aligns with their local culture.**

Life Transitions

Life transitions—significant life events that require a new circumstance to be incorporated into our lives—can be periods of incredible possibility and incredible difficulty.[1] During these periods of transition, social support and care are critical factors for helping us navigate and flourish through change. Unfortunately, it is these moments where we become most disconnected from our past social networks and our past sources of purpose. Meanwhile, the isolation, alienation, and sorting of American communities makes finding a supportive community even more difficult during these already complicated transitional periods.[2] Establishing "Life Transitions" as a chapter within this framework recognizes the important role of policy in enabling more connected, participatory, and caring experiences of transition.

As we developed this chapter, four periods of life transition stood out as moments of both acute challenge and potential:

Early Childhood & Parenting: For children and their parents, social support during the early years of life creates the foundation for long-term flourishing. However, as more children are raised by single parents in communities that are less connected, it has made forming these supportive relationships more difficult.

Adult Transition: The period of adult transition significantly shapes Americans' lifelong relationships and habits of participation. Since the second World War, however, the cross-class experience of the military has been replaced by four-year colleges that have accelerated the sorting of where we live, the groups we join, and the relationships we form.

Community Integration: The experience of integrating into a community—both for the general population, and for veterans, immigrants, and formerly incarcerated people—comes with significant hurdles for attaining a sense of stability, connection, and belonging in their communities.

Retirement & Older Adults: Retirement presents the opportunity for new experiences and responsibilities, along with existential questions of belonging, purpose, and identity. The ability to actively contribute and receive support during this period of change can be the difference between older adults thriving and struggling in their later years.

Life transitions will always be difficult, but they need not be so isolating. Policy can create the conditions for more supportive and community-embedded experiences of transition. By integrating peer support and community involvement into existing programs—and applying existing funding streams to support new peer and community programs—policymakers can center participation, connection, and social support during the early years of life. Through service years and domestic exchanges—first at the state-level, then possibly at the national-level—the adult transition can be transformed to help emerging adults form lifelong relationships across difference and long-term habits of participation. By applying a "welcome lens" to facilitate the integration for all new or returning residents—and providing targeted supports to veterans, immigrants, and the formerly incarcerated—policymakers can help make the experience of community integration more connected and less isolating. And by creating more intergenerational housing, service, and education opportunities for older adults, policymakers can help boost their overall and intergenerational connection.

Early Childhood & Parenting: Bolster social support for new parents and children, easing the transition to parenting and improving outcomes during life's early years.

"Supported transitions through the early years of life establish the foundations for the long-term flourishing of parents and their children. Policy change … can create the conditions for more peer and community participation in early care."

The early years of life—from birth through age five—is a formative transitional period, both for young children and their parents. Supportive relationships, both familial and communal, provide the foundation for young children and parents to flourish through this major life transition. For children, positive early relationships with their parents, caregivers, and broader support networks shape their long-term development, including their ability to cultivate relationships throughout their lifetimes.[3] For new parents, social support from peers, family, friends, and neighbors helps them navigate a major life transition, both in support of their young children and to ensure they are on stable footing throughout their parenting years.[4]

American society has become less hospitable to young children and new parents—both economically and socially—over the last 50-plus years. Among married couples, dual-earner households have doubled since the 1960s, from 25 percent then to nearly 60 percent today.[5] While this has been positive for women's economic equality, it means that substantially more families must arrange for outside care during their children's early years of life. During the same time period, marriage rates have been plummeting faster than fertility, especially among Americans who never graduated from college.[6] This has led to a doubling in the share of children raised by a single mother or father—from 13 percent in 1968 to 25 percent today—leaving more single parents responsible for caring for their children throughout life's early years.[7] All of these shifts are layered on top of the other structural changes that have made American community life less supportive: the sorting and isolation of our neighborhoods, the decline and transformation of associational life, and the individualization and bureaucratization of care settings.

"The robust community and friendships I had when I was establishing my family made the difficulties of life tolerable—and even helped my family flourish through these difficulties. There are too many people who don't have any of these supports in their lives."

- Erika Bachiochi, Ethics & Public Policy Center

In the face of these changes to family and community structures, policymaking for the early years of life has been largely reactive in nature. The result is a fragmented patchwork of programs that are both under-matched compared to the scope of parents' and children's needs, and difficult for all stakeholders to navigate.[8] In response, some groups have called for a cohesive "National Children and Family Policy" to "promote the stability and well-being of the American family," rather than continue to fund one-off programs.[9]

While we do not attempt to design a national children and family policy in this report, we present several opportunities for policymakers to center participation and connection during the early years of life. As a starting point, policymakers at all levels can work to both offer the material benefits that provide new parents with the stability to support their young children, and simplify early childhood systems to make the experience of navigating supports more streamlined and less difficult.

Policymakers can also meet people where they are, offering subsidies to new parents—along with their family members and neighbors—to provide at-home and community-based child care. Policy has a further role to play in embedding peer support and community involvement into existing programs, such as incorporating more peer navigator roles into initiatives for new parents and funding. Finally, policymakers can enable existing funding streams—including Medicaid and local human services budgets—to be applied to social support groups for new parents.

Supported transitions through the early years of life establish the foundations for the long-term flourishing of parents and their children. Policy change—whether within existing programs or as part of a more cohesive policy vision—can simultaneously remove systemic barriers to connection in these early years and create the conditions for more peer and community participation in early care.

What Local & State Government Can Do

Local and state governments are on the frontlines of supporting new parents and their children to thrive through "safe, stable, and nurturing relationships."[10] Municipalities and states can play two primary roles in this regard: (1) providing new parents with the material benefits they need to relationally and financially support their infants and toddlers, and (2) prioritizing peer-based and community-involved practices in their programs and funding decisions.

Offer material benefits to new parents to nurture relationships in life's early years. State and local government can start by offering material benefits that provide new parents with the time and security to cultivate safe, stable, and nurturing relationships with their infants and toddlers. This includes such policies as paid family leave so that parents can receive paid time off to care for their newborns, child allowances or expanded tax credits so that parents can meet the material needs of early care, and extended postpartum Medicaid coverage to support low-income mothers and their babies. These benefits can create the conditions for families—particularly low- and middle-income families—to provide the relational support their newborns need.

Capacity - Funding *Participation - Promote Freedom* *Participation - Target Groups*

Provide cash subsidies for at-home and community child care. Beyond providing basic material benefits to new parents, states and municipalities can provide cash subsidies for at-home and community child care—both drawing on the Child Care and Development Block Grant and raising their own funding sources.[11] Considering that half of mothers prefer to stay home rather than return to work—and one-third of all families with kids have one parent staying home to care for their children—these at-home subsidies could meet parents where they are, offering them the financial support to spend quality time with their infants and toddlers at home. Moreover, flexible subsidies for community child care could enable families, friends, and neighbors to pool resources, allowing them to form child care cooperatives or other community-scale and community-involved child care groups. This approach would serve the dual benefit of promoting cooperation and connection among parents, and facilitating more early connections for infants and toddlers.[12]

Capacity - Funding *Opportunity - Remove Barriers* *Participation - Make Participatory*

Support parent partner and peer navigator programs for new parents. State and local governments can center the role of "near peers" to provide social and informational support to new parents. This could include Parent Partner Programs, where state governments dedicate funding to support parents who are at risk of becoming involved in the child welfare system—or already involved in it—to team with a peer parent mentor with a closed child welfare case.[13] This could also involve Peer Navigator initiatives, where alumni navigators help new, low-income parents navigate formal government benefits and informal community supports. Funding can be allocated through state human services resources, Medicaid, or other federal sources. These programs can help to build peer support among new parents during a period of high vulnerability, while helping these new parents navigate federal, state, and local social services systems.

Capacity - People *Participation - Target Groups* *Connection - Overall*

Fund parent peer groups during pregnancy and the early years of life. Parent peer groups provide cohort-based educational, emotional, and social support to new parents, and exist in communities nationwide. State and local government can recognize these groups as an integral part of communities' social care infrastructure, and allocate funding to increase access and participation across socioeconomic, geographic, and racial lines. This must involve meeting people where they already are. Within the prenatal and pediatric care contexts, this could involve incorporating the "Centering Pregnancy" and "Centering Parenting" models, which states can help fund by making them reimbursable through Medicaid.[14] This could also involve embedding and funding pregnancy and new parent groups within state- and municipally-supported community groups for families. Outside of formal care settings, state and local human services agencies could provide funding for their beneficiaries to participate in community-based new parent groups. Investment in these cohort-based initiatives can help build social capital among new parents, both immediately following childbirth and throughout their parenting journeys.

Opportunity - Boost Supply *Opportunity - Remove Barriers* *Connection - Overall*

CASE STUDY

PEPS Partnerships with Community Organizations in Seattle

PEPS is a Seattle-based nonprofit that connects parents in facilitated peer support groups throughout different stages of their parenting journey, from expectant parents to parents of newborns, infants, adolescents, and teens.[15] A core element of PEPS programming is community partnerships, often with community-based organizations within and outside of Washington State.[16] Examples include partnerships with Open Arms, a network of community-based and culturally matched doulas, Denise Louie Education Center, which provides multicultural early learning services to children and families, and Mercy Housing Northwest, an affordable housing development.[17]

What Philanthropy Can Do

Philanthropy can both enable and accelerate efforts to make the early years of life and the transition to parenthood more participatory, cooperative, and connected. As enablers, philanthropy can both support research that can lead to further investments in the early years of life and they can provide pilot funding to promote more experimental initiatives. As accelerators, philanthropy can support technical assistance, trainings, and learning networks to encourage the broader adoption of peer- and community-based initiatives for children and their parents.

Invest in research on relationships during the early years of life. Funders can invest in more research to bolster the evidence base on the importance of relationships during the early years of life for children and new parents alike. Developing a more robust evidence base on the effectiveness of approaches to cultivate connectedness and social support during life's early years could lead to more philanthropic funding for this work and greater policy adoption. Importantly, this research should involve longitudinal studies on both children and parents, as relationships matter for both groups for different reasons over time.

Capacity - Process *Capacity - Funding*

Facilitate the development of child care cooperatives. Philanthropy can promote the development and growth of affordable, participatory, and community-owned child care cooperatives—either embedded within broader social cooperatives or as independent entities. Local funders can provide seed support and technical assistance to help these cooperatives launch and build capacity. National and local funders can host learning networks to promote experimentation and the sharing of effective practices within and across place. As states provide flexible subsidies for home-based and community child care, such networks could help community members test strategies to pool these resources for family- and community-involved care. These efforts would help further embed care for children in their familial, neighborhood, and friend networks—and lay the foundation for policy change to promote child care and social cooperatives.[18]

Capacity - People *Capacity - Funding*
Participation - Make Participatory

Support parent peer groups during pregnancy and the early years of life. Like local government, philanthropy can increase their support for new parent groups and similar programs focused on cultivating parents' connectedness. Local funders can provide direct support for these groups, both in terms of grants to established organizations (e.g., PEPS) and micro-grants for neighbors and community members to form their own groups. Local and national funders can also bolster the capacity and effectiveness of these efforts—both formal and informal—by investing in training, technical assistance, and learning networks for their leaders. By making social support for new parents more accessible and comprehensive, funders can improve the transition into parenthood for new parents while improving outcomes for their children.

Capacity - Funding *Opportunity - Boost Supply*
Opportunity - Remove Barriers

Incubate "Moai groups" as a practice within American communities. Moai groups are a tradition in Okinawa, Japan in which groups of about five young children are paired together and make a commitment to support each other for life.[19] Moai groups have been identified as one of the core activities that contributes to Okinawa being a blue zone—that is, an area of the world where people live exceptionally long lives. Several groups in the U.S. have begun putting Moai groups into practice in their communities. Philanthropy can play a role in funding local Moai group pilots, facilitating peer learning among the communities putting Moai groups into practice, and promoting the broader adoption of Moai groups in communities across the U.S.

Capacity - Funding *Opportunity - Boost Supply*
Connection - Overall

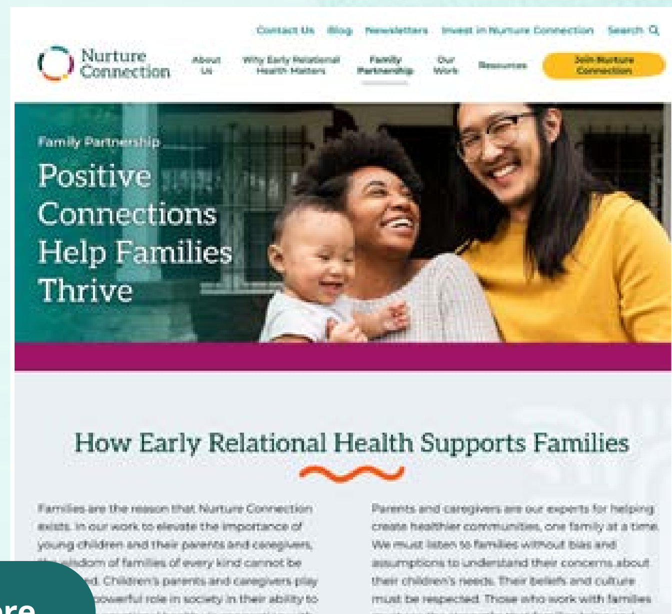
Incorporate a connection lens into investments tied to life's early years. Funders focused on life's early years can broaden the aperture of their grantmaking, incorporating a lens that prioritizes the social connectedness of young children and their parents. This could include increasing funding for children's early relational health, an emerging focus area within philanthropy. But this support could also extend beyond the limiting health frame, prioritizing active and caring relationships for children—and the conditions that support these relationships—as an end in and of itself. For example, philanthropy can encourage the creation of child-friendly streets and neighborhoods, which would provide outsized benefits for the connectedness of young children and their families. Funders can also invest in social capital formation for parents—both to support their children better and to navigate the major life transition into parenthood—as an independent funding priority. This integrative connection lens can rebalance support for children and parents during the early years of life away from the purely material and toward the relational.

Capacity - Funding *Connection - Overall*

CASE STUDY

Nurture Connection Network

Nurture Connection is a network that aims to "[promote] strong, positive, and nurturing early relationships to build healthier, more connected communities."[20] They are an early-stage, networked effort to integrate a connection lens into philanthropic giving and public policy focused on early childhood. Nurture Connection partners with foundations to incorporate an emphasis on "relational health" within their early childhood funding strategies. They also work with policymakers, identifying opportunities for all levels of policy to support the connectedness of new parents and their children. Finally, they support the engagement and development of families as leaders across this work.



Learn more about Nurture Connection here

What Federal Government Can Do

The federal government can center relationships and participation—in the early years of life and for new parents—by expanding funding streams through legislation, embedding peer-based practices in their programs, and supporting ecosystem development. Much like philanthropy, the federal government can both enable more participatory, community-involved programs and promote its maturation within and across local communities.

