



A Regional Approach to Expanding Asset Building Opportunities: The Bay Area Asset Support Center

Introduction

Over the last few decades, U.S. anti-poverty efforts have evolved from a narrow focus on income supports and social services to include a broad set of strategies that help low-income families build financial wealth as a pathway to long-term economic security. A national “asset-building movement” has emerged that is advancing a range of practical strategies and public policies to help low- and moderate-income individuals and families save, invest and preserve financial assets.

The San Francisco Bay Area has long been a hub of asset-building innovation.¹ However, in the fall of 2006, several Bay Area foundations recognized that in many parts of the region asset-building activities were nascent and fragile, and there were few opportunities for shared learning and strategic engagement between leaders of different strategies. They began deliberations about ways to build the capacity of players, programs and services to support a full continuum² of asset-building opportunities for low- and moderate-income residents across the region.

These discussions laid the groundwork for a new initiative, the Bay Area Asset Support Center. This case study aims to share the story of the initiative with asset-building stakeholders in hopes that it will inspire and inform similar efforts in other regions. It begins with an overview of the initiative followed by key findings and highlights of lessons learned.

What was the Asset Support Center?

The Asset Support Center was a foundation-driven initiative, underway from July 2007 through December 2009, to strengthen and expand the asset-building field in the nine-county region.³ The objectives of the initiative were to:

- Create a searchable, online database of asset-building strategies throughout the region;
- Provide pro bono technical assistance to advance local and regional programs;
- Convene practitioners, funders and other stakeholders to share information about promising practices, emerging challenges, opportunities and trends; and
- Expand the base of support for public policy reforms.

Structure

The Asset Support Center was overseen by a management team of funders who met on a quarterly basis to guide and assess the progress of the initiative. Members included senior program officers from The California Endowment, Citi, the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund, the Friedman Family Foundation, the Levi Strauss Foundation, the San Francisco Foundation, the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, United Way of the Bay Area, the Walter and Elise Haas Fund, the Walter S. Johnson Foundation and the Y&H Soda Foundation. The San Francisco based asset-building leader EARN was the fiscal sponsor of the initiative and served on the executive committee with the Walter and Elise Haas Fund and the Y&H Soda Foundation. The management team selected Asset Building Strategies, a

¹ The region is home to prominent examples of several asset-building strategies — the Assets for All Alliance in San Jose and EARN in San Francisco are among the largest and most successful providers of Individual Development Accounts (IDAs) in the country; United Way of the Bay Area has supported one of the nation’s largest regional Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) campaigns; and Bank on San Francisco has demonstrated the powerful roles that public and private sectors can play in connecting un-banked families to affordable financial services.

² For a depiction of the “continuum” that informed early discussions, see the Walter and Elise Haas Fund report, *Building Asset While Building Communities* at www.haassr.org/html/resources_links/pdf/buildingReport2006.pdf.

³ The Asset Support Center was originally envisioned as a two-year initiative. It was later extended an additional six months.

ASSET BUILDING AFTER FORECLOSURE

In 2008, as foreclosures were beginning to undermine the financial security of thousands of Bay Area households, the Asset Support Center convened leaders from across the region to consider a range of services needed by displaced families. The meeting was attended by more than 90 nonprofit, public and private sector leaders and helped them to understand and plan for the unfolding crisis.

consulting firm led by national asset building expert Heather McCulloch to staff the initiative.⁴

Activities and services

❖ Research/mapping of asset-building programs and services

Asset Support Center staff created a searchable, online database of asset-building programs and services underway in the nine Bay Area counties. Posted on the website of the statewide Asset Policy Initiative of California (www.assetpolicy.org/asc), the database ultimately covered over 40 strategies offered by 450 organizations. Staff also developed a contact list of more than 1,000 asset-building stakeholders.

❖ Technical assistance

Early in the planning process, Asset Support Center funders identified technical assistance as a critical tool to establish, strengthen and expand local asset-building efforts. The initiative offered technical assistance to nonprofits, public agencies, foundations, cooperative enterprises, financial institutions and elected officials. Technical assistance was originally provided by Asset Support Center and EARN staff, but additional consultants were engaged as demand increased. Technical assistance fell into four primary categories: workshops and trainings, planning and facilitation, research and reports, and evaluation.

