

Pursuing Just and Equitable Communities

in Light of COVID-19: An Action Agenda for Creating a New Normal

Executive Summary

COVID-19 has devastated communities. It has illuminated and deepened existing inequities (Harkavy et al., 2020). These public health and economic crises are experienced in neighborhoods. The consequences are long-term. Communities that were already vulnerable are even worse off (Schanzenbach & Pitts, 2020). This has been especially the case for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) populations (Farmer, 2020). Under-served populations of all backgrounds in urban and rural contexts will heavily rely on government for some semblance of stability (Orgera et al., 2020). They will also rely on anchor institutions – hospitals, colleges, universities, arts institutions and other enduring organizations that remain in their communities (Maurrasse, 2019).

Anchor institutions have been absolutely essential during the pandemic. They cared for patients, used their facilities, provided supplies and equipment, instituted virtual programming, distributed meals, maintained civic life, contributed to funds, and on. Community-centric anchor institutions, such as community colleges, public regional universities, independent community-based hospitals, and locally-focused arts institutions are vital resources to historically under-served communities (Cantor & Englot, 2020; Perlstein, 2018). These institutions will be especially needed in their localities in the years to come.

If we are to set the most distressed communities on a stronger path given all that has transpired in 2020, public policy must support the role of anchor institutions in strengthening their communities (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2013). Moreover, we must rally the entire nation on a comprehensive rebuilding project. This is a matter of national service – a civic enterprise to engage young people and others in the process of reimagining and reconstructing society (Stegman, 2020). Policymakers should see anchor institutions as important hubs for voluntarism, internships, apprenticeships and other paths to connect people to the necessary work that will be required to transform communities.

Introduction

The Anchor Institutions Task Force (AITF) has been promoting the role of anchor institutions in community and economic development since 2009 (Harkavy, et al., 2009). AITF is an action-oriented learning community of leaders at anchor institutions and other partners dedicated to

enhancing the engagement of anchor institutions in mutually transformative collaboration that can lead to equitable growth in communities of all types (Anchor Institutions Task Force, 2020).

As enduring organizations that play a vital role in their local communities and economies, anchor institutions (universities, hospitals, colleges, museums, corporations, libraries, and more) can be crucial partners in mapping the course of their communities. A values-oriented big tent organization, AITF mobilizes representatives of multiple sectors around the common pursuit of equity and social justice, democracy and democratic practice, collaboration, and the significance of place (Maurrasse, 2019).

As the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a drastic, seemingly unrelenting, public and economic emergency, communities are tragically disrupted. Populations that were already in dire straits were only further disadvantaged by such a sweeping set of circumstances. COVID-19 laid bare the price of generations of systemic racism, as BIPOC communities have been disproportionately adversely impacted by the pandemic and its residual effects.

Public policy must be positioned to help communities progress as we look ahead. A dedicated national rebuilding effort will be required, and anchor institutions must play an essential role (Liu et al., 2020). In fact, it is hard to imagine that communities will be able to effectively navigate an uncertain future without the engagement of anchor institutions.

Many anchor institutions will collaborate toward improving their communities regardless of policy incentives. But so much more can be accomplished if public policy aligns with anchor institutions to collectively craft a more equitable and sustainable future. COVID-19 probably won't be the last pandemic. Anchor institutions are indispensable to the future preparedness of localities to manage pandemics (Blumenthal & Fowler, 2020). Moreover, the health, educational, and economic disparities illuminated during the pandemic will have to be closed. Here again, anchor institutions will be necessary partners in finding solutions. If we are going to significantly strengthen communities post COVID-19, anchor institutions will need targeted incentives to expand their capacity to collaboratively alleviate the perilous consequences of the pandemic.

Rationale for Action

- The pandemic has devastated communities.
- It has disproportionately impacted the most vulnerable populations.
- A growing racial justice movement has challenged everyone to recognize and dismantle manifestations of systemic racism in so many facets of life.
- Anchor institutions have responded during the pandemic on multiple levels.



- Local investments of anchor institutions are increasingly seen as integral to core business operations as well as a core function of the institution.
- Community-centric anchor institutions have been especially vital in their localities.
- Going forward, these anchor institutions, among others, will be essential to rebuilding communities.
- Despite their clear value, community-centric anchor institutions are facing substantial budget cuts along with increased costs.
- The work required is substantial, and will require significant civic participation as well as new forms of work to meet particular needs created by the pandemic.
- The work of rebuilding communities will have to directly address racial inequities and all forms of inequality that limit our collective future.

Policy Options

- Public policy has not adequately included anchor institutions as vital partners in community and economic development.
- While some programs exist, they are not sufficient given the magnitude of need, especially given the crises we face.
- The engagement of anchor institutions as collaborators in communities will be needed more than ever to solve health, economic, educational and other problems.
- Public policy should recognize and support the role of community-centric anchor institutions, and encourage their engagement in cross-sector collaboration designed to strengthen their communities.
- Given the particular reality of systemic racism, public policy will have to pursue race-specific solutions, and encourage cross sector collaboration to dismantle manifestations of systemic racism in local communities.
- Some local governments have been collaborating with their nearby anchor institutions during the pandemic, and should receive incentives to encourage and support cross sector collaboration involving anchor institutions in their jurisdictions.
- Federal policy should find ways to align with mayors that have been leveraging anchor institutions to strengthen their communities.



- Multiple federal agencies could better accomplish their goals from strategies to collaborate with anchor institutions to strengthen localities.
- Because of the breadth of the pandemic's impact, policymakers should consider how to rally the public around a common commitment to rebuild communities.
- Anchor institutions should be considered hubs for training and deploying volunteers and workers to help reimagine and rebuild communities in the wake of COVID-19.

Policy Recommendations

- Create a substantial Fund for Anchor Institutions to provide incentives for anchor institutions, especially community-centric anchors, to collaborate toward rebuilding local communities;
- Include criteria in the Fund that requires applicants to recognize specific strategies to dismantle systemic racism;
- The Fund could be housed in a relevant federal agency such as the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. But the Fund would be a multi-agency partnership. Numerous agencies would be allocated a portion of the Fund to distribute to anchor partnerships aligned with their particular priorities. This would enable the Fund to be as cross sector as possible. Resources from the Fund could support single anchor institutions for their collaborative efforts in their communities as well as multi-institutional, cross sector partnerships designed to solve problems in their localities.
- Develop a National Work Initiative designed to leverage anchor institutions to enable work opportunities to help reimagine and rebuild communities in the wake of the pandemic. As many have lost work and entire industries have been decimated throughout the pandemic, new needs have emerged. The work of strengthening communities over the next few years will lead to new jobs. Anchor institutions will play a central role in hiring and training for growth areas of employment. This program would focus specifically on new forms of employment that focus specifically on strengthening local communities and enhancing opportunities for historically underserved communities with some emphasis on BIPOC communities;
- This Initiative would also be structured as a multi-agency initiative, and housed in a logical federal agency.
- Engage all levels of government across federal, state, and local levels in these recommendations to ensure collaboration and coordination from the national to the local.

Applications to the Fund for Anchor Institutions or the National Community Work Initiative would be required to include collaboration with local government.

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