Boost funding support for parents and children. Congress can significantly increase funding to support parents and children to flourish during the early years of life. To start, Congress can expand the Child Tax Credit back to the $3,600 per qualifying child level that it established during Covid—making it fully refundable and indexed to inflation, and specifically targeting lower-income families. This pro-family policy could provide new low-income parents with more economic security in their child's earliest years—both supporting the material and relational needs of their children. Congress can also provide additional subsidies for home- and community-based child care. This can take the form of direct payments for at-home and community care, and be allocated to social and child care cooperatives, helping to generate resources and momentum for these nascent local opportunities. By boosting funding for social support during life's early years, the federal government would be recognizing the importance of these years for the relational development of children and their parents, and would be rebalancing their investments in infants, toddlers, and new parents compared to other groups (e.g., older adults).

Capacity - Funding

Simplify and universalize systems supporting parents and their young children. The federal government can help simplify and universalize systems designed to support children and parents during the early years of life. Rather than merely creating new roles to help families navigate these complicated systems more effectively, the federal government can establish a policy vision focused on making these systems easier to navigate and embedding them as part of the essential community infrastructure.[21] Such a universal system could be designed to be locally driven, ingrained within the existing civic infrastructure and associational life of communities, and oriented toward participation, cooperation, and responsiveness to community needs. This approach would require the federal government to create a cohesive policy vision and provide ongoing funding and coordination support, while devolving decision-making and control to state, local, and neighborhood actors.

Capacity - Process *Opportunity - Remove Barriers*

Participation - Make Participatory

Embed peer navigator and peer groups within federal programs. Just as peer navigators can be embedded in state and local programs for new parents, they can also be embedded in federal programs. As documented in the case studies below, the federal government has started piloting such peer navigator programs to help families connect with support services during their children's early years of life. Such efforts can be further developed, not only incorporating peer navigators into other federal programs, but expanding from one-to-one to group-based peer support. These efforts can provide new parents with valuable informational and social support as they navigate engaging with the welfare state.

Capacity - People *Opportunity - Boost Supply*

Participation - Target Groups

Cultivate the development of a more relational early childhood ecosystem. The federal government can help connect, strengthen, and grow local early childhood and parenting ecosystems—with a specific emphasis on becoming more relational. Executive agencies, such as HHS, can incorporate a connection lens into their investments and programming for the early years of life, prioritizing initiatives that invite family members, peers, and neighbors to participate. Such agencies can also convene CoPs of grantees and partners, encouraging experimentation with integrating participatory and cooperative practices into early childhood initiatives. As local stakeholders develop promising practices, The White House and agencies can support their dissemination through convenings, guides, and ongoing CoPs. In the late 2010s, HHS initiated efforts to incorporate social capital into human services programs.[22] An opportunity exists to return to and build on these efforts in future administrations.

Capacity - People *Capacity - Funding*

CASE STUDY

Alumni Navigators for Healthy Start Families

In 2023, the GSA launched a pilot partnership with HHS, HUD, DOL and USDA to create a new "Alumni Navigator" role to help Healthy Start families receiving federal benefits navigate the transition into parenthood. Alumni Navigators are mothers who recently completed the Healthy Start program, and have "experience navigating benefits enrollment (e.g., Medicaid and WIC), and accessing key community resources and supports." Alumni Navigators "provide new families with social, informational, and emotional support and deliver a 'bundled' set of critical resources."[23] Early results indicate that these Alumni Navigators increase trust and connectedness of both the participants and navigators.[24]

Learn more about Alumni Navigators here

CASE STUDY

Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV)

The MIECHV Program is an initiative of the Health Resources & Service Administration that "helps pregnant people and parents of young children improve health and well-being for themselves and their families" by "partnering trained home visitors with families to set and achieve goals." **Home visitors provide valuable informational and social support, such as showing parents how to be positive and supportive with their children, encouraging talking to and teaching babies from a young age, and connecting families to resources in their communities.**[25] Since its implementation in 2010, the program has been proven to produce measurable improvements in the well-being of parents and children.[26]

Learn more about the MIECHV Program

Adult Transition: Reimagine the adult transition to foster lifelong relationships across difference and habits of community participation.

"The adult transition can be the great connector, not the great divider ... this period of transition can be one of the major leverage points for strengthening the connectedness of all Americans."

Americans' experience of the adult transition—that is, the transitional years between childhood and adulthood—significantly influences who we form relationships with and our habits of participation. Whether we attend college or join the military, the values we develop, practices we assume, and relationships we cultivate during this period tend to remain with us for the rest of our lives. Though the institutions of college and the military are unique to our developed western context, *rites of passage* into adulthood have been commonplace across history and cultures because of their influence on the community members we become.[27]

The modern construct of the adult transition emerged during and immediately following WWII. Prior, America's standing military was relatively small, four-year college was almost exclusively reserved for the aristocratic elite, and most youth went to work on farms or in factories after completing grade school.[28] WWII established the adult transition, as we know it today, in two ways: (1) the mass mobilization of troops in WWII created a shared, transitional experience for an entire generation of young men; and (2) the passing of the G.I. Bill of Rights opened up four-year colleges to millions of returning veterans. In *The Years That Matter Most*, Paul Tough describes the sea change that the G.I. Bill ushered in: "In the public imagination, college came to be seen, for the first time, not as an exclusive privilege of the moneyed elite but as the most promising path for ordinary Americans to reach new opportunities in life."[29]

Over the past 75 years, however, the collective, cross-class experience of the military as the bedrock of the adult transition has been replaced by four-year colleges that have become the great sorter of Americans' relational lives. With the creation of the All-Volunteer Force in 1973, the military shifted from an institution that the vast majority of men in their 20s, 30s, and 40s joined, to one that less than one percent of the population now serves in at any given time.[30] During this same time period, four-year colleges shifted from a "hereditary aristocracy" to a "hereditary meritocracy," with massive class gaps emerging in rates of college access and completion, particularly at selective residential colleges.[31] Meanwhile, those who do not attend four-year colleges and do not join the military miss out on a collective experience of the adult transition. They may attend community or commuter colleges that lack a cohort experience, get full-time jobs immediately after high school, or not enter the workforce altogether.[32] This divide in the adult transition contributes to broader divides in relationships and participation throughout life: college students and graduates have more friends than their non-college peers and are more likely to participate in their communities, both during and following the adult transition.[33]

Despite these trends, the adult transition can be the great connector, not the great divider—a time for 18- to 22-year-olds to cultivate lifelong relationships across difference and lifelong values and habits of participation. But this reorientation will require policy change. State governments have the potential to lead the way, launching state-level service years and domestic exchanges for emerging adults that can be replicated on a state-by-state basis. Philanthropy can fund pilots of these policies and facilitate policy diffusion through learning networks or policy labs. The federal government can help scale and institutionalize these efforts, providing educational benefits, coordinating service years and exchanges across states, and, potentially, expanding national service and exchanges as a universal expectation for emerging adults. Considering the significance of the adult transition in shaping our values, habits, and relationships, this period of transition can be one of the major leverage points for strengthening the connectedness of all Americans.

> *"We need government support for 'coming of age' programs. During the early transition periods of life—particularly high school to college—teenagers should have the opportunity to take a step back and think about what a real contribution to our shared life might look like."*
>
> *- Ian Marcus Corbin, Harvard Human Flourishing Program & Medical School*

What State Government Can Do

After decades of efforts to advance service and connection across difference during the adult transition, a state-level front has recently opened up. In red and blue states alike, governors are proposing and launching initiatives to encourage service years for recent high school graduates. States have also expressed interest in domestic exchanges for high school juniors and seniors, with an explicit focus on promoting connection and service across various lines of difference. This momentum presents a live opportunity for policy change tied to the adult transition:

Create service year opportunities for all high school grads. State leadership can create state-level service year options to incentivize one year of public service for all high school graduates. States can draw on the models from recent initiatives in California, Maryland, and New York, enabling recent high school grads to (a) serve across the state in organizations that provide job training, mentorship, and professional development; (b) earn a living wage; and (c) receive benefits for education and vocational training. Because the adult transition plays such a critical role in shaping the relationships and behaviors of 18- to 22-year-olds, broadly adopted service years can both foster lifelong relationships across differences (e.g., class, race, geography) and promote habits of community participation that will follow young people throughout their lives.

Capacity - Funding *Opportunity - Boost Supply* *Connection - Bridging*

Establish domestic exchange programs for high school juniors and seniors. State leaders can establish domestic exchange programs for juniors and seniors in high school to experience living in geographically, demographically, socioeconomically, and ideologically different communities than their own. Such exchange programs could be (a) funded and administered through a state-level service commission, civic program, education agency, or higher education system; (b) offered in partnership with multiple other states; and (c) run by nonprofit partners (e.g., American Exchange Project) in collaboration with local high schools. While these exchange programs would be shorter in duration than service years, they have the potential to forge lasting relationships along multiple lines of difference.

Capacity - Funding *Opportunity - Boost Supply* *Connection - Bridging*

CASE STUDY

Emergence of the State-Level Service Year Option

Since 2020, California, Maryland, and New York have all launched service years for recent high school grads in their states. Each program emphasizes providing tuition-assisted pathways to higher education, promoting the cultivation of civic skills, and facilitating bridging social capital. These are not small-scale programs either: California Volunteers' College Corps aims to host 10,000 fellows between 2023 and 2027,[34] and Maryland is looking to host 2,000 members per year by 2026 through its Service Year Option.[35]

POLITICS AND POWER State government Local government

Meet 3 young people hoping to make Gov. Moore's service program a success

Pamela Wood

What Philanthropy Can Do

Philanthropy can both accelerate and sharpen state-level policy adoption of service years and domestic exchanges. Funders can provide pilot support to demonstrate the potential of such initiatives to be incorporated within state budgets, facilitate state-level learning across governors' offices and service agencies, and encourage the inclusion of a connection lens within these service and exchange initiatives. Taken together, these efforts can both build policy momentum while orienting these policies toward connection across difference:

Provide pilot funding for state-level service years and domestic exchanges. National and regional funders can facilitate pilots of state-level service years and domestic exchanges. Such pilot funding could be particularly helpful in states with governors who are interested in launching these initiatives, but who may not have the political capital to immediately allocate state resources to them. This pilot funding can generate the evidence, buy-in, and political will for state-level policymakers to begin integrating service year and domestic exchange initiatives into the state budget.

Capacity - Funding

Organize a service year learning network for governors' offices. National funders and nonprofits can bring together governors' offices interested in rolling out state-level service initiatives to learn from one another, support policy diffusion, and refine these programs over time. Our interviews found many governors' offices that were considering launching service year initiatives, but few teams who were coordinating with one another in an intentional manner. Prominent ecosystem players, such as Service Year Alliance and America's Service Commissions, could potentially play this network-building role, accelerated by philanthropic support.

Capacity - People

Help integrate a connection lens into state-level service year initiatives. While the messaging around the current state-level service year efforts is largely workforce-focused, philanthropy can help integrate a connection lens into these initiatives. Funders can help realize the bridging potential of service years by supporting wraparound programming that promotes connection across geographic, socioeconomic, and racial/ethnic differences. Convergence Policy Center released a paper on these grounds in 2023, and Maryland is working with Thread to integrate a bridging lens into their support programming for fellows.[36] These efforts should be deepened within existing state-level service year initiatives and incorporated into new state service years from the start.

Capacity - Funding *Opportunity - Improve Quality* *Connection - Bridging*

CASE STUDY

Building Bridging Social Capital through Maryland's Service Year Option

Among the key goals of Maryland's recently launched Service Year Option is to promote bridging social capital among participants.[37] **In the Service Year Option's launch year, all corps members participated in quarterly trainings facilitated by Thread—a Baltimore-based nonprofit focused on strengthening the community's social fabric—where they were introduced to and had the opportunity to practice skills for connecting across difference.** Beyond these trainings, participants also have monthly opportunities to build relationships with their fellow cohort members, who represent a diverse swath of Maryland's communities. Because Governor Wes Moore made connecting across difference a core pillar of his vision for the Service Year Option, this commitment has been designed and operationalized throughout the program model.

What Federal Government Can Do

As state-level service and exchange efforts mature, the federal government can become an invaluable facilitator of interstate coordination. The federal government can supplement state-level education benefits for service years with benefits that can be applied across state lines, coordinate reciprocity between states for service years and domestic exchanges alike, and, in time, potentially create national versions of the state-level service and exchange models. All of these possibilities should be seen as just that—possibilities—and should be responsive to how programs evolve in the states:

Provide federal educational and vocational benefits for state-level service years. Over time, the federal government can supplement state-level educational benefits for service years with similar federal benefits. Informed by the model of the G.I. Bill, the Department of Education can administer funding to public service veterans that can be applied to college tuition, vocational training, and the like. Importantly, these benefits can be applied across states in contrast with state-level service benefits that can only be applied in-state. This funding could further incentivize participation in state-level service years, particularly among low- and middle-income young adults, while promoting the translatability of educational and vocational benefits across state lines.

Capacity - Funding *Participation - Target Groups*

Coordinate reciprocity between states for service years and exchanges. The federal government, likely through AmeriCorps, has the potential to facilitate exchanges between states—both for service years and domestic exchanges alike. For service years, the federal government can serve as a central clearinghouse, helping to coordinate reciprocity of compensation and benefits between states. This would allow one state's residents to serve in a different participating state if they were interested in doing so. Similarly, the federal government could set up an Office of Domestic Exchanges within AmeriCorps to coordinate and streamline inter-state exchanges.

Capacity - People *Capacity - Process*

Consider creating national service year and domestic exchange models. Depending on the degree of state-level adoption of service years and domestic exchanges, it could ultimately make sense for the federal government to create national versions of these models. The form of national involvement should be based on how the state-level efforts evolve. This could simply involve dedicating more federal funding toward state-level service and exchange models. It could include creating a federal service year and exchange programs that complement the state-level initiatives. The most comprehensive version could entail merging federal and state efforts into one federated network that streamlines administration, benefits, coordination, and funding.

Capacity - Funding *Opportunity - Boost Supply* *Connection - Bridging*

CASE STUDY

Federal Education Benefits for Service

The federal government has a long history of providing benefits to individuals who have completed some form of public service—both as an incentive and reward for service. The most generous and well-known of these benefits is the G.I. Bill, which opened up higher education to returning veterans following WWII and continues to do so today. Though less known (and less generous), the federal government also offers education benefits to Peace Corps and AmeriCorps alumni who enroll in educational opportunities following their service.[38]

Community Integration: Enhance local capacity to help all individuals—particularly veterans, immigrants, and the formerly incarcerated—integrate into new communities.