❖ Convenings

The Asset Support Center hosted two large meetings (attracting 65 and 90 participants respectively) focused on asset-building trends, challenges and opportunities emerging across the region. Nonprofits, foundations,

public agencies, elected officials, financial institutions and other asset-building stakeholders participated in these regional learning opportunities:

- ❑ *County Asset Building Coalitions: Expanding Asset Building Opportunities for Bay Area Residents* in March 2008 focused on strengthening and improving coordination among emerging county asset-building coalitions.
- ❑ *Asset Building after Foreclosure* in October 2008 focused on the social and financial service needs of families displaced by foreclosure.

Although the convenings were very popular, the cost of planning and implementing them was high. Consequently, the management team decided to offer webinars, which could be implemented at significantly lower cost and with greater frequency:

- ❑ *Expanding Asset Building through Shared Ownership* in April 2009 featured national experts on shared ownership strategies who discussed ways for low- and moderate-income households to invest in homes and business in partnership with other stakeholders: co-workers, neighbors, nonprofits or the public and private sector.
- ❑ *Outcome Based Evaluation: Measuring the Impact of Asset Building Programs* in June 2009 highlighted best practices in outcomes-based evaluation and focused on how local practitioners were measuring the impact of their work.
- ❑ *Exploring the Health-Wealth Connection: Health Insurance as an Asset Building Strategy* in September 2009 focused on the role of health insurance in helping families to preserve hard-earned assets.

⁴ Christi Baker, principal of Chrysalis Consulting, served as interim director during Ms. McCulloch's maternity leave from July 2008 through January 2009 and Siobhan Mulvey joined as an associate in early 2009. In addition, ASC benefited from the work of two graduate school students, one focused on research in 2007–2008 and the other on outreach, in the spring of 2009.

❖ Outreach

Outreach to encourage use of Asset Support Center resources was initially informal, consisting primarily of emails, calls and meetings with individuals. In early 2008, staff initiated a more formal outreach process using a brochure, presentations to asset-building coalitions and targeted meetings with strategic players in each county. In early 2009, staff began using email marketing software to reach out more regularly and formally to a growing contact list.

External environment

Dramatic changes in the economic environment helped to shape the initiative. When the Asset Support Center started, the region's asset-building field was expanding, focused on increasing access to economic opportunity in a growing economy. By early 2008, the foreclosure and broader economic crisis pushed financial survival strategies to the forefront.

The initiative took a proactive approach to addressing the foreclosure crisis with the fall 2008 convening on asset building after foreclosure. In early 2009, the management team shifted resources to increase the pool of funds for technical assistance, and a special emphasis was placed on projects that helped asset-building providers rethink their strategies in an environment of increasing demand and decreasing resources.

As the crisis continued in 2009, foundations were impacted by declining portfolio values and challenging budget decisions. One foundation suspended all grantmaking and dropped out of the initiative, and another ended their support for asset-building activities after a strategic planning process. The remaining Asset Support Center funders maintained their commitment to asset-building strategies.

A promising change in the external environment paralleled the start-up of the initiative. In mid-2007, countywide asset-building coalitions were under development in Alameda, Contra Costa and Marin, later followed by Santa Clara and San Mateo. Staff and management team members saw these multi-sector coalitions as an innovative approach to connecting clients to multiple services, sharing knowledge, leveraging resources and building partnerships within counties. Asset Support Center staff connected leaders of the coalitions with one another, reported on their work to the management team and supported their development with technical assistance.

Key Findings

Feedback from users of Asset Support Center services and key stakeholders was collected and evaluated throughout the initiative. This section summarizes the data and analysis that informed the management of the initiative and key decision points.

Findings from regular assessment tools

- *Technical assistance* — Clients completed a survey upon completion of technical assistance contracts.
- *Convenings and webinars* — Participant evaluations were collected at the end of each session.
- *Webpages* — Data on webpage traffic was collected by EARN from Google Analytics.

