Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance

University of Baltimore Jacob France Institute

**10-Year Review: Findings and Opportunities**

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The Johns Hopkins Institute for Policy Studies was engaged by the Jacob France Institute to assess the changes in the context within which the Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance (BNIA) operates, its current adaptations to changes in the environment, and its future potential. More than 20 interviews were conducted with funders, allies, customers, and National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP) managers in the course of the work. This paper summarizes the findings and opportunities that emerged from these consultations and additional research, recognizing that many of them touch on activities already underway at BNIA.

**CONTENT**

* ***Data warehouse still useful***

Interviewees widely agreed on the value of a warehouse that brings together neighborhood level data from multiple sources on [housing and community development](http://www.bniajfi.org/vs/vital_signs/1), [sanitation](http://www.bniajfi.org/vs/vital_signs/5), [urban environment, transportation](http://www.bniajfi.org/vs/vital_signs/6), [crime and safety](http://www.bniajfi.org/vs/vital_signs/3), [children and family health](http://www.bniajfi.org/vs/vital_signs/2), [education, youth](http://www.bniajfi.org/vs/vital_signs/7) development, [workforce, economic development](http://www.bniajfi.org/vs/vital_signs/4), and [neighborhood civic action](http://www.bniajfi.org/vs/vital_signs/8). The data must be triple-checked for accuracy if user confidence is to be maintained.

* ***Finer level neighborhood data with additional features needed***

Easily accessible on-line data by census block would help community development planners and implementers build data profiles of areas of interest to them, freeing them from the discipline of the Community Statistical Areas boundaries.

As community development (CD) has become more market-oriented over the past 10 years, the need for timely parcel-based data has grown, both to trigger interventions and as a foundation for planning in a city where neighborhood characteristics can change dramatically from block to block. To fuel action, the data must alert CD professionals before official actions such as foreclosures are taken. BNIA’s data to support the work of the Baltimore Homeownership Preservation Coalition was cited as an opportunity for expansion, particularly as delinquencies at finer granularity than those published by the Federal Reserve Bank and “intent to foreclose” data are added.

CD practitioners also need property-level data on investor-owned properties, non-arms-length transactions, rentals, and pricing of available commercial properties. If desired information is proprietary, they would find a guide to availability and cost useful.

**CAPABILITIES NEEDED**

* ***More than a data repository***

BNIA’s core function as a compendium of data requires deep understanding of how the data it adds to its warehouse is generated (what exactly is being counted and how it is categorized), its utility and limitations, and how it differs from other sources of similar data. The potential of data synthesis/fusion/integration – from multiple sources, block by block, CSA, or citywide; data mining – extracting patterns from the data; and data extraction – from unstructured primary data sources – were felt to be excellent opportunities for BNIA.

* ***Seeking out and responsive to an expanded set of “users”***

BNIA’s original design aimed at serving grass roots neighborhood organizations, but it is only the larger, staffed organizations that are capable of undertaking community development initiatives in partnership with public, private, and nonprofit entities. They are primarily interested in data, not analysis, but would like to see what analysis is being done. (See finer level data above.) They also have *their own data to be integrated.*  Few of the BNIA-like organizations across the country (partners in the NNIP) operate community user training, but some are planning or have partnerships to deliver this critical element; BNIA participates in the community leader training put on by citywide and umbrella community organizations. The Citizens Planning and Housing Association (CPHA), which had committed to provide such training in the original alliance, has not been able to do so. The websites that offer the opportunity for users to manipulate data online have careful step-by-step instructions and the best sites explain what the data is best used for.

Foundations have found it handy to have BNIA data, and often need translation and analysis. Each of the local foundations has a particular focus and requirements, whether it is to support baseline and post facto assessment of projects, to deepen understanding of an emerging issue and contribute to the design of initiatives and measurement of progress, or to allow applicants to describe conditions and quantify their needs. Some foundations are looking for BNIA to intensify its mining of local and other data sources. Baltimore Housing has data that could be included, and the Urban Institute’s NNIP staff has gained access to several more national datasets.

Data from many agencies across city government are now part of BNIA’s datasets. There are additional city datasets relevant to neighborhood change that are yet to be acquired and integrated. Most relevantly, the City’s fiscal challenges have left its analytical capabilities very thin, both in agencies and in the central administration (Mayor’s Office, Finance Department), just when they are needed most to insure that policies and programs are responsive to real needs, operating effectively and efficiently, and generating desired outcomes. BNIA can be a valuable partner to CitiStat and other management efforts to realize these goals.