"...we make an affirmative case for policymakers to approach integration as a shared experience of life transition instead of an independent set of population-specific issues."

Integration, which we refer to as the process of entering a new place or re-entering an old place anew, is a period of possibility and peril for individuals' relationships, participation, and membership in their communities. Disconnected from our past community institutions and social networks, we're left asking: "where do I begin?" Figuring out where to start is a challenge for all of us moving to or re-entering communities, but it is especially acute for veterans, immigrants, and formerly incarcerated people who are both coming from different environments and entering communities that often do not understand their experiences. Historically, we have not treated integration as a shared experience—not only for veterans, immigrants, and the formerly incarcerated, but for all newcomers. In this section, we make an affirmative case for policymakers to approach integration as a shared experience of life transition instead of an independent set of population-specific issues.

Modern America does not make integrating into communities easy. From the decline in religious groups and non-religious community groups, to the isolating nature of our housing and neighborhoods, to our historically low levels of interpersonal trust, we have fewer organic relationships and communities to welcome us when we arrive. For veterans, immigrants, and formerly incarcerated people, they must both answer existential questions — "Who am I now? Where do I belong? What's next?" — and do so in communities that have fewer support structures to help navigate these questions.[39] Plus, immigrants and the formerly incarcerated can be on the receiving end of stigma and distrust in many communities, leaving them with even more complicated experiences of community integration.[40] The end result, both for these specific transitioning populations and all newcomers, is an experience of integration fraught with heightened risks of alienation, isolation, and social sorting.

"If you ask people receiving social services what they need most—be they newly arrived refugees, returning veterans, returning citizens—it's often some type of integration into a social network, not necessarily just resources. What helps most? Actually integrating and building relationships between the broader community and the particular communities in need of social support."

- Pete Davis, Join or Die and the Democracy Policy Network

Every community has the potential to better support community integration—for all newcomers and specific transitioning populations—and policy can play an enabling role. Local governments can start by making communities more welcoming for all new residents, incorporating a "welcome lens" into their programs and practices, hiring a Welcome & Integration Lead to coordinate the integration of new residents, and activating their neighborhood leadership to be responsible for welcoming neighbors into their communities. Local policymakers can also fund and host specific supports for veterans, formerly incarcerated people, and immigrants—such as community circles and peer-based initiatives—providing a soft landing for these transitioning populations.

Philanthropy and the federal government can accelerate these efforts, allocating more intentional resources for community integration activities, funding trainings to help policy and community practitioners cultivate welcoming skills, and facilitating cross-population coordination and convening for stakeholders that are typically siloed in support of specific transitioning populations.

Despite the potential of these policy efforts, they are no panacea for creating more integration-friendly communities. Ultimately, it will take buy-in from neighbors and community groups to build the culture and structures that make the places they call home more welcoming.

What Local & State Government Can Do

As the most proximate level of government to community members, local governments are on the frontlines of facilitating welcome and integration. Local governments can promote the integration of all new residents by approaching welcome as a lens that can be applied across programs, personnel, and neighborhoods. Local and state governments can also drive targeted support for transitioning populations, hosting community circles and peer programs for veterans, immigrants, and formerly incarcerated people. By approaching welcoming holistically, local government can help provide a softer landing for newcomers and those who are returning.[i]

Apply a cross-cutting "welcome lens" for policies, programs, and practices. Within a broader focus on connection, local government can adopt a cross-cutting "welcome lens," adapting their policies, programs, and practices with an orientation toward helping newcomers integrate into their communities. This could involve government both auditing their practices and programs, and identifying how they can be adjusted to better support new residents of all stripes. For example, local governments—in partnership with neighborhood or community leaders—can start the practice of offering welcome kits to all new residents within their first few weeks of moving in.[41] Local government could also apply this welcome lens to specific transitioning populations—veterans, immigrants, and the formerly incarcerated—determining more targeted supports across government for these groups. For example, libraries can run peer ambassador programs that pair new immigrants with immigrants who are more embedded in the community. This reorientation towards welcome could help all new residents feel more connected to their new homes, and could provide outsized benefits to transitioning veterans, immigrants, and the formerly incarcerated.

Capacity - Process *Opportunity - Remove Barriers*

Hire a staff member dedicated to welcome and integration. Local governments can hire a staff member focused on promoting the welcome and integration of new and returning residents, particularly veterans, immigrants, and the formerly incarcerated. This individual can help coordinate integration and welcome activities across government functions, forge partnerships with community groups, and lead community outreach to specific neighborhoods and populations. Most places can consider integration—both in general and for specific groups—as an interrelated set of practices and activities. However, in places with significant immigrant or veteran populations, for example, it may make sense for this staff member to focus on specific populations (e.g., Chicago's Office of New Americans, DC's Office of Veterans Affairs). Overall, such a staff member can help apply a welcome lens across government activities and within the community.

Capacity - People *Capacity - Process*

Incorporate a welcome and integration angle into neighborhood programming. Cities and towns can activate their neighborhood leadership and programming efforts—as described in the "Neighborhoods" section—to incorporate a welcome and integration angle. Neighborhood leaders can add the responsibilities of welcoming new residents to their neighborhoods, delivering the welcome kit and connecting them to neighbors, activities, and other resources. Local governments can also create specific micro-grant opportunities focused on welcoming and integration, enabling neighborhood leaders and neighbors to create activities to connect newcomers to their communities.

Capacity - People *Capacity - Process* *Participation - Make Participatory*

[i] *Note: Stable housing and employment are foundational needs for transitioning populations. However, these are entire policy domains in and of themselves, so we elected to exclude them for clarity's sake.*

Support community circles for immigrants, veterans, and the formerly incarcerated. State and local governments can play a role in funding and hosting welcome circles for immigrants, veterans, and formerly incarcerated people who are new to the community or returning to it. Such welcome circles can provide these transitioning populations with a soft landing, offering an immediate avenue for social support, helping with navigating local government and community resources, and connecting them with long-term opportunities for community involvement. These circles can be hosted and coordinated by local government (e.g., personnel like the Welcome & Integration Lead; institutions like libraries, community centers, and schools), community groups, or a mix of the two. Likewise, government can partially fund these initiatives through state and local agency budgets and relevant federal sources (e.g., VA and DoD funding).

Opportunity - Boost Supply *Participation - Target Groups* *Connection - Overall*

Promote peer-based initiatives for transitioning populations. State and municipal government can promote peer-based initiatives that offer both social and informational support for transitioning populations. This can include 1-to-1 or small group mentorship/navigator programs, which pair transitioning veterans, formerly incarcerated people, and immigrants with peers who have successfully navigated transitioning into their community. This can also involve supporting activity-based and peer support clubs for these groups—along with the families of transitioning veterans and the incarcerated—that include both those who are new to the community and who are well-integrated. Much like the community circles, government can refer transitioning populations to these programs, offer space to host them, and contribute dollars to these initiatives through state and local agency budgets, as well as relevant federal funding sources.

Opportunity - Boost Supply *Participation - Target Groups* *Connection - Overall*

CASE STUDY

Vermont's Circles of Support & Accountability (CoSA)

Vermont's CoSA model surrounds a returning citizen with a circle of community volunteers who help them work through the challenges involved with re-entering their community.[42] CoSA circles operate from Community Justice Centers across Vermont, are supported by state Department of Corrections funding, and typically meet weekly for at least one year. CoSA alumni report higher rates of community connection and re-offend at significantly lower levels than formerly incarcerated individuals who do not participate in the program.[43]

Learn more about VT's CoSA model here

CASE STUDY

Brooklyn Public Library's Welcome Home Initiative

The Brooklyn Public Library's Welcome Home initiative offers "practical and emotional support from people who've been there and know firsthand what reentry is like."[44] The program includes a few key pillars: access to resources, 1-to-1 peer navigator services, and monthly peer-support dinners. While the New York Public Library system is the most well-resourced in the U.S., such an initiative could be modified and translated to other municipalities in support of formerly incarcerated people.

Learn more about BPL's Welcome Home Initiative

What Philanthropy Can Do

Both through their funding and convening capacities, philanthropy can encourage local government and community groups to adopt a holistic welcome and integration approach. Funders can support various initiatives that de-silo populations and incorporate a welcome lens, including government and community programs, certification initiatives tied to municipalities' level of welcoming, trainings for local practitioners to cultivate welcoming skills and practices, and cross-population learning networks. Such investments can enable and build momentum around the adoption of welcoming practices within communities:

Incorporate a welcome and integration lens into funding priorities and grantee support. Philanthropy can incorporate a welcome and integration lens—potentially as part of a broader connection lens—into their funding priorities and support for grantees. This could entail funding pilots for local government to apply a welcome and integration lens into policy, programs, and personnel. It could also include building a holistic portfolio around integration, funding community groups that (1) support veterans, immigrants, and/or formerly incarcerated people, and (2) incorporate welcoming practices into their existing programs and activities. By applying this integration lens to funding and support, philanthropy can help proliferate practices of welcoming across local government and community groups.

Capacity - Funding *Opportunity - Boost Supply*

Participation - Target Groups

Encourage municipalities to become more welcoming through certification initiatives. Philanthropy can support organizations like Welcoming America that certify cities and towns based on their level of "welcoming."[45] Such certifications provide municipalities with milestones that are tied to certain welcoming criteria, encouraging them to incorporate practices of welcome and integration while providing an opportunity for municipalities to celebrate their achievements. Funders could encourage these certification initiatives to broaden their aperture beyond immigrants to include veterans and the formerly incarcerated. Alternatively, they can fund independent welcoming certifications for immigrants, veterans, and formerly incarcerated people while encouraging them to actively collaborate. They could also nudge these groups to use more politically inclusive language and less progressive-coded language, inviting in rather than alienating the moderate and conservative working-class communities that welcome a significant share of immigrants, veterans, and formerly incarcerated people.

Capacity - Process *Opportunity - Improve Quality*

Participation - Target Groups

Support trainings to make communities more welcoming and integration-friendly. Cities, towns, neighborhoods, and community groups that want to become more welcoming—both overall and for transitioning populations—may benefit from training support. Such trainings could cover the interpersonal skills of welcoming, cultural competencies for engaging with specific transitioning populations, and practices for providing emotional and spiritual care. To the extent possible, these trainings should be delivered by peer community leaders, rather than out-of-town experts. Funders can support these trainings to boost communities' capacity to become more welcoming, integration-friendly places.

Capacity - Funding *Opportunity - Improve Quality*

Participation - Target Groups

Create cross-population learning networks to cultivate a holistic integration field. Philanthropy can play a role in facilitating cross-population connection and peer learning among policymakers and practitioners committed to helping veterans, immigrants, and formerly incarcerated people integrate into their communities. Traditionally, these policymakers and practitioners only engage with peers focused on their specific population. However, considering the overlapping challenges that each of these groups face as they integrate into communities, there is an opportunity for cross-population learning and collaboration. These learning networks could help to break these practitioners out of their silos and cultivate a more holistic field of integration.

Capacity - People *Opportunity - Improve Quality* *Participation - Target Groups*

CASE STUDY

Welcoming America's Certified Welcoming Initiative

Welcoming America's "Certified Welcoming" standard encourages municipalities to become more welcoming places for immigrants.[46] The "carrot" of public recognition as a "Certified Welcoming" community provides an incentive to begin. The process of cross-sector collaboration on welcoming helps communities identify strengths, gaps, and opportunities for improvement. The outside audit—assessing cities and towns against several criteria for a welcoming place—promotes fidelity to these goals and opportunity areas. Welcoming America's certification process includes multiple levels of welcoming—ranging from a baseline of one-star to a pinnacle of five stars—to encourage a trajectory of continued improvement.[47]

Learn more about the "Certified Welcoming" standard here

What Federal Government Can Do

Because federal funding streams contribute to the siloing of populations and solutions, they can play a role in de-siloing welcome and integration activities. When it comes to funding, the federal government can both bolster investments in existing integration initiatives for transitioning populations, and create pilot funding opportunities for local governments to incorporate broad-based welcome practices. The federal government can also leverage its coordination and convening capabilities, encouraging cross-population engagement and a more proactive approach to welcome and integration within communities:

Leverage funding to encourage more integration-friendly communities. The funding levers of the federal government can help encourage a holistic welcome and integration lens within communities. This could include providing pilot funding specifically for local government and community groups to incorporate welcoming and integration practices into new or existing programs. The federal government could also target existing funding streams—across the VA, DHS, DoJ, and other agencies—that can be more easily applied to support community circles, peer groups, and other community-involved integration activities. Finally, the federal government can (a) identify existing CoPs for government grantees where a welcome and integration lens can be applied, and (b) create new CoPs tied to welcoming and integration focused funding streams. This shift in how the government funds integration-related activities can begin to both encourage a welcome and integration lens at the local level and de-silo efforts to support veterans, formerly incarcerated people, and immigrants.

Capacity - Funding *Opportunity - Boost Supply*

Participation - Target Groups

Coordinate across agencies to better support communities' integration efforts. Through the federal government's interagency coordination powers, it can support local communities to facilitate integration better. This could involve standing up interagency committees that prioritize opportunities for agencies to incorporate a welcome and integration lens into their programming and oversight, and better coordinate funding streams. Administrations have undertaken similar efforts in the past in response to crises, such as Operation Allies Welcome following the fall of Kabul.[48] However, the federal government can broaden the focus beyond refugees to include veterans and the formerly incarcerated, and pursue a more proactive rather than reactive approach to integration. This would help break down silos across government supports for immigrants, veterans, and formerly incarcerated people, allowing these efforts to be seen as a broader integration project.

Capacity - People

Promote cross-population connection and learning among policymakers and practitioners. The White House, executive agencies, and Congress can leverage their engagement and convening powers to promote connection and peer learning among local policymakers and practitioners working to help veterans, immigrants, and the formerly incarcerated integrate into their communities. Currently, such convening efforts happen in silos: veterans engagement leaders convene veterans groups, immigrant engagement leaders convene immigrant and refugee groups, and criminal justice leaders convene criminal justice groups. By beginning to engage and convene these groups together through the lens of welcome and integration, government can model this approach to be adopted by local communities and facilitate cross-population learning and collaboration. They can also help surface needs and supports for groups who represent multiple populations—formerly incarcerated veterans, formerly incarcerated immigrants, and immigrants who are veterans.