❖ Technical assistance

The Asset Support Center provided more than 1,000 hours of pro bono technical assistance to Bay Area asset-building stakeholders — nonprofits, public agencies, funders, elected officials and cooperatives across the region. Of the total hours, two thirds was “direct” technical assistance and a third was “indirect.”⁵ 57% of the total technical assistance hours benefited the Bay Area region as a whole, while the other 43% went to individual counties. 45% of the technical assistance hours supported workshops that served multiple organizations, 29% focused on planning and facilitation, 17% supported research on promising practices and 9% focused on evaluation tools and systems.

Evaluations of technical assistance from clients resulted in consistently high ratings (*range: 4=very helpful; 3=somewhat helpful; 2=not very helpful; 1=not helpful at all*):

- Staff's helpfulness in identifying client's technical assistance needs = 3.9 average
- Staff's helpfulness in finding/coordinating with an outside consultant = 4 average
- Helpfulness of consultant's services = 3.8 average
- Overall helpfulness of ASC technical assistance to the organizations = 3.7 average
- Clients' willingness to recommend ASC technical assistance services to other Bay Area stakeholders = 100% said yes

⁵ “Direct technical assistance” included hours approved by the Asset Support Center executive committee for a specific organization. “Indirect” technical assistance included hours spent by staff on outreach, managing the process, tracking, evaluation, reporting, etc.

❖ Convenings

The Asset Support Center hosted two in-person meetings and three webinars between March 2008 and September 2009. More than 300 Bay Area stakeholders participated in the convenings. The in-person meetings were well attended and very highly rated, with particularly strong feedback on the role of meetings as learning and networking opportunities. Feedback on the webinars was positive, overall, but attendance was lower than in-person meetings.

❖ Webpage Use

With more than 5,000 page views, the Asset Support Center's searchable database of asset-building services was the most popular destinations for visitors to the Asset Policy Initiative of California web site between January 2008 and November 2009. However, responses to surveys by technical assistance clients and anecdotal evidence from the field indicated that the searchable database was not a well-known resource among Bay Area asset-building practitioners.

❖ Sources and allocation of resources

Funded by foundations on the management team, the initiative cost \$567,000 over two and a half years. Resources were allocated as follows:

- ❑ 24% — Technical assistance
- ❑ 23% — Research, mapping and webpages
- ❑ 16% — Convenings⁶
- ❑ 12.5% — Administration⁷
- ❑ 9.5% — Strategic planning, assessment and evaluation
- ❑ 8% — Fundraising and reporting⁸
- ❑ 7% — Outreach and marketing

Interim assessment and adjustments

The Asset Support Center conducted an interim assessment in the fall of 2008, including a review of evaluations and surveys gathered to date, insights from staff and consultants, and interviews with key stakeholders. The assessment found that technical assistance was highly valued by practitioners, but webpage use was limited; convenings and webinars were valued for the purposes of networking, information gathering and shared learning; practitioners were interested in webinars, but they did not

want to completely lose face-to-face networking opportunities; and the initiative's field-building role was particularly valued by all stakeholders.

In response, the management team approved a shift of resources from research/webpages to technical assistance and the use of webinars to reduce the cost of convenings. In April 2009, planning the phase-out of the initiative, the management team decided to identify a local nonprofit to sustain the Asset Support Center's convening function, webpages and contact list; and it determined that the technical assistance would be discontinued due to funding limitations. These decisions were re-evaluated and modified at the management team's final retreat in November 2009, as described below.

Input from focus group and key stakeholder interviews

In the fall of 2009, a focus group and key stakeholder interviews provided the management team with feedback on the value of Asset Support Center services to asset-building practitioners. The focus group included practitioners who received technical assistance, participated in convenings or used the online ASC database; a mix of staff from nonprofits, public agencies and one foundation; and a blend of organizations from across the region. The stakeholder interviews included a smaller group of key informants who had used a number of Asset Support Center services, and they delved more deeply into perceptions of the initiative's effectiveness. Highlights are summarized below.