The general public and policymakers need help making sense of data on people and places, and can better understand public policy issues when data from various sources is used to tell a story. BNIA can contribute to the public discussion of emerging issues by understanding what data/information would be relevant and communicating in a variety of self-initiated and invited appearances in op ed columns, radio talk shows, and other forums. One interviewee suggested that BNIA declare success when the BNIA icon is on the computer desktop (or speed dial) of all those who are working for a stronger Baltimore City. Other NNIP (National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership) sites have made themselves relevant and essential to those from all sectors who are grappling with their cities’ challenges. The Board of BNIA can be reconstituted to include leaders of the public, private, foundation, and nonprofit organizations that are part of the governance of Baltimore City. The board of SAVI at the Polis Center in Indianapolis includes university and business leaders as well as foundation and nonprofit officials.

Investigators at universities and research institutes who are addressing local policy questions either in a focused way or as part of multi-location studies, represent another set of “publics.” These researchers are aided in their competition for research grants and contracts by access to novel datasets, and their work can contribute to deeper understanding of the City’s assets and problems and alternative policy options for addressing them. The growing interest of funders of health-related research in contextual analysis drives collaboration between BNIA and researchers in the City’s two medical schools and school of public health.

BNIA must be able to articulate its value in helping community organizations, advocates, foundations and other funders, public officials, researchers and others make good decisions, either directly or through its contextual contributions to public policy research, including public health.

* ***Delivery of all disclosable data, first level analysis, and rudimentary mapping through an interactive website***

User-propelled search, combining of indicators, and mapping should be possible using the BNIA website, which would free staff for continued data acquisition, analysis, and fee-based projects. For example, with simple on-line tutoring, census-based demographics can be compared to Baltimore City Public Schools demographics to understand the extent to which families in specific places are using alternatives to public education or are not counted in the census – currently, the Baltimore City Public Schools are seeing Hispanic populations that are not reflected in census data. Many community-based organizations, recognizing the critical role played by schools in the health of their neighborhoods, are focusing more energetically on community-school-parent partnerships. Other NNIP partner websites, such as Denver and Philadelphia, allow users to access and combine data, and in some cases create maps. Indianapolis’s SAVI is currently testing a website that allows interactive creation of maps and tables at the block group level, and uploading of the user’s own data.

* ***Analytical capacity, with a network of subject area specialists, to collaborate in short-turnaround and longer-term fee-based projects for advocates, foundations and other nonprofit, government, and private sector organizations***

This aspect of BNIA’s work, as in other NNIP sites, generates over half of the organization’s budget. Key to expanding it is the capacity to understand the issues being presented by potential clients, to assess what data would be useful in framing and analyzing the issue, to determine what data the repository has and what it would need to add to do so, how to integrate data to produce analytically credible results, and especially to understand what the results reveal (starting with, “is a high number good or bad”). Fourteen of the 35 NNIP sites are housed in or affiliated with research universities, which gives them access to data and policy analysts in a wide range of fields. BNIA’s challenge is to develop mutually supportive relationships with local analysts, beginning with others in the University of Maryland System.

**FINANCES**

* ***Larger purposes affect funding availability***

Unlike many other NNIP sites, BNIA does not serve purposes other than those related to being a neighborhood indicators organization – for example the Providence Plan focuses on homelessness, the Columbia site on evaluation – and does not have ready customers from its host institution, such as SAVI, which supports (and receives funding for its contributions) research at its host institution, Indiana University/Purdue University Indianapolis. SAVI’s core funders are the Indiana University System and the United Way. It is virtually impossible to find sustaining financial support for simply warehousing and reporting data.

* ***Core funding from or through partners***

The Annie E. Casey Foundation has been a stalwart supporter of the core capabilities of BNIA through its funding of Vital Signs updates. BNIA must aggressively pursue additional core funding or in-kind services from an expanded set of partners with whom they can make common cause. See below.

* ***Pricing structure***

All customers – from small neighborhood organizations preparing a funding application to larger foundation-funded initiatives to teachers and researchers who request data for their students or research projects – need a clear understanding of what data, information, mapping, etc. is free to them by virtue of BNIA’s core mission, and, through a menu of services, what they can expect to pay for additional or customized work. Core partner agreements require specification of the basis on which the products of the partnership are to be shared publicly.