Capacity - People *Opportunity - Improve Quality*

Participation - Target Groups

CASE STUDY

Federal Funding for Community Integration

The federal government offers several funding streams that can be used to support the integration of veterans, immigrants, and formerly incarcerated people into their communities. The VA and DoD offer tens of millions of dollars annually to help veterans transition into their communities through sports and physical activity, the arts, and peer support, among others.[49] Citizenship and Immigration Services, housed within DHS, offer $10-$20 million annually in "Citizenship and Integration Grants" to help immigrants integrate into their communities.[50] The DoJ provides approximately $10 million annually for community-based reentry programs, such as CoSAs, through the Second Chance Act funding stream.[51]

All of these funding sources have the potential to be expanded and made more accessible and flexible to encourage more community-involved approaches for integration.

Retirement & Older Adults: Promote the overall and intergenerational connectedness of older adults—both during and after retirement—through housing, service, and education.

"Older adults have just as much to give as they have to receive—whether in service to their communities, care for their neighbors, or education for younger generations. Our approach to policy can recognize the potential of this intergenerational reciprocity."

The transition into retirement and the older adult years can come with a sense of possibility and trepidation for what's to come in this later stage of the life course. Retirement can present the opportunity for new experiences, activities, and responsibilities, but it also can evoke existential questions of purpose and meaning, community and belonging, and identity and overall usefulness. The older adult years can be a time of great abundance—be it the abundance of caring for one's grandchildren or of giving back to one's community. But they also can be a period of great loss—of health and mobility, and of friends and life partners. Our ability to actively participate and contribute during this period of transition and change—and receive support from family, friends, and neighbors—can be the difference between flourishing and struggling in our later years.

Despite significant government investments to support older adults' connectedness, the experience of Americans' older adult years is often defined by both overall isolation and disconnection from younger generations. HHS has an entire Administration for Community Living (ACL) with a primary goal of helping older adults, "live where they choose, with the people they choose, and with the ability to participate fully in their communities."[52] Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) in many communities already provide support services and programming to bolster the social connection among older adults. Still, older adults have been acutely impacted by the forces shaping community life over the past 50-plus years—from the isolating design of our neighborhoods, to the socioeconomic and generational sorting of our housing and associational life, to the siloing and individualization of care—and policy responses have not kept up with the scale of these changes. As a result, older adults—particularly those with lower incomes, health challenges and disabilities, and men—are the most socially isolated group in American life.[53] Moreover, when it comes to intergenerational connection, today's older adults have fewer opportunities to participate and connect with younger generations than they have at any time in our nation's history.[54]

> *"So many of the institutions we built for older adults—from retirement communities, to lifelong learning groups—were animated by communitarian ideals, but oftentimes ended up separating older adults from the rest of society ... Old and young are the future of together: living together, learning together, working together, and caring together."*
>
> *- Marc Freedman, CoGenerate and Yale School of Management*

Policymakers can go much further in their efforts to reduce isolation and boost the overall and intergenerational connectedness of older adults. Through the AAAs, state and local government leaders can prioritize the planning and coordination of activities to support participation and connection among older adults. State and local governments can likewise activate the housing sector to promote connection for older adults: encouraging nursing homes and affordable housing to prioritize connection, reforming zoning to enable more intergenerational neighborhoods, and experimenting with intergenerational cohousing models. All levels of government can create more opportunities for older adults to serve their communities, provide care for young children, and offer companionship for fellow older adults in need. And all levels of government can create more education and community learning opportunities for older adults—both through educational benefits and grant funding—helping them navigate the transition to retirement and creating avenues for intergenerational connection.

Notably, most of these policies are not top-down, narrowly defined solutions for older adults. Rather, they involve the broad reinvigoration and reimagining of our civic infrastructure to promote intergenerational participation and reconnection. Older adults have just as much to give as they have to receive—whether in service to their communities, care for their neighbors, or education for younger generations. Our approach to policy can recognize the potential of this intergenerational reciprocity.

What State & Local Government Can Do

The Older Americans Act of 1965 authorizes, regulates, and funds a nationwide network of AAAs, which now include 57 state agencies and 665 local agencies.[55] As a result of this legislation, state and local governments manage most of the planning and coordination related to older adults. States and municipalities have several high priority opportunities to strengthen connection for older adults, including connecting older adults through the housing sector, engaging older adults to serve and provide care in their communities, promoting ongoing education and community learning opportunities, and ensuring transportation is available to enable older adults to participate in their communities.

Incorporate isolation prevention into planning and coordination supports for older adults. States and municipalities can play a primary role in the planning and coordination of supports for older adults. States can develop a Multi-Sector Plans for Aging (MPA), which is a "cross-sector, state-led strategic planning process, [resulting] in a roadmap that can help states transform the infrastructure and coordination of services for their rapidly aging population."[56] These plans can ensure the rapid and holistic coordination of services across state agencies, including services to prevent social isolation. Utah's MPA, for example, assigns people in its state bureaucracy to be responsible for the priorities of, "Identifying and providing connection opportunities for socially isolated individuals."[57] Moreover, municipalities and counties can establish local-level AAAs to complement the efforts of state agencies while accommodating the particular needs of their community's older adults. These local AAAs can be especially helpful in places with rapidly growing populations of older adults (i.e., FL, VT, etc.), where different jurisdictions will have significant, distinctive needs.

Capacity - Process

Reorient housing policy to promote overall and intergenerational connection. State and local government can help make housing in their communities places of connection for older adults, rather than isolation. Because states are responsible for enforcing the quality and safety of nursing home facilities, they can ensure that they take on social isolation as part of this enforcement mandate. State and local housing authorities can incorporate social connection and community participation into their plans for the design, programming, and governance of affordable housing developments, just as NYC has done through their Age Friendly NYC Commission.[58] State and local government can also reform their zoning laws to enable and incentivize more ADUs, cottages, and cohousing projects to be developed—each of which would allow older adults to live more communally across generations with family members or neighbors.[ii]

Opportunity - Improve Quality *Opportunity - Boost Supply* *Connection - Bridging*

Activate older adults to provide service and care within their communities. State and local governments can ensure that their civic engagement and service initiatives both serve older adults in need and engage older adults as a resource to serve their communities. This could include state-level service initiatives, such as California's Experience Corps—based on AARP's long-running model—which promotes (a) intergenerational volunteer opportunities for older adults to mentor and support children, and (b) peer-support services to older adults experiencing isolation or disability.[59] Local governments can also leverage zoning to encourage senior centers and housing to be co-located with early childhood programs, creating daily opportunities for older adults to provide care for young children.[60] Such efforts can activate older adults to provide much-needed service and care in their communities, cultivate purpose during retirement, and build intergenerational bonds.

Opportunity - Boost Supply *Participation - Target Groups* *Connection - Bridging*

[ii] *See "Housing" section for more detailed information on zoning reform.*

Provide intergenerational education and learning opportunities. Local and state governments can support education opportunities within communities, helping older adults navigate their transition to retirement and promoting outlets for intergenerational learning. For example, Virginia's "Senior Citizen Higher Education Act" allows older adults (age 60+) to enroll in classes at all Virginia state and community colleges—for credit and free of charge—if certain conditions are met.[61] State and local arts councils often offer funding to community arts organizations for "creative aging" initiatives, with a specific emphasis on providing older adults access to classes and workshops.[62] State and local workforce agencies can fund programs for recently retired older adults to mentor apprentices who are looking to enter and build skills in the same trade or craft. Applying this intergenerational learning lens to state and local programs can foster intergenerational connection while supporting the particular needs of communities.

Opportunity - Boost Supply *Participation - Target Groups* *Connection - Bridging*

Mobilize transportation systems to remove barriers to participation. While every level of government has some amount of responsibility for helping older adults reduce isolation through adequate transportation, transit authorities most often reside at the state level. Consequently, state governments and their local government partners can mobilize their transportation systems to promote participation and connection among older adults. According to the National Center for Mobility Management, which commissioned a 2019 study to review opportunities to leverage transportation to reduce social isolation among older adults, states should focus on three principles: (1) making transportation for seniors affordable, (2) financing it through a variety of funding sources (private and public), and (3) coordinating it centrally at the appropriate level—whether that be state or local depending on the size of the population.[63] Importantly, these transportation investments would provide outsized benefits for older adults who have fewer financial means and/or are living with disabilities.

Capacity - Funding *Opportunity - Remove Barriers* *Participation - Target Groups*

CASE STUDY

Reducing Nursing Home Isolation in NJ

NJ's Office of the Long Term Care Ombudsman is responsible for oversight of all long-term care facilities in the state. **In 2020, this office launched its "Social Isolation Project," which makes unannounced visits to facilities in its mandate, with a specific focus on ensuring residents are able to socialize and communicate.**[64] Through this project, members of the Long Term Care Ombudsman team also work with facility staff to provide resources to decrease social isolation, helping to equip them to follow through on this mandate.

Learn more about NJ's Social Isolation Project here

What the Federal Government Can Do

The federal government can bolster community participation and connection for older adults, both through the welfare state and service and education initiatives. The federal government funds state programs on aging via grants, sets standards for Medicare and Medicaid-funded nursing facilities, and creates the laws and regulations for the various AAAs. To that end, the federal government can play a strong oversight role of states, drafting legislation and modifying rules to account for older adults' participation and connection. Beyond oversight and rulemaking, the federal government can also create opportunities for older adults to provide intergenerational service and care, and unlock educational benefits to help older adults enroll in higher education opportunities.

Offer funding for AAAs to promote connection and reduce isolation. Policymakers can continue to tackle social isolation through regulatory reform and legislation. In February of 2024, the ACL issued updated rules for the Older Americans Act of 1965.[65] According to this updated guidance, for AAAs to be considered for funding through the legislation, their plans must incorporate services that address social isolation. Efforts at new legislation discretely aimed at reducing social isolation among older adults could also improve connection. This includes the "Addressing Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults (SILO) Act," which would unlock $62.5M in annual funding to "improve social connection and reduce isolation among older adults."[66] As with other legislation that aims to serve older adults, execution would happen through AAAs.

Capacity - Funding *Capacity - Process* *Connection - Overall*

Expand opportunities for intergenerational service and care. Similar to local and state governments, the federal government can activate older Americans as resources to provide service and care—as much as supporting them as a community in need of service. This could include growing AmeriCorps Seniors, which matches and funds older adults (age 55+) to serve in their communities, and currently engages 100,000+ older adults annually.[67] It could also include initiatives that facilitate the age integration of service, developing service programs that intentionally bring older adults and young people to serve together, shoulder-to-shoulder.[68] Finally, it could involve developing new initiatives, such as the Caring Corps, which imagines engaging hundreds of thousands more older adults to support their communities' caregiving needs for children in their early years of life.[69] Such service-oriented care could be compensated and provided in settings both informal (e.g., neighborhood groups) and formal (e.g., preschools), thereby strengthening communities' care infrastructure and creating another pathway for intergenerational connection.

Opportunity - Boost Supply *Participation - Target Groups* *Connection - Bridging*

Help older adults navigate retirement by providing benefits to return to school. The federal government can facilitate a connected, supportive transition into retirement by providing benefits for older adults to go back to school. Funding for these benefits could take various forms, such as offering education benefits tied to service as described in the "Adult Transition" section, or providing early social security benefits if they are specifically used to pay for education.[70] The choice of how to use these early benefits would be up to older adults, and it could range from enrolling in a one-year master's program to completing a craft-based apprenticeship program. Outside of the provision of benefits, the federal government can also encourage state higher education systems to allow for tuition-free enrollment in their state and community colleges. Such benefits—and the access they provide—could help older adults gain momentum as they enter retirement, cultivate relationships across generational differences, and experience meaningful social support in a period of transition.

Opportunity - Remove Barriers *Participation - Target Groups* *Connection - Bridging*

CASE STUDY

AmeriCorps Seniors

AmeriCorps Seniors, which is AmeriCorps' signature program for older adults (age 55+), provides ~140,000 volunteer opportunities for older adults each year.[71] The Foster Grandparent program connects older adults with high needs students to support their academic achievement.[72] The RSVP program allows older adults to choose when, how, and where they want to serve in their communities.[73] The Senior Companion program engages AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers to support other older adults who have difficulties with daily living tasks.[74] AmeriCorps Seniors has been found to promote the well-being, skills, and sense of belonging and purpose of their participating volunteers.

Check out AmeriCorps Seniors here

What Philanthropy Can Do

Despite the high levels that government already spends on older adults, philanthropy can play a meaningful role in supporting this group, particularly to promote participation and connection within communities. Funders can apply an intergenerational lens to their investments and support of grantees, promote experimentation around emerging intergenerational housing and care models, and prepare stakeholders to engage more effectively across generational lines.

Apply an intergenerational lens to funding decisions and grantee support. As foundations deepen their focus on regenerating connection within communities, they should emphasize integrating older adults rather than viewing them as a community to be served. The F4SC's Action Guide for Building Socially Connected Communities lists "creating intergenerational communities" as the first of 21 promising strategies for connection.[75] Along these lines, philanthropy can apply an intergenerational connection lens to their funding approach. This can involve a range of strategies, including intentionally funding initiatives that facilitate intergenerational participation and connection, supporting their grantees to incorporate an intergenerational angle into their efforts, and encouraging experimentation with new strategies for intergenerational engagement.

Capacity - Funding *Connection - Bridging*

Experiment with new housing and care models to foster intergenerational connection. Philanthropy, in partnership with state and local government, can pilot housing and care models to reduce social isolation among older adults and promote intergenerational connection. This could include experimenting with and helping expand intergenerational cohousing models, as described in the "Housing" section. It could also include facilitating pilot partnerships with cities to encourage intergenerational housing matches—similar to what Boston's Age Strong Commission and New Urban Mechanics have done with Nesterly.[76] Funders can also help empower older adults to provide care for young children, facilitating experiments that co-locate older adult housing with early childhood centers, embedding early childhood programs within housing and community centers for older adults, and engaging older adults living in neighborhoods to support their neighbors' child care needs.

Opportunity - Boost Supply *Participation - Target Groups* *Connection - Bridging*

Equip policymakers and practitioners to facilitate intergenerational engagement. As government, community groups, and neighbors engage more across generational lines, they will have myriad preparation needs, which philanthropy can help address. Funders can promote peer-to-peer learning by convening CoPs of local government and community practitioners who are intentionally advancing intergenerational connection. They can fund the development of guides and toolkits for incorporating an intergenerational lens into initiatives, and they can fund technical assistance for implementation support. Funders also have an opportunity to support training for those working on-the-ground—both practitioners who are engaging groups across intergenerational difference, and older adults who become engaged in supporting their community's care needs for children's early years of life.