❖ Regional approach

Interviewees agreed that Asset Support Center services had a positive impact on the region. They noted the absence of cross-county collaboration prior to the initiative and the fact that the initiative brought people together to learn from one another and connect ideas and services. They found that the Asset Support Center provided practitioners with a collective identity and increased the credibility of asset building within the region.

❖ Independent role

The Asset Support Center was valued as an independent entity that was committed to furthering

6 This category includes in-person meetings, webinars and management team meetings.

7 This category includes EARN fiscal sponsor fee.

8 This category includes resources set aside for the start-up of the Bay Area Asset Funders Network.

the field of asset-building within the region, as opposed to advancing any one organization's agenda.

❖ **Impact of services**

As a result of Asset Support Center services, practitioners made more informed decisions, clarified expectations and reframed thinking. The expertise brought in from the initiative resulted in quality insights, decisions and products. Interviewees appreciated all Asset Support Center services, but they particularly valued the pro bono technical assistance.

❖ **Value of technical assistance**

ASC technical assistance saved organizations resources by greatly reducing staff time that would have been spent on particular projects. Interviewees noted that in all cases Asset Support Center technical assistance resulted in tangible products — including reports, tools and training. Few interviewees cited the creation of additional asset-building programs or services as a result of technical assistance; but almost all of them noted service improvements in terms of program delivery, structuring and/or evaluation. In addition, several interviewees credited the consultant's feasibility analysis as being the critical factor in deciding not to undertake a new program; it helped them to understand that they were not ready for successful implementation.

Management team retreat conclusions

In its final retreat, in November 2009, the management team identified strengths, weaknesses and lessons from the initiative:

❖ **Regional approach**

The Asset Support Center helped to jumpstart the regional asset-building conversation and it solidified

and gave credibility to the field within the region. It was an innovative model, a collaborative effort that successfully leveraged talent and helped to build the regional asset-building infrastructure.

❖ **Structure/management**

Staff/management was top-notch and the structure was effective at enabling funders to gain key insights into the asset-building field and practitioners. The management team's high level of involvement in the day-to-day workings strengthened the connection between funders and the field. However, giving more flexibility and autonomy to staff might have made the process more efficient. There was some disappointment with the fact that the Asset Support Center did not bring more funders to the table, including financial institutions and public agencies. However, this was the result of a conscious decision to focus on managing the initiative, instead of expanding the group.

❖ **Technical assistance**

The response to technical assistance was overwhelmingly positive, and it was the service most valued by the field. However, it was expensive and would be difficult to fund in the future. Rather than using the technical assistance to pursue a predetermined set of strategies, the Asset Support Center chose to entertain to a wide range of technical assistance requests from the field. An alternative would have been to develop a set of strategic goals for the field and invest in technical assistance projects that advanced those goals. Given the diversity and creativity of the region's asset-building practitioners, the management team chose the responsive approach.

❖ **Convenings**

Asset Support Center convenings provided a valuable opportunity for funders and practitioners to network

FINANCIAL COACHING TRAINING

As the economic crisis deepened, Bay Area families turned to local nonprofits and public agencies for financial advice tailored to individual needs and circumstances. Agencies, in turn, turned to the Asset Support Center to support training for organizations to develop in-house financial coaching programs. Funded by the initiative, a region-wide financial coaching training was provided by EARN in October 2009 and served 25 organizations from across the nine Bay Area counties.

SUPPORTING ASSET-BUILDING COALITIONS

From its inception, Asset Support Center funders and staff saw county asset-building coalitions as a promising way to building synergy and leverage resources across Bay Area counties. The initiative supported these efforts through shared learning opportunities, research on best practices, support for strategic planning and evaluation design, and other forms of technical assistance.

and share information. They were popular and well attended and succeeded in strengthening the region's asset-building infrastructure, showing participants how their work is part of something larger than a single organization or strategy.

❖ Research/mapping

The research and mapping of regional asset-building activities was critical to building a base of knowledge to inform the work of Asset Support Center funders and staff. However, the benefits of making the information available to the public through a searchable, online database did not justify the cost.