**OPPORTUNITIES TO EXPAND PARTNERSHIPS**

* BNIA should reformulate and crisply articulate its goals and the benefits it delivers to a wide range of community members, including institutions.
* The United Way of Central Maryland (UWCM) has adopted the CIM system (Community Issues Management, developed by the University of Missouri’s Center for Applied Research and Environmental Systems) to provide publicly (nationally) available data and tools for collaboration across the community on key issues. There are several areas in which cooperation between BNIA and UWCM to enrich UWCM data resources would be productive immediately, about which conversations have already begun. Deeper engagement in the future, particularly with regard to systematically using the 2-1-1 logs and possibly Efforts to Outcomes software to match needs and the supply of services to meet them, holds promise.
* If the United Way can be thought of as a collaborative of funders of human services agencies with which BNIA might usefully partner, then the Baltimore Neighborhood Collaborative (BNC) serves the same purpose for funders of neighborhood strategic planning and implementation. BNIA data is used both by applicants for funding to demonstrate need and target interventions and for successful grantees to demonstrate the impact of their activities. The collective support of this utility needs to be viewed as an ongoing cost of doing business by local funders.
* Supported by key board members, the Family League of Baltimore City (FLBC) has already begun to use Efforts to Outcomes software to better assess the extent of the reach of its grantee service providers in serving needy citizens. Integration with BNIA’s fine-grained information about community characteristics in specific geographies would dramatically enhance FLBC’s ability to fine-tune, integrate (in the cases in which families need multiple services), and portray the responsiveness of the efforts they are making.
* The release of data from the 2010 Census over the course of 2011 and the release of the five-year American Community Survey in December 2010 give BNIA an opportunity to re-introduce itself to the public and policymakers with timely analysis of neighborhood-level change and other themes. It also provides an opportune moment for discussions with Baltimore City government about an ongoing relationship to have BNIA integrate administrative data for the City’s own purposes and for public release, set against the backdrop of BNIA demographic data and analysis. Data Driven Detroit’s online maps of all indicators include maps of all the special district designations made by city government and one that overlays them all. BNIA’s establishment of a Data Committee would be a good first step towards exploring this opportunity.
* Strategic marketing of BNIA capabilities to researchers within the University System of Maryland and local Baltimore research institutions can widen its opportunities to be regularly included in grant proposals.

**CONCLUSIONS**

BNIA has the potential to become:

* + A go-to, responsive provider of high quality data and analysis on key issues of the day, widely mentioned in the local press, an essential partner for policymakers and other community stakeholders in all sectors
  + A more useful tool for community development practitioners - adding depth to the indicators currently maintained, using datasets now available through Urban Institute and Baltimore Housing and others, more real estate parcel data, synthesis of data from multiple sources at the block level
  + A provider of core data for providers of human services, and integrator of their service delivery data to produce clearer understanding of needs and the extent to which they are being met
  + A mechanism for better integration of services of all types
  + A provider of contextual data and information to public policy researchers, giving them a competitive edge in seeking funding that is used to compensate BNIA
  + A primarily web-based, highly interactive source of timely, accurate information and links to up-to-date relevant analysis

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| **INTERVIEWEES** |  |
| Marian Amoa | United Way |
| Tim Armbruster | Goldseker Foundation |
| Saundra Bond | 2-1-1 Maryland @ UWCM |
| Gayle Carney | CCTS |
| Jonathan Carter | United Way |
| Bob Embry | Abell Foundation |
| Mark Furst | United Way |
| Carol Gibison | Knott Foundation |
| Martha Holleman | Strategic Thinking for Social Change |
| Seema Iyer | Baltimore City Department of Planning |
| Steve Janes | Baltimore Housing |
| Sharon Kandris | Social Assets & Vulnerabilities Indicators (SAVI), The Polis Center, Indianapolis |
| Tom Kingsley | Urban Institute |
| Rafael Lopez | Family League of Baltimore/AECF |
| Diane Bell McKoy | Associated Black Charities |
| Joe McNeely | Central Baltimore Partnership |
| Sandy Monck | United Way |
| Betsy Nelson | Association of Baltimore Area Grantmakers |
| Janice Hamilton Outtz | Annie E. Casey Foundation |
| Kathy Pettit | Urban Institute |
| Johnette Richardson | Belair Edison Neighborhoods |
| Chris Ryer | Southeast CDC |
| Sally Scott | Homeownership Preservation Coalition |
| Ann Sherrill | Baltimore Neighborhood Collaborative |
| Jane Sundius | Open Society Institute-Baltimore |
| Tom Wilcox | Baltimore Community Foundation |