Capacity - People *Capacity - Funding*

CASE STUDY

Generations United's Certifications & Technical Assistance

Generations United (GU) is a nonprofit focused on "[improving] the lives of children, youth, and older people through intergenerational collaboration, public policies, and programs for the enduring benefit of all."[77] **Two of GU's initiatives are specifically focused on equipping initiatives to facilitate intergenerational connection: the Intergenerational Program Certification and the Technical Assistance initiative.** GU's Intergenerational Program Certification encourages the development of outstanding intergenerational programs that connect younger and older people in the U.S., and recognizes their efforts through certifications.[78] GU's Technical Assistance team provides support for policymakers and practitioners to design, develop, and implement policies and programs that promote intergenerational connection.[79]

Enabling Conditions

Certain policy areas are not explicitly related to connection within communities but affect whether and how Americans experience it. While several factors impact American community life, three areas seem to have an outsized influence: work, technology, and local news. These enabling conditions matter—in many regards, they are the air we breathe—and they shape the nature of our civic opportunities, our agency to participate in them, and the quality of the connections we form. To holistically address the drivers of community connection through this policy framework, we must, therefore, account for these enabling conditions.

Unfortunately, work, technology, and local media ecosystems are all doing more to hinder participation and connection within communities than enable it. As work has become less stable, secure, and predictable for low-wage workers over the last half-century, it has become more difficult for many to spend time with family and participate in community. As big technology and media companies compete to monetize our finite attention, we spend less time in our communities and more time in front of screens. As outlets for local news and media continue to decline in local communities, neighbors trust each other less, participate less, and become less connected to the places they call home.

However, America's workplace environments and technology and media ecosystem can be reimagined to better enable participation and connection within communities. Policy can help establish more predictable and stable workplaces, creating the conditions for workers to spend more time with family and participate in their communities. Policy can help reverse the role of big tech and media in weakening Americans' relational lives and promote a tech and media ecosystem that facilitates more prosocial interactions. Policy can even contribute to regenerating America's local media ecosystem within communities, and re-envisioning it as a platform for participation, cooperation, and connection.

The foundational changes described in the first section can create the conditions for holistic, consistent, and durable policymaking to strengthen connection. Progress on these enabling conditions can ensure that the connection-related policies detailed throughout this framework benefit from more tailwinds—and face fewer headwinds—as they are implemented.

Work: Improve the stability and predictability of work, providing workers the agency to participate in community life and cultivate stronger connections outside of work.

"A future where all workers have stable and predictable work—and the agency to spend more time with their families and communities—must be driven by policy."

Because most working-age Americans spend the majority of their waking hours *inside* of the workplace, our experience of work significantly influences how, where, and with whom we spend our time *outside* of the workplace. The effect of work on our ability to participate in community and cultivate relationships outside of work is a function of two factors: *time* and *control*. The more time we spend working, the less time we can spend with family, friends, and community members. The more control we have over our schedules, the more flexibility we have to adapt work around our personal lives and the more we can plan our time outside of work.

Not all work is created equal, and the experience of work for those with college degrees and those without college degrees has become increasingly divergent over the past 50 years. More and more, workers with college degrees are sorted into high-wage, knowledge sector jobs, while workers without college degrees are funneled into low-wage, service and retail jobs.[1] A slew of factors has driven this broadening gulf, including globalization and the "China Shock,"[2] the financialization of the economy,[3] the decline of organized labor,[4] and the fissuring of the workplace.[5] These changes—and the sorting of work they have induced—are the consequence of intentional policy decisions to promote free trade, deregulate the financial system, and weaken worker protections.

The result of this sorting is not only broadening inequality in pay and benefits between high- and low-wage workers, but also a growing divide in control over leisure time. While knowledge work may involve significant levels of time investment, it typically provides a high level of control for workers over how they spend their time. In contrast, these low-wage jobs are often highly *precarious*—defined, in part, by less scheduling predictability and greater instability and insecurity—which leaves workers with far less agency over their personal time.[6] The unpredictability and instability of this precarious work hinders individuals from spending time with family, participating in community, and building relationships outside the workplace.[7]

A future where all workers have stable and predictable work—and the agency to spend more time with their families and communities—must be driven by policy. State and local governments can continue to build on the momentum around "fair workweek" and paid family leave policies, ensuring both more predictable schedules and paid time off for low-wage workers. The federal government can adopt these policies at scale when the bipartisan political will exists. Philanthropy can build on the bipartisan interest in these policies and cultivate the left-right coalition needed for broader policy proliferation, both at the state level and federally. Laissez-faire government policy has permitted work to encroach upon family and community life, particularly for America's low-wage workers. The government has a responsibility to enable all Americans to connect with the things that matter to them most: family, friends, and community.

"These kinds of precarious practices ... undermine the ability to form meaningful connections in your community. They undermine your ability to engage with nonwork organizations, whether those be schools or childcare centers or houses of worship or community organizations. These kinds of scheduling practices ... take all the control out of your life, and it's this control that is exactly what you need so that you can give in a more communal way to other things."

- Daniel Schneider, Harvard Kennedy School's Shift Project [8]

What Local & State Government Can Do

Local and state governments can play a leading role in implementing policy that promotes stability and predictability for workers. "Fair workweek" policies can facilitate scheduling predictability, paid family leave policies can allow workers to care for newborns and seriously ill loved ones, and worker boards can help workers realize these policies at a sectoral level. While typically framed as a progressive issue, such policies could also appeal to conservatives: the stability and predictability of work are fundamental for workers to be able to spend time with family, attend religious services, and participate in community life.

Pass "Fair Workweek" policies to improve schedule predictability. Local and state governments can pass "fair workweek" and "predictable scheduling" policies to improve the predictability and stability of low-wage workers' schedules. These policies have primarily been enacted in left-leaning cities and states, and their rationale and messaging have been focused on promoting worker stability, power, and rights. However, there is also a connection-related rationale for these policies that can hold bipartisan appeal: more stable and predictable work schedules enable low-wage workers to spend more time connecting with their communities and families.[9]

Participation - Promote Freedom *Participation - Target Groups* *Connection - Overall*

Advance paid family leave policies to provide paid time off for family care. Local and state governments can also pass paid family leave policies to enable workers to receive paid time off to bond with a new child or care for a seriously ill loved one.[10] Considering the generous leave policies that higher-wage workers already receive, such paid family leave policies would provide outsized benefits for low-wage workers, who often do not receive any form of family leave. This would ensure that these workers have the opportunity to spend time bonding with their families and communities when their care is needed most.

Participation - Promote Freedom *Participation - Target Groups* *Connection - Overall*

Establish worker boards to set industry- and geography-wide workplace standards. Local and state policymakers can establish worker boards—governmental bodies that bring together representatives of workers, employers, and the public to set workplace standards covering all workers in a particular industry and geography.[11] Such bodies, like the Farm Laborers Board in New York and Industry Standard Board in Detroit, can serve as avenues for worker participation and pathways to advocate for scheduling and leave policies at an industry-wide scale.[12] Worker boards offer benefits similar to those of sectoral unions and bargaining, but unlike unions, the government can play a more direct role in creating worker boards.

Capacity - People *Participation - Promote Freedom* *Participation - Make Participatory*

CASE STUDY

"Fair Workweek" Policies Across the U.S.

In recent years, "fair workweek" and "predictable scheduling" policies have gained momentum as a policy solution to promote stability for workers. Many major cities have passed these ordinances in the past decade, including Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia.[13] At the state-level, Oregon has enacted a statewide predictable scheduling ordinance,[14] Connecticut and Colorado have been actively considering a similar statewide policy,[15] and more limited "right to request" statutes have become law in Vermont and New Hampshire.[16]

What Philanthropy Can Do

Philanthropy can bridge the research and advocacy gap on the relationship between precarious work, community and family life, and connection. Funders can support the foundational research to better understand how unstable work affects Americans' relational lives. They can also help with left-right coalition-building, particularly around the pro-worker policies that strengthen families and communities.

Fund research on the relationship between precarious work and connection. Because the research connecting unpredictable and precarious work to lower levels of community participation, time spent with family, and social connection is surprisingly limited, philanthropy has an opportunity to fund research to develop a more robust evidence base. Specifically, funders can focus on supporting research that explores the relationship between precarious work and social connection. Better research in this realm could inform the targeting of policies and expand the coalition of potential state and local partners.

Capacity - Process *Capacity - Funding*

Support right-left coalition-building to advance stability for workers. Philanthropy can help coalesce the emerging conservative ecosystem interested in advancing worker stability and connect them with the existing progressive ecosystem. This could involve funding a consortium for these thinkers and policymakers, allowing them to meet regularly and facilitate relationship-building, policy development, and coalition-building around these policies. It could also involve creating legislative language around these policies that could appeal more to moderate and conservative-leaning municipalities and states.

Capacity - People *Capacity - Funding*

BIG IDEA

Measuring Connection with the Shift Project

The Shift Project, which is based out of the Harvard Kennedy School and UCSF, collects survey data on scheduling practices and well-being from thousands of retail workers employed at large firms.[17] As the largest source of data on work scheduling for hourly service workers, Shift's research and findings have facilitated state and local level policy change to promote stability for workers. **Shift has the opportunity to include connection-related measures in its surveys, and, in turn, deepen the evidence base on the relationship among precarious work, community and family life, and social connection.**[18]

Read more about The Shift Project's opportunity to measure connection here

What the Federal Government Can Do

While the momentum around policies that advance worker stability is concentrated at the state and local levels, federal actions can, in time, promote national policy adoption. Notably, the feasibility of passing and implementing such policies will be contingent upon the formation of a bipartisan coalition of lawmakers to support them.

Pass a federal "fair workweek" policy. As a bipartisan coalition develops over time, local- and state-level "fair workweek" policies have the potential to be adopted at the federal level. This could involve examining the efficacy of different state and local policies and incorporating the most effective principles and policy design elements at the federal level. Congresswoman DeLauro and Senator Warren recently attempted to advance "fair workweek" policies at the federal level by reintroducing the "Schedules that Work Act," which is designed to establish a federal right to predictable, stable schedules.[19] While this legislation may provide the policy foundation for future bills, it currently lacks the bipartisan support to be passed.

Participation - Promote Freedom *Participation - Target Groups* *Connection - Overall*

Advance a federal "family benefit." The federal government can institutionalize the paid family leave policies that have been passed at the state and local levels. Rather than advancing legislation exclusively focused on paid family leave—which has historically lacked bipartisan support—these policies could be included in a broader "family benefit" that has bipartisan momentum, as evidenced by the overwhelming passage of the Tax Relief for American Families and Workers Act.[20] This "family benefit," in its full form, would likely include an expanded Child Tax Credit and additional subsidies for home- and community-based child care, along with paid family leave.

Participation - Promote Freedom *Participation - Target Groups* *Connection - Overall*

Support the development of state- and local-level worker boards. The federal government can support the development of worker boards at the state and local levels. Most directly, the DOL could offer funding—first for pilot projects, then potentially at a larger scale—for state and local governments to establish worker boards. The federal government can, likewise, play an enabling role, from creating templates and frameworks to help state and local leaders launch and run worker boards to convening state and local stakeholders involved in worker boards to diffuse practices and facilitate broader policy adoption.

Capacity - People *Participation - Make Participatory*

Big Tech & Media: Reform big tech and media ecosystem to enable—rather than compete with and hinder—community participation and connection.

"Big technology and media platforms are tools—just as they can be oriented to fray the social fabric of communities, they can also be reoriented to help knit it back together."

Big technology and media platforms are the large-scale companies that mediate our digital lives and influence our offline lives. They include the platform giants like Meta, Google, Amazon, Apple, and Microsoft, along with the major media players like Netflix, Disney, Comcast, AT&T, News Corporation, and Paramount. These platforms profoundly shape all aspects of the human experience—and, particularly, our relational lives—both online and offline, interpersonally and communally.

The business models of big tech and media are built on capturing as much of our leisure time as possible, which competes directly for the time we spend with others offline, both one-to-one and in community. In the late 1990s, Robert Putnam identified the competition created by the introduction of television—what he called "the only leisure activity that seems to inhibit participation outside the home"—as the primary driver of the decline in community participation.[21] These days, the competition generated by smartphones, streaming services, social media platforms, and emerging AI companions—designed by behavioral scientists to capture as much of our attention as possible—makes the threat of television seem quaint.

But it is not just about time displacement; big tech and media platforms also fundamentally shape our relationships with others and the places we call home. The content we consume on these platforms, often designed to promote engagement through either amusement or outrage, influences how we relate to people online and in real life.[22] The very nature of these mediums, apart from the content on them, directs how, where, and to whom we pay attention.[23] And their mass, cross-geography scale collapses our context,[24] simultaneously directing our attention to the national rather than the local and affecting how we relate to our neighbors and communities. These dynamics have contributed to population-level declines in interpersonal trust, social skills, awareness of local issues, and community participation.[25]

"Technology has changed the scale of political community. When you had limitations on travel and communication, you had smaller, more robust communities ... Now, all that exists is you competing in the market as an individual. This is widely alienating—especially if you aren't just competing in your small city, but now the global market."

- Samuel Kimbriel, The Aspen Institute Philosophy & Society Initiative

Big technology and media platforms are tools—just as they can be oriented to fray the social fabric of communities, they can also be reoriented to help knit it back together. But shifting the large-scale technology and media ecosystems that mediate our experience of modern life will require significant policy change. Unfortunately, policy action, particularly at the federal level, has failed to prevent the harms big tech and media have done to Americans' relational lives in recent decades. Moreover, the current policy space dedicated to reforming big tech and media is significantly underdeveloped and outmatched compared to the magnitude of the challenges affecting individuals and communities.

Federal policymakers must play catch up and step into their critical role in reforming big tech and media to strengthen connection within communities. Through our interviews and secondary research, it became clear that certain universal baseline regulations should be implemented—including promoting mandatory interoperability and developing accountability and oversight mechanisms—to create more fertile conditions for specific prosocial policies. Beyond these baseline changes, the federal government can target policies to mitigate the adverse effects of technology on Americans' relational and communal lives. Passing "right to disconnect" legislation, taxing companies that monetize people's attention, and promoting bridging-based recommenders on social media platforms could all be effective places to begin. Finally, with artificial general intelligence posing an evolving threat to human relationships, government and philanthropy can help prevent its potential harms and shape it to be developed in a more prosocial and pro-community manner.

This package of policy actions represents a starting point, not an endpoint. Significantly more policy development is needed—both to mitigate the damage that has already been done, and to avert future harms.

What Federal Government Can Do: Baseline

The federal government must play catch up in establishing baseline regulations for the technology and media platforms that it has failed to rein in. Without these foundations in place, it will limit the potential of targeted policymaking to promote a prosocial and pro-community technological ecosystem.

Promote mandatory interoperability across social media platforms. The federal government can advance legislation, such as the ACCESS Act,[26] to promote mandatory interoperability across social media platforms. Proponents of mandatory interoperability requirements tout their benefits for facilitating competition. Not only would this give more prosocial platforms a fighting chance to win against the Facebooks and Twitters of the world, it would also enable public-spirited, prosocial platforms to coexist better alongside existing private ones. However, mandatory interoperability policies should be seen as a starting point: prosocial platforms may not be able to compete with Facebook and TikTok, and even if they can compete, significantly more needs to be done.