❖ Public policy impact

The Asset Support Center did not fulfill its goal of building support for public policy reform. While funders were interested in supporting public policy, it was not an explicit part of the agenda. Since the initiative received few requests for assistance on public policy ideas, it fell by the wayside.

❖ Outcomes

Feedback about the impact of the Asset Support Center on strengthening the regional asset-building field was very positive, overall. However, it was difficult to evaluate measurable outcomes of income and asset growth for individuals and families.

Next steps

As noted above, prior to the retreat, the management team decided that the Asset Support Center would continue as a project of an existing asset-building nonprofit. That decision was re-evaluated at the management team's final retreat, and it was decided that elements of the initiative would instead be incorporated into a new regional asset funders network.

The Bay Area Asset Funders Network will be launched in early 2010 as the first regional affiliate of the national Asset Funders Network. The network will support asset-building activities in the region by providing a forum for collaboration among foundations devoted to enhancing this field; fostering connections and shared learning between grantmakers and their peers in the nonprofit, public and private sector; and serving as a resource for stakeholders interested in asset-building work in the Bay Area.

Lessons Learned

The following section highlights lessons learned from the Asset Support Center experience that could inform similar efforts in other parts of the country:

Leadership

❖ Building upon existing relationships increases chances of success.

Strong working relationships — among funders and between funders and staff — are an important ingredient of a successful asset-building initiative. In the case of the Asset Support Center, several of the funders had already worked together as part of collaboratives and most had previously worked with Asset Support Center staff, Heather McCulloch, and fiscal sponsor, EARN. These existing relationships provided a solid base from which to build the initiative and navigate challenges as they emerged.

❖ Legitimacy — or “reputational capital” — matters.

It is important that regional initiatives identify leadership — funders and staff — with the credibility to bring diverse stakeholders to the table. The reputations of Asset Support Center funders and staff played an important role in establishing the legitimacy of the initiative.

Structure

- ❖ **The ongoing recruitment of funders should be a goal of the initiative.**

An early goal of the Asset Support Center was to increase the level of funding devoted to asset building by attracting new funders to the field. Once the initiative was underway and the demands for planning and decisions intensified, it was hard to bring new players into the process so the management team decided to limit its membership. An alternative would be to develop a structure that allows for the recruitment of new funders on an ongoing basis. For example, funder meetings could be focused on strategic discussions, with the day-to-day management of the initiative left to staff, guided by a subcommittee of funders.

- ❖ **Tension between funder- and practitioner-driven initiatives is inherent.**

Funder-driven initiatives are typically regarded with suspicion by practitioners. The Asset Support Center management team tried to balance the interests of funders with those of practitioners by gathering — through informal and formal channels — and responding to practitioner criticism on an ongoing basis. But they chose to keep the initiative funder-led because the peer learning at the management team level was highly valued by participants. Alternatively, regional initiatives could consider a structure that includes practitioners in decision-making or advisory roles.

Services

- ❖ **Funders could explore alternative approaches to allocating technical assistance resources.**

The Asset Support Center accepted technical assistance requests for a wide variety of strategies, from a range of organizations, across a large geographic area. Other initiatives might choose to target resources to a small number of organizations or strategies. In addition, funders might be more prescriptive rather than being exclusively responsive to practitioner requests for technical assistance. Finally, funders might require that technical assistance applicants demonstrate how their project will benefit the broader asset-building field (e.g. through workshops or reports).

- ❖ **Webinars, alone, will not fulfill field-building goals.**

If the goals of the initiative include field building as well as knowledge sharing, then supporting a mix of

meetings and webinars is the best approach. The Asset Support Center experience indicated that in-person meetings were highly valued as a way to network, build relationships and learn from one another. Webinars offered a more cost-effective means of sharing knowledge, but they were not as effective at building the relationships and networking opportunities that are essential to field building.