Capacity - Process

Increase the accountability of technology platforms. The federal government can introduce legislation to increase the oversight, transparency, and accountability of technology platforms. Congress can pass legislation like the bipartisan Platform Accountability and Transparency Act,[27] which would increase the amount and type of data—including data on advertising, viral content, and ranking algorithms—that social media companies share with researchers and the public.[28] Congress can also re-establish the Office of Technology Assessment to help legislators assess the effects of new technology, prevent harmful technologies from being introduced, and increase accountability for existing technologies.[29] Finally, Congress can consider introducing legislation—along the lines of the Digital Platform Commission Act—to create a sector-specific regulator of technology platforms.[30] Such legislation would help account for the fact that existing agencies have neither the resources nor expertise to regulate a sector posing such novel and emerging challenges. These accountability mechanisms could mitigate the negative effects of technology—both current ones and those that emerge in the future—on human relationships and community.

Capacity - Process

What Federal Government Can Do: Targeted

In addition to addressing baseline issues in the media and technology ecosystem, the federal government can advance more targeted policies—both to mitigate the harms of technology on Americans' relational lives and promote more prosocial options. Considering the pervasiveness of big tech and its rapid evolution, the policies we identify below represent a non-comprehensive range of targeted interventions.

Pass "right to disconnect" policies to protect workers' personal time. The federal government can pass "right to disconnect" legislation—modeled after similar policies in other developed countries—that discourages employers from contacting employees outside of work hours. Right to disconnect policies can take many forms. Recently passed legislation in Australia imposes fines on employers if they penalize employees for not responding to digital communications outside of work hours.[31] Ontario, Canada takes a lighter touch approach, requiring businesses with more than 25 employees to have a written policy allowing workers to disconnect outside regular work hours.[32] Adopting such policies in the U.S. would benefit knowledge workers more than blue-collar, service, and retail workers. However, these policies could offer a meaningful step in preventing work communication technologies from further seeping into Americans' personal and communal lives.

Capacity - Process *Participation - Promote Freedom*

Tax technology and media companies that monetize Americans' attention. Companies that monetize Americans' attention—including streaming services and social media giants—directly compete with community and family life for our leisure time. The more time we spend in front of screens, the less time we spend participating and connecting with others. Digital advertisers should both (1) lose their current 100% tax deduction for advertising expenditures,[i] and (2) be affirmatively taxed for their advertisements that allow social media companies to monetize users' attention.[33] Streaming services, at a minimum, should be taxed in the same way cable and satellite providers are taxed.[34] Moreover, "attention harvesting" features, such as autoplay on streaming services and infinite scrolling on social media, should be regulated—not in a one-off manner, but through a broader standard that can be applied to current and future product features. Such efforts would be a starting point for rebalancing the playing field between community life and the companies harvesting our attention.

Capacity - Process *Participation - Promote Freedom*

Promote the development and adoption of bridging-based rankings. Bridging-based rankings and recommenders are a recommendation system for social media platforms that rewards content that helps bridge divides, leading to positive interactions across diverse audiences.[35] To start, the federal government could fund R&D to promote the development and deployment of such bridging-based systems. The federal government could also require that platforms report metrics on the extent to which they reward division. While bridging-based rankings are no panacea, they can help make online life more connected and less divisive, thus contributing to more connected and less divisive in-person interactions.

Capacity - Process *Capacity - Funding* *Connection - Bridging*

[i] *Notably, these tax deductions should be maintained and expanded for advertising with local news and media sources, both digital and print. We described this more in the following section.*

Develop governance frameworks to mitigate the social risks of generative AI. Considering the emerging risks that generative AI presents to human relationships and the broader social fabric, the federal government can facilitate non-partisan cross-sectoral research, convening, and coordination to proactively mitigate these risks. The purpose of these efforts can be to develop governance and regulatory frameworks that (a) protect individuals and communities from the potential social consequences of generative AI, and (b) promote prosocial approaches to developing and implementing generative AI technology.[36] At the time of writing, such efforts are underway with the Biden Administration's Executive Order on AI,[37] which includes a Blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights, and the development of a Risk Management Framework within the National Institute of Standards and Technology.[38]

Capacity - People *Capacity - Process*

CASE STUDY

Regulating Attention Markets

Though there has been much public criticism of the "attention economy," there have been few serious policy efforts to rein it in. Indeed, Columbia's Tim Wu has described the attention economy as the law's "blind spot."[39] **John Newman, a professor of antitrust at the University of Miami, is a notable exception: in his "Regulating Attention Markets" article, he offers a set of policy proposals to curb the attention economy.[40] In particular, Newman proposes an affirmative taxation on advertisements that monetize users' attention, the taxation of streaming services, and the regulation of "attention harvesting" features.** To provide further grounding for such policies, more research is needed to quantify the effects of the attention economy—both the economic deadweight losses and the social implications for families and communities.

What Philanthropy Can Do

Philanthropy can play a constructive role in shaping our technology and media ecosystem for the good of civic life. Considering how unprepared the federal government is to address the threats of AI, funders can lead efforts to mitigate these threats, particularly the potential of AI to replace human relationships. Philanthropy can also facilitate the development and proliferation of more prosocial platforms by funding, convening, and equipping technologists to build digital spaces for the public good.

Prevent AI from replacing human relationships. The rapid advancement of generative AI poses an emerging threat to human relationships, as chatbots like Replika that market themselves as replacements for friendships and romantic relationships have grown in recent years. There is a significant role for regulation to prevent AI from replacing human relationships, but policymakers do not know where to begin. As such, philanthropy can help develop this policy space, equipping policymakers to respond quickly and thoughtfully to this growing threat. For example, funders can support research-to-practice efforts, like those in the Allen Lab for Democracy Renovation,[41] with a specific focus on AI and human relationships. They can also convene researchers, AI executives, and policymakers to develop standards and regulations to mitigate the risks AI poses to human relationships. These efforts, among many other possibilities, should lead to proactive policy action to ensure AI does not replace human relationships.

Capacity - People *Capacity - Funding*

Promote growth of digital public spaces and civic online forums. Philanthropy can support the expansion and replication of "digital public spaces" that encourage more public-spirited, prosocial behavior—both online and in real life. This can include supporting efforts like New_Public, which aim to proliferate these sorts of spaces across the internet.[42] It can also include funding civic online forums (e.g., Front Porch Forum, CommonPlace), which offer a prosocial alternative to Nextdoor and Facebook.[43] These online forums are intentionally designed to promote participation, connection, and social trust—and research on their effectiveness has validated these outcomes. Funders can provide the expansion capital to promote the growth of civic online forums at a sustainable pace while they build viable business models. Philanthropy can also support efforts to facilitate peer learning networks for the local leaders driving these platforms, and to create toolkits for planting and replicating these forums elsewhere.

Capacity - Funding *Opportunity - Boost Supply* *Opportunity - Improve Quality*

Support efforts to promote the prosocial stewardship of digital communities. Considering the degree to which online groups facilitate connection, philanthropy can support efforts to promote the stewardship of these online communities. This could include several support options, ranging from hands-on to distributed. Funders can invest in CoPs, support groups, and trainings for community stewards to better facilitate online and in-person connection. Philanthropy can also support the creation and distribution of toolkits and other resources to provide online community managers with access to encourage more prosocial community stewardship. Such efforts could leverage the scale of online platforms to amplify the good of prosocial community stewardship.

Capacity - People *Opportunity - Improve Quality*

Help validate and promote the "exit to community" model. "Exiting to community" is a process whereby the ownership of technology platforms can transition from investor ownership to ownership by the people who rely on them most.[44] This approach has the potential to align the revenue, membership, and governance of the existing and emerging technology platforms that shape our lives. Funders can facilitate these community exits by helping to validate the model and promote broader adoption; this would likely involve providing the risk capital to prove that these models work at different levels of scale. Philanthropy can also play a role in promoting policy change to support capital allocation toward large-scale community ownership, which is, at present, a major barrier for exits to community.[45]

Capacity - Process *Participation - Make Participatory*

CASE STUDY

New_Public's Community & Neighborhood Stewards

New_Public has recently incubated two initiatives, a Community Stewards Guild and a Neighborhood Steward Fellowship, that equip digital community leaders to cultivate more prosocial digital public spaces. Given the size of certain online communities—like Facebook groups with 10,000+ members—their stewards have significant influence to shape online and offline life. New_Public is testing and learning alongside their community stewards, with the ultimate intent of distributing the practices they develop to online community leaders nationwide. More recently, New_Public created a Neighborhood Steward Fellowship, which is focused on supporting individuals who lead neighborhood-oriented digital public spaces—like Michael Wood-Lewis of the Front Porch Forum—to improve local cohesion, civic engagement, and trust.[46]

Learn more about New_Public's Neighborhood Steward Fellowship here

Local News & Media: Revitalize local news and media ecosystems to be more community-embedded, community-driven, and participatory.

"America needs a vision for its local media ecosystems that both regenerates it within communities and reimagines it to become a platform for participation ... The future of local news must not be separate from and created for communities; it must be integrated in and created by communities."

Our local news and media ecosystems profoundly shape how we relate to our neighbors, community institutions, and local government. This ecosystem comprises many forms of media, including local newspapers, online blogs and forums, TV news, and radio stations. Healthy local information ecosystems provide a myriad of community-level benefits. They promote a sense of connection and belonging to place, more participation in community institutions, and higher levels of interpersonal trust, while creating an essential lever for governmental and institutional accountability. When it comes to relationships in community, our local media ecosystems are the air we breathe. A deprived or polluted media environment will contribute to deprived or polluted relationships, while an abundant and healthy media environment will contribute to abundant and healthy relationships.

Unfortunately, the local media environments in many parts of the country have become polluted and starved of oxygen. Since the peak of local news in the 1990s, market conditions have forced more than 2,000 newspapers to close, local newsrooms have cut 50,000 jobs, and local papers have lost up to $40 billion in annual revenue.[47] Today, approximately 1,800 communities are considered news deserts—that is, places that have no local news outlets at all.[48] The decimation of local news has been perpetuated by a confluence of factors, including the rise of social media and targeted digital advertising along with the consolidation of newspaper ownership among private equity and hedge funds. This has led academics to deem the local news business model "defunct" and call the situation a "market failure."[49] But this is not just a business model problem; it is a fundamental threat to community life. The weakening of local media ecosystems has torn the social fabric of affected regions, reducing levels of community participation and eroding interpersonal and institutional trust.

America needs a vision for its local media ecosystems that both regenerates it within communities and reimagines it to become a platform for participation. This can begin with revitalizing and regenerating local news in the communities where it has withered. We must replant in local news deserts so that they can become forests, and we must prevent desertification in other regions. But that's not enough. We must also reimagine local news to be better than it was before. That means making it more community-embedded, more community-governed, more participatory, and more cooperative. The future of local news must not be separate from and created for communities; it must be integrated within and created by communities.

"The rise in social media and nationalization of news has been damaging on top of the withering of civic institutions. If civic institutions and local news are gone, what is a reliable, non-conspiratorial place to understand your community?"

- Lara Putnam, University of Pittsburgh

Policy and philanthropy are both vital to realizing this vision of a regenerated, reimagined local media landscape in the U.S. Regeneration can start on the demand-side: policymakers at all levels can introduce interventions, such as tax credits and vouchers, to encourage advertising revenue from small businesses and subscription revenue from community members. Such regenerative efforts will also require action on the supply-side, both "replanting" local news within communities and experimenting with new, sustainable local news models. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, policy and philanthropy can help reimagine local media to become more participatory. This could involve testing new community-embedded media models, integrating a lens of participation into how philanthropy evaluates and supports grantees, and, potentially, adapting government-related funding streams to encourage more community-embedded and participatory approaches to local media. The nature of the market failure of local media offers a strong rationale for these non-market actions. Still, these actions will only be successful if community members step up to participate in the regeneration of their local media ecosystems.

What Local & State Government Can Do

Local and state governments have become increasingly open to strengthening local news in their communities. Support for the business model of local news through tax credit policies may be necessary, but not sufficient. State and local actors can also consider how the revitalization of local news can become a more participatory, community-driven endeavor, creating local news vouchers and community media hubs that invite residents to cooperate with one another and shape their local information ecosystems.

Offer state tax credits for small businesses and local newsrooms. As a starting point, state governments can offer tax credits for small businesses and newsrooms in an effort to stabilize local news outlets.[50] Small businesses can be granted a certain amount of refundable tax credits annually, specifically for spending on advertising or sponsorships with local news organizations. Local newsrooms can receive a refundable employment tax credit to subsidize part of the cost of local reporters. Collectively, these tax credits can boost revenues for local news outlets while offsetting one of their core cost drivers.

Capacity - Funding

Provide residents with vouchers to spend on subscriptions to local news outlets. Local and state governments can encourage residents to become stewards of local news, offering vouchers for residents to spend on subscriptions to local news outlets. While municipalities and states can determine the exact structure of the subsidies, the overarching premise is that (a) individuals receive vouchers to (b) apply to qualifying outlets of their choice that (c) local or state governments then pay directly to the outlets.[51] These "local news dollars" can simultaneously open up a new revenue source for sustaining local news organizations while connecting (or reconnecting) residents with these organizations.

Capacity - Funding

Reimagine social infrastructure as hubs for creating community-driven news. Local and state government can reimagine their social infrastructure—public schools, libraries, community and regional colleges—to serve as hubs for participatory, community-driven news and programming. Community media operates by tapping into the people and third places that already exist in a community and activating them to become stewards of local news and media in their communities. This includes both utilizing existing community spaces and developing the programmatic pipelines that engage and prepare neighbors to participate as co-creators. Such community media hubs could be especially beneficial in regions that are experiencing local news deserts, helping to strengthen trust and connection by inviting in the community to create media and improve the local information ecosystem.[52]

Opportunity - Boost Supply *Participation - Make Participatory*

CASE STUDY

Local News Funding Act in DC & Democracy Vouchers in Seattle

The Local News Funding Act, introduced by the Washington, DC City Council in 2023, is the first municipal effort to put the vision for local news vouchers into practice.[53] The LNFA would dedicate 0.1% of the District's General Fund budget to support the program, which would establish a voucher system for residents and news organizations, as well as a Community Journalism Board to administer the program. This policy is modeled after Seattle's Democracy Voucher program, where every city resident gets four vouchers worth $25 each to donate to candidates for local office.[54] The Seattle initiative has diversified the pool of local donors, expanded the pool of local candidates, and boosted voter turnout in the city.[55]

What Philanthropy Can Do

Over the past decade, philanthropy has driven efforts to rehabilitate local news ecosystems. Funders can continue to promote experimentation with new business and governance models and double down on approaches to "replant" local news within communities. They can also integrate a connection lens into their investment approach, reimagining the process of creating local news as a platform for participation and cooperation.