- ❖ **Mapping regional activity is critical to informing the work of the initiative, but making the information publicly available may not warrant the cost.**

Understanding the regional landscape of asset-building programs and services is critical to building the base of knowledge from which to launch a regional initiative. But sharing the findings with the public can be costly. The Asset Support Center searchable online database was expensive to produce, and it was not widely used by regional stakeholders. An alternative might include a more informal or less detailed inventory or a wikipedia-like approach that allows practitioners to draft and edit their own website entries.

Staffing and Operations

- ❖ **Align consultants to tasks requiring specialized skills.**

It was costly to use consultants to staff all elements of the Asset Support Center. An alternative approach would be to embed the initiative in an existing nonprofit, using the nonprofit's staff to manage day-to-day activities (fundraising, project management, event planning, technical assistance coordination, reporting, etc.) and using consultants for tasks requiring specialized skills. However, this approach may evoke opposition from other stakeholders if they perceive a bias on the part of the lead organization.

- ❖ **The timeframe of the initiative should allow for enough time to recoup start-up costs.**

Most new organizations spend their first two years in start-up mode. The Asset Support Center's entire lifecycle was two and a half years, so it was unable to recoup the higher costs of start-up activities including developing the concept, work plan and budget; raising funds; identifying a fiscal sponsor; making staffing decisions; developing marketing materials; identifying appropriate technologies; consolidating a management team; conducting, documenting and posting field research; organizing and hosting management team and field events, etc. With a longer timeframe (e.g. five

years) initiatives are more likely to realize the benefits of lower costs in later years.

❖ **Several cost-saving measures should be considered at the front end.**

- ❑ *Maximize use of technology:* Initiatives should explore technology tools — such as email marketing, meeting scheduling software and webinars — early in the process, to increase the efficiency and reduce the costs of the initiative.
- ❑ *Consider “universal” proposals and reporting:* Initiatives will be able to minimize resources spent on grant proposals and reporting if funders agree to “universal” proposals and reports. This approach was adopted, successfully, by Asset Support Center funders.

❖ **A mix of online marketing and one-on-one outreach is critical to getting the word out about the initiative.**

Initiatives should use technology to conduct early and ongoing outreach about activities and services while also allocating staff time to reach out to stakeholders, on a one-on-one basis. In the Asset Support Center experience, email marketing was the best way to spread the word about the initiative and promote convenings, but one-on-one outreach was the most effective way to identify and encourage viable technical assistance requests.

Outcomes

❖ **Plan for and invest in realistic success measures.**

Regional asset funder initiatives should be clear about the goals they are trying to achieve and how success will be measured. Asset Support Center management team members acknowledged that they should have developed a more formal “theory of change” at the beginning of the initiative and identified concrete measures of success.

Replication

❖ **Elements of the initiative could be adapted to different conditions.**

The Asset Support Center emerged from a unique set of pre-conditions including a strong base of asset-building organizations in parts of the region, a cadre of supportive funders and strong relationships between funders and staff; but these “pre-conditions” do not need to be present in other regions. This report aims to offer lessons learned so that *elements* of the approach can inform other efforts, tailored to the unique circumstances of individual regions.

Resources and Contacts

For more information, please contact Heather McCulloch, Managing Director, Asset Support Center (415) 378-6703, heather@assetbuildingstrategies.com or visit the Asset Support Center webpages at www.assetpolicy.org/asc.

Management Team Members

Amanda Feinstein <i>Walter and Elise Haas Fund</i>	Lisa Kawahara <i>Friedman Family Foundation</i>
Bob Uyeki <i>Y&H Soda Foundation</i>	Pat Krackov <i>Silicon Valley Community Foundation</i>
Ray Colmenar <i>The California Endowment</i>	Merle Lawrence <i>Levi Strauss Foundation</i>
Robert Friedman <i>Friedman Family Foundation</i>	Ben Mangan <i>EARN</i>
James Head <i>San Francisco Foundation</i>	Mona Masri <i>Citi</i>

Former members

Heather McCulloch <i>Asset Building Strategies</i>	Denis Udall <i>Walter S. Johnson Foundation</i>
Robert Phillips <i>The California Endowment</i>	Stewart Wakeling <i>Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund</i>
Tse Ming Tam <i>United Way of the Bay Area</i>	