Fund policy and business model experiments to strengthen local news. Philanthropy can continue to build on its leadership role in revitalizing local news, funding policy and business model experiments that can be validated within and translated across communities. Philanthropy can support campaigns to advance local and state policy experiments, such as local news vouchers and tax credits. They can also continue funding experiments with business and governance models to promote sustainability and community ownership of local media. The learnings from this experimentation could be distributed and replicated across emergent networks, such as Rebuild Local News.[56]

Capacity - Funding

Support local news "replanting" strategies. Funders can drive a "replanting" strategy for local news, supporting communities to either (a) purchase newspapers that could potentially be sold to private equity or (b) buyback newspapers from private equity owners. Here, philanthropy can provide the risk capital—either through grant funding or interest-free debt—to finance the acquisition and replanting of local news organizations. They can also work with community partners to facilitate the transition into new ownership and operations. This strategy can be particularly effective in preventing regions from becoming news deserts.

Capacity - Funding *Opportunity - Boost Supply*

Promote more participatory and cooperative local news approaches. Philanthropy can approach their efforts to revitalize local news as avenues for community participation, cooperation, and connection. This could be as simple as incorporating connection principles into their evaluation and support of grantees. It could include supporting models like the community "news brigade" in East Lansing, MI, which has created a newsroom composed of "citizen journalists" cooperating to bring local news back to their community.[57] It could entail supporting the dissemination of toolkits and trainings, such as Hearken's Citizens Agenda,[58] to equip newsrooms to become more participatory and connective. And it could involve establishing community media hubs at libraries, high schools, and colleges. Such approaches could be especially helpful in smaller cities, towns, and rural areas, where many legacy news outlets have failed and may not come back with new funding models.

Opportunity - Boost Supply *Participation - Make Participatory*

CASE STUDY

The National Trust for Local News & The Colorado Sun

The National Trust for Local News (NTLN) helps conserve local news within communities through financing acquisitions and establishing sustainable, locally rooted operations. In 2021, NTLN partnered with *The Colorado Sun* to purchase Colorado Community Media, which has 24 weekly and monthly newspapers that serve eight counties including and surrounding Denver.[59] According to NTLN's website, in less than six months, they identified the opportunity, raised the capital for the acquisition, completed the purchase, entered into agreements with a local operating partner, and hired a new publisher.[60] This strategy likely prevented Colorado Community Media from selling to interested private equity buyers.

Learn more about the NTLN here

What Federal Government Can Do

Federal policymakers have been hesitant about the federal government's role in revitalizing local news. However, the magnitude of the crisis and the limitations of a purely philanthropic approach has encouraged some federal leaders to reconsider policy's role. We highlight three potential roles for the federal government: one actively being considered by Congress, one that involves reform to a government-chartered entity, and one that is more aspirational and participatory in nature.

Offer federal tax credits to small businesses and local newsrooms. Legislators can support the Community News & Small Business Support Act, which would provide tax credits for small businesses that advertise with local news and payroll tax credits for employing local journalists.[61] This legislation would provide small businesses with $5,000 in tax credits for advertising with local news in the first year and $2,500 for each of the next four years. Similarly, local news organizations could claim up to $25,000 in payroll tax credits per local journalist employed in year one and $15,000 per journalist per year over the following four years. Much like the state-level tax credits, these federal credits are intended to buttress the business models of existing local news organizations.

Capacity - Funding

Incorporate community participation and cooperation as strategic priorities for the CPB. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) is the primary steward and distributor of federal funds to local public radio, television, and online services. At present, the CPB has no priorities in its public "Goals & Objectives" related to making public media more participatory and community-driven.[62] Because these objectives dictate how the CPB administers its funding and programs, its board could add objectives focused on supporting local media providers to foster more community participation and cooperation. Such priorities within the CPB's strategy could catalyze the adoption of more participatory practices among the 1,500 radio and TV stations they support.[63]

Opportunity - Boost Supply *Participation - Make Participatory*

Establish a National Endowment for Community Media. The federal government can follow Victor Pickard's recommendation and establish "a federally guaranteed, public media center in every community ... [that] will look like and be governed by the communities they serve."64 A National Endowment for Community Media (NECM) could help permanently fund these community newsrooms through a one-time appropriation from Congress, structured as an endowment that could support local news organizations in perpetuity. Funding could be offered to county governments via a funding formula, prioritizing capacity-building in the regions that need it most and adaptability to changing local conditions. Governance could be structured to insulate the NECM from political interference and promote regionalized leadership and representation.

Opportunity - Boost Supply *Participation - Make Participatory*

BIG IDEA

Making the Corporation for Public Broadcasting more Public

The CPB is a congressionally chartered, independent nonprofit organization that administers hundreds of millions of dollars in federal funding for local media each year.[65] While the CPB is an independent entity, it is reliant on federal funding and all of its board members must be confirmed by the Senate.[66] Consequently, both the public and Congressional leaders can influence the CPB's strategic direction. **If elected officials and citizens decided that making public media more participatory and community-driven was a priority, they could collectively advocate for the CPB to adjust its "Goals & Objectives" to incorporate these principles, which would then translate to their work with grantees.**

Conclusion

While the decline of connection within American communities partially resulted from policy change, policy can also help build the foundations to make our communities more connected again. Policy change can orient our community institutions to center connection, help Americans flourish through more connected life transitions, and cultivate the enabling conditions for participation and connection within communities. Throughout this framework, we have documented 150+ policy and philanthropic opportunities across 13 sections and four chapters to get us started.

But where do we go from here? That is the question we tackle as we conclude this framework. We begin by describing some of the limitations inherent to this framework and exploring how they can be overcome. We then identify several opportunities for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners to build on this project. After that, it is on you to apply, challenge, and build on this starting point.

Limitations & Opportunities

The state of policy and practice dedicated to strengthening connection within communities continues to be underdeveloped. While this project is an attempt to further develop and cohere this field, it is also a reflection of the field's nascency. As a consequence of the emergent nature of this work, we faced several constraints throughout the process of creating this framework. In the bullets below, we highlight five key limitations, along with opportunities to overcome them moving forward:

1. The framework is non-comprehensive. None of the chapters, sections, or analytical dimensions within the framework are fully comprehensive. There are several policy opportunities that we did not have space to include—for institutions like transportation, for specific demographic groups, or for types of geographies—but are still relevant for strengthening connection within communities. Researchers, funders, and policymakers should draw on this framework as a starting point, identifying opportunities to build new areas of connection-focused policymaking, whether that be tied to institutions, parts of the life course, types of geographies, or demographic groups.

2. The framework excludes home life. For the purposes of clarity, we largely focused the framework on life in communities—that is, life apart from home and work. Though family life is technically separate from civic life, it is also viewed by many as the building block of community. In reality, it is impossible to isolate the strength of families from the strength of the communities in which they live. Policymakers, researchers, funders, and practitioners have an opportunity to further this project by developing an integrated framework—inclusive of family, work, and community—focused on strengthening all facets of Americans' relational lives.

3. Sections within the framework could have benefited from further depth. The scope of this framework—13 sections across four chapters—forced us to limit the level of depth we could pursue within any particular section. We could have gone much deeper, both in terms of including additional opportunities and providing more guidance on how specific opportunities could be implemented. To that end, we encourage policymakers, researchers, and community practitioners to deepen each section, incorporating opportunities that we left out and designing strategies for how specific opportunities can be executed.

4. There is no means to evaluate the opportunities within the framework. Considering the nascency of intentional policymaking on connection—and because a connection lens has not yet been established—we did not have the ability to comparatively evaluate the policies and programs within the framework. While we provide a basic tool for evaluation in **Appendix D**, it is less focused on policy impact and more focused on policy maturity, momentum, and feasibility. By establishing measures, personnel, and a connection lens—as described in the "Foundational Changes" chapter—policymakers can begin developing the means to evaluate programs within and across place.

5. The framework does not address the vital role of civic and cultural change. Because we specifically focused on policy within this framework, we did not speak to the civic and cultural change that may be even more important to bolstering connection within American communities. While policy, culture, and civic life are constantly interacting with one another, cultural and civic change often precipitate policy change, and not the other way around. Within the realm of policymaking, this change will demand a cultural shift to embed and elevate connection as a priority lens. Beyond policy, this change will require the proliferation of more collectivist and communitarian cultural narratives, the creation of civic and spiritual movements with inclusive communitarian ethos, the acculturation of young people toward the common good, and more.

Future Directions

There are several opportunities for policymakers, researchers, community practitioners, and funders to build on this framework. We highlight three complementary future directions—theorizing, field-building, and testing and learning—in the bullets below:

1

Deepen and connect the theoretical base. The theory undergirding policymaking on connection is significantly underdeveloped and could benefit from deeper theorizing. More work is needed to break down silos within the theory (e.g., across disciplines and political orientations), to expand the theoretical focus from the individual- to the community-level, and to develop new paradigms that can inform policymaking. There is an opportunity for academics, think tank leaders, and practitioners to come together in a consortium format—while maintaining their existing roles—to deepen and connect the theoretical base in service of applied research, policy, and practice.

2

Build a cross-institutional connection field. Every institution that interacts with American community life can apply a connection lens—building a connection field within their respective institutions and establishing a connection field across institutions. This could entail creating connection fields within the institutions featured in this framework (e.g., housing, education) and beyond them (i.e., economic development, criminal justice, etc.). This could also involve coalescing and integrating these fields to learn from one another and recognize their work toward a shared project. Drawing inspiration from this framework, leaders within each institution—and throughout the broader cross-institutional connection field—could then develop, organize, and package policy ideas and program models that become their agenda for policymaking and experimentation.

3

Test, learn from, and diffuse promising policies. Policymakers committed to advancing connection within communities—particularly those at the state and local levels—have an opportunity to begin intentionally testing policies, programs, and practices and learning from their peers. Philanthropy can play a leading role in standing up these policy support structures, helping form either (a) learning networks for state and local leaders focused on peer support and information sharing, or (b) more robust policy labs that explicitly encourage policy experimentation and diffusion. While many of these policies and programs are already being tested within communities, such support structures could promote more streamlined learning and translation—within and across place.

Closing Thoughts

Policy is no panacea for strengthening connection in America's communities. It is no replacement for civic action, it does not preclude the need for cultural transformation, and it is likely not even the main driver of change in our communities. But policy certainly has a role to play, both in reversing decades of policymaking that have weakened the connective tissue of our communities and in creating the conditions for this connective tissue to regenerate.

Policymakers have an opportunity—dare we say obligation—to step into this role. This framework is not just an invitation to consider how policy can help strengthen connection within communities. It is also a challenge to act. Make the foundational changes to begin approaching policy with a cross-cutting connection lens. Take steps to make your community institutions more participatory and connected. Create the conditions for community members, old and new, to flourish through life transitions. There are tangible actions policymakers can take *today.*

History often rhymes. In the 1990s, Robert Putnam rang the alarm bell on the decline of civic life and rise in isolation across American communities. *Bowling Alone* captured the public imagination, social capital became a popular area of study in the academy, and President Clinton invited Putnam to speak at The White House. But policymakers did next to nothing in response. Thirty years later—and amidst very live crises of democratic backsliding and deaths of despair—the public discourse has once again turned to questions of loneliness and community. Policymakers today have an opportunity to do what they did not do in the 1990s.

Will we take action to durably strengthen connection in American communities? Or, will we be having this same conversation again in 2054?

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We conducted 72 interviews that helped shape the broad contours of this framework along with some of the specific recommendations within it (see **Appendix B**). Thanks to all of you for taking the time out of your busy schedules to share your learnings and wisdom with us. While I imagine you won't agree with everything in this framework, I hope you see elements of your interviews reflected within it.

Finally, I am deeply grateful for Jon Gruber at Einhorn Collaborative and David Hsu at the Omidyar Network for their support—both as funders and advisors—in helping me develop this framework. I'm particularly thankful for Jon's patience and encouragement as the drafting phase took longer than expected (lesson learned on scoping!), and for David's help in helping me imagine the potential of this work in its early stages.

- Sam Pressler, June 2024

Appendices

Appendix A: Methods & Analysis

Considering this project's scope spans across sectors, levels of scale, and place, our research needed to achieve significant breadth and depth. To do this, we established a feedback loop between secondary source research on existing literature and primary source interviews with policymakers, practitioners, and academics. The secondary sources that we consulted informed the target interview list, and the interviews we conducted informed additional secondary sources to review.

Interviews

To identify interviewees, we first constructed a landscape of perspectives that represented a range of thinking on social connection. Once we established this landscape, we identified an initial list of more than 100 relevant academics, practitioners, and policymakers to interview. We then conducted outreach to request and schedule interviews with these stakeholders.

We utilized a semi-structured interview process for all interviews with separate question sets for academics, practitioners, and policymakers. These interviews ranged from 30 minutes to one-hour, depending on the capacity of our interviewees. Before the conclusion of each interview, we asked interviewees to share recommendations for additional interview prospects and secondary sources to consult. Throughout the period during which we conducted interviews, we leveraged an inductive approach to continuously increase the depth and breadth of our base of interview candidates. At the end of each week, we reviewed the recommended interview prospects and prioritized them based on their potential to deepen a perspective that we had already heard or speak to a new, relevant perspective. Oftentimes, these were perspectives related to disciplines (i.e., public health, democracy, etc.), stakeholder types (e.g., policymakers, practitioners, academics), or domains of diversity (e.g., demographic, geographic, viewpoint) that were underrepresented among our current base of interviewees.

We repeated this process each week for three months, from August through October 2023, and concluded our initial interviews by the end of 2023. As we developed the policy framework in early 2024, we scheduled additional interviews—both with new and repeat interviewees—to fill in gaps from our initial batch of interviews. Ultimately, we conducted 72 total interviews (see **Appendix B**).

Secondary Research

The preliminary outline that we developed for this report informed our initial approach to secondary research. To inform the theoretical research necessary for this report—and draw from a range of perspectives—we consulted sources from the social sciences, political theory, history, philosophy, and theology. To account for and build upon similar past policy efforts, we identified several examples of policy frameworks and policy recommendations that were relevant to strengthening civil society, civic life, associational life, civic infrastructure, social capital, social connection, and/or belonging.

The interview process then helped us identify additional secondary sources for our report. At the end of each week of interviews, we reviewed recommended secondary sources and prioritized them based on their potential to supplement or fill gaps in our existing research. This often involved incorporating new disciplines or policy frameworks and recommendations to consider. The breadth of secondary sources we consulted for this report, in part, reflects the diversity of perspectives that constituted our interviews. Collectively, this mix of iterative desk and interview research helped us access a robust base of sources to match the comprehensive nature of this report.

Analysis & Review

We analyzed the interviews to identify themes to inform both the Context and Framework sections of the report. Our first pass-through of the interviews specifically focused on synthesizing and organizing themes by (1) the question we asked during the interviews and (2) the stakeholder type that we interviewed. From there, we aligned on key themes that were relevant to each section of the report, and used that as a baseline to develop detailed section outlines. Finally, we selected specific quotes that exemplified each theme, and prioritized them for inclusion within their appropriate section. This approach allowed us to incorporate the perspectives of our interviewers in an intentionally holistic manner.

We also analyzed the interviews and our secondary sources to construct the outline for the framework—and, at times, specific policies within it. We started by identifying each policy recommendation or idea from these sources and documenting them in an Airtable database. We categorized these policies on an ongoing basis, which led us to construct the four chapters of the framework: "Foundational Changes," "Community Institutions," "Life Transitions," and "Enabling Conditions." We then refined these chapters further, determining the particular policy sections based on needs identified and policies recommended. Finally, based on our analysis of the interviews and secondary sources, we highlighted specific policy recommendations and case studies or resources to include within each section.

Each section of the framework was reviewed by two to three experts who volunteered their time to offer feedback. We selected these experts based on the relevance of their experience to each section (indeed, many were the same people we interviewed) and their capacity to review. While our reviewers could not represent all perspectives relevant to each section, their review helped to surface inconsistencies, gaps, and blind spots throughout the report. These reviewers helped to deepen and sharpen the points throughout this broad-ranging document.

Appendix B: Interview Lists

Practitioner Interview List		
Name	**Role**	**Interview Date**
Pete Davis	Director of *Join or Die*; Author of *Dedicated*; Co-Director of Democracy Policy Network	8/3/2023
Garrett Cathcart	Founder & Executive Director, More Perfect Union	8/3/2023
Jake Harriman	Founder & CEO, More Perfect Union	8/3/2023
Barrett Takesian	Founder, Portland Community Squash	8/7/2023
Henry Honorof	Director, Welcoming Neighbors Network	8/8/2023
Natalie Bomstad	Executive Director, Wello	8/9/2023
Ken Thompson	Founder, Visible Hands Collaborative	8/17/2023
Michael Wood-Lewis	CEO, Front Porch Forum	8/24/2023
Ted Johnson	Founder, Us @ 250; Senior Fellow, New America Foundation	8/29/2023
Daniel Marshall	Founder, Lamplight Camp	8/30/2023
David Eisner	Former CEO, Convergence Center for Policy Resolution	9/8/2023
Nate Storring	Co-Executive Director, Project for Public Spaces	9/11/2023
Rich Feldman	Board Member, Boggs Center	9/11/2023
Teju Ravilochan	Founder, GatherFor	9/12/2023
David McCullough III	Founder, American Exchange Project	9/13/2023

Mack McCarter	Founder, Community Renewal International	9/20/2023
Ash Hanson	Founder, Department of Public Transformation	9/26/2023
Eli Pariser	Co-Director @ New_Public	9/28/2023
Bridget Marquis	Director, Reimagining the Civic Commons	9/28/2023
Shamichael Hallman	Director, Urban Libraries Council	9/29/2023
Hollie Russon Gilman	Senior Fellow, Political Reform Program at the New America Foundation	10/11/2023
Josh Yates	Executive Director, Belmont Innovation Labs	10/17/2023
Matt Dunne	CEO, Center on Rural Innovation	10/19/2023
Steve Lazar	Social Studies Teacher, NYC; PhD Candidate in History at CUNY Graduate Center	10/23/2023
Daniel Valdez	Chief Communications Officer, Welcoming America	10/25/2023
Melissa Bertolo	Certified Welcoming Director, Welcoming America	10/25/2023
Michael O'Bryan	Resident Fellow, Lindy Institute for Urban Innovation	10/27/2023
Artie Padilla	Senior Program Officer, Central Valley Community Foundation	10/31/2023
Marc Freedman	Co-CEO, CoGenerate	3/1/2024

Academic/Researcher Interview List

Name	Role	Interview Date
Ian Marcus Corbin	Fellow, Harvard Human Flourishing & Harvard Medical School	8/2/2023
Aaron Horvath	Research Scholar, Stanford Center on Philanthropy & Civil Society	8/8/2023
Gordon Hanson	Professor, Harvard Kennedy School; Faculty Director, Reimagining the Economy Project	8/9/2023
Carol Graham	Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution	8/11/2023
Elias Crim	Founder, Solidarity Hall and Solidarity Workshop	8/14/2023
Lara Putnam	Professor of History, University of Pittsburgh	8/15/2023
Peter Levine	Professor of Citizenship & Public Affairs, Tufts' College of Civic Life	8/21/2023
Rick Weissbourd	Professor, Harvard Graduate School of Education and Harvard Kennedy School; Director, Making Caring Common Project	8/23/2023
Erika Bachiochi	Senior Fellow, Ethics & Public Policy Center	8/24/2023
Tony Pipa	Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution	8/24/2023
Ron Ivey	Fellow, Harvard Human Flourishing Program	8/29/2023
Seth Kaplan	Author, *Fragile Neighborhoods*	8/31/2023
Elizabeth Garlow	Senior Fellow, New Practice Lab at the New America Foundation	9/6/2023
Matthew O. Jackson	Professor of Economics, Stanford University	9/7/2023
Stephanie Ternullo	Assistant Professor of Government, Harvard University	9/11/2023
Jason Blakely	Professor of Political Science, Pepperdine University	9/12/2023
James Walsh	Behavioral Economist, University of Oxford	9/13/2023
Samuel Kimbriel	Director, Philosophy & Society Initiative at the Aspen Institute	9/18/2023
Ethan Zuckerman	Founder, Institute for Digital Public Infrastructure	9/27/2023
Mario Luis Small	Professor of Sociology, Columbia University	9/28/2023
Name Withheld	Social Connection & Loneliness Researcher	10/2/2023
Josh Yates	Executive Director, Belmont Innovation Labs	10/17/2023

Policymaker Interview List		
Name	**Role**	**Interview Date**
Matthew Dalbey	Senior Advisor for Sustainable Communities, EPA	9/20/2023
Name Withheld	Office of Governor Bill Lee (TN)	9/25/2023
Michael Evans	Program Director, Mayor's Office of New Urban Mechanics (Boston, MA)	9/28/2023
Erika Poethig	EVP for Strategy & Planning at the Civic Committee and Commercial Club of Chicago; Former Special Assistant to President Biden, Economic & Community Development	10/2/2023
Cleo Hirsch	Former Deputy Director, Americorps; Former Transition Director, Governor Wes Moore	10/2/2023
Rob Traverse	Director of Civic Programming & Special Projects, RI Department of State	10/3/2023
Name Withheld	Office of Senator Chris Murphy (CT)	10/4/2023
Brittany Sickler	Director of Ecosystem Development, Small Business Administration	10/4/2023
Kate Gordon	CEO, California Forward; Former Senior Advisor to the Secretary of Energy, Department of Energy	10/4/2023
Name Withheld	Office of Governor Spencer Cox (UT)	10/5/2023
Lindsay Tracy	Innovator-in-Chief, State of Washington	10/13/2023
Name Withheld	Office of Senator Tina Smith (MN)	10/19/2023
Will Oliver	President, Fresno County Economic Development Corporation	10/31/2023
Chris LaTondresse	CEO, Beacon Interfaith Housing Collaborative; Former County Commissioner, Hennepin County, MN	11/1/2023
Renny Mackay	Former Director of Policy, Office of Governor Mark Gordon (WY)	11/6/2023
Sarah Flammang	Deputy Secretary of Service & Civic Innovation, MD	11/8/2023
Kendal Smith	Director of Policy Development, Office of Governor Phil Scott (VT)	11/8/2023
Monica Hutt	Chief Prevention Officer, Office of Governor Phil Scott (VT)	11/8/2023
Alex Farrell	Commissioner of Housing & Community Development (VT)	11/8/2023
Maggie Anderson	Chief of Staff to Levar Stoney, Mayor of Richmond, VA	11/15/2023
Name Withheld	Office of Governor Andy Beshear (KY)	11/15/2023
James Wagner	Director of City Experience, Tulsa, OK	11/21/2023
Julia Tivald	Former Policy Advisor, White House Office of Faith-Based & Neighborhood Partnerships	12/6/2023
Name Withheld	Office of Governor Jared Polis (CO)	1/24/2024
Cate Townley	Senior Built Environment Specialist, CO Department of Public Health & Environment	2/6/2024
Name Withheld	Office of Representative Derek Kilmer (WA)	2/8/2024

Appendix C: Theories of Community

The State: Government versus Associational Life

What role should the government play vis a vis associational life? Since de Tocqueville wrote Democracy in America, this question has underpinned one of the fundamental debates within American community theory.

On one end of the spectrum, stakeholders believe that government can "crowd out" civil society and human relationships. They hold that government policies and programs can displace community institutions—both religious and secular—and reduce communal, neighborly, and familial ties of mutual obligation and care. Accordingly, these stakeholders aim to limit the role of government policy and programs, particularly where they pose the greatest risk of crowding out associational life and human relationships.

On the other end of the spectrum, stakeholders assert that government can "enable" the strengthening of associational life and social connection. They believe that government policies and programs can give a boost to civic life and relationships—whether that be through making government itself more participatory, coordinating and convening community groups, removing barriers to community participation, or offering funding for these groups. Consequently, these stakeholders are more comfortable with designing policies and programs related to community and connection. Notably, in the American context, even these actors are concerned about government going too far and crowding out associational life. This contrasts with Western and Northern Europe, where the welfare state often plays a more expansive role and concerns about displacing civic life are less salient.

The Market: Market Forces versus Associational Life

Compared to the clear separation between the state and associational life, there is less of a clear dividing line between associational life and the market. Many market institutions are, in fact, community institutions. Consequently, the debate within community theory is not about the market versus associational; rather, it is over the question: *what role should market forces play in relation to associational life?*

On one end of the spectrum, stakeholders believe that communities and individuals should be protected from market forces. They hold that these forces can overwhelm and dictate all facets of our lives, making participation in community, attending religious services, and spending leisure time with friends and family more difficult. Flowing from this view, these stakeholders aim to establish protections for workers and rein in the power of large corporations to return stability, agency, and voice to individuals and communities.

On the other end of the spectrum, stakeholders assert that the market forces of growth and economic development are integral for thriving communities. These actors believe that individual and community prosperity are foundational for an active and robust civic life. Accordingly, they advocate for pro-business and pro-growth policies—particularly at the regional, state, and local levels—to foster economic and community development.

Scale & Scope: Federalists versus Localists

What is the optimal relationship between national and local institutions? From a policy perspective, this is a foundational question of federalism rooted in the 19th century debates between Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson. These debates also extend beyond government and apply to the relationship between national and local community institutions.

On one end of the spectrum are the federalists, who believe in the importance of strong, centralized power at the national level. While federalists generally respect the importance of local governance, they also see a need for national institutions that can coordinate and deliver policies and programs at scale. Federalists are concerned about provincialism at the local level, believe that local stakeholders can lose the forest for the trees, and assert that some issues require national action. Consequently, federalists advocate for national, centralized governance, policies, and programs to complement or supersede local efforts.

On the other end of the spectrum are the localists, who believe that decision-making power, governance, and ownership should be concentrated at the local level. Localists hold that those closest to the problems on the ground are best positioned to design solutions. They also hold that proximate, local relationships—governmental, commercial, or otherwise—can better foster trust, transparency, and accountability compared to abstract, national ones. As such, localists typically prefer state and local government action over federal action, and advocate for more local ownership and control within private and social sector organizations.

Expertise: Technocrats versus Small "d" Democrats

Who determines what is best for communities? This question has been central to millennia of political theory on democracy, and continues to arise in debates about decision-making and control of government entities and civil society groups.

On one end of the spectrum are the technocrats—that is, those who believe qualified experts are best positioned to govern and make decisions for communities. Technocrats hold that decision-making should be "evidence-based" and that governance should be led by individuals in possession of the knowledge and skills to make these "data-driven" decisions. For technocrats, the public should be engaged to inform decisions—often through quantitative rather than qualitative methods—but they should not necessarily be entrusted to govern organizations or make decisions. As such, technocrats advocate for more corporate and administrative forms of governance that centralize power and control among the experts.

On the other end of the spectrum are the small "d" democrats—that is, those who assert that the "public" should hold governance and decision-making power. Small "d" democrats believe that decision-making should be made more participatory and that governance should be driven by those who are most likely to experience the impact of an organization's decisions. For democrats, the dynamic, "deep stories" of individuals and communities are to be trusted over quantitative data and expertise. Experts can participate in civic life as peers, but they should not be granted more power than anyone else based on their expertise. Small "d" democrats, therefore, advocate for more cooperative, representative, and membership-driven forms of governance that distribute power among the public.

Appendix D: Dimensions for Evaluation

The heterogeneity of the policies that we include throughout this framework could benefit from a means for comparative evaluation. While there are no standard metrics to score such policies, we can assess them qualitatively across a few dimensions. We identified four that reflect the range of concerns of policymakers: maturity, momentum, implementation difficulty, and impact potential. The following table explains each dimension, including the qualitative categories for assessing them.

Dimensions	Assessment Categories
Maturity: How mature is this set of policies?	**Theorized:** Concept has been theorized but not yet developed into full policy. **Developed:** Policy has been developed into a solution that can be tested. **Tested:** Policy has been tested at the local, state, and/or federal levels. **Scaled:** Policy has been scaled across the local, state, and/or federal levels.
Momentum: What level of momentum does this set of policies currently have?	**None:** Policy has no apparent momentum. **Some Interest:** Policy has interest from policymakers but doesn't appear to be moving. **Gaining Traction:** Policy is beginning to be tested and adopted by policymakers. **Actively Spreading:** Policy is actively spreading at one or more levels of government. **Window Passed:** The window for policy consideration appears to have passed.
Implementation: How difficult would it be to implement this set of policies?	**Low:** Low level of implementation difficulty. **Medium:** Medium level of implementation difficulty. **High:** High level of implementation difficulty.
Impact Potential: What type of impact would this set of policies have if implemented?	**Targeted:** Policy has the potential to impact a targeted demographic or geographic group. **Universal:** Policy has the potential for distributed, universal impact. **Ripple:** Policy has the potential for broader ripple effect beyond its intended outcomes.

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Problem Definition

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Conclusion

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