Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance—Jacob France Institute

Strategic Plan for *Vital Signs* 2011 and Beyond

Development of Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators in the 2010’s

December 2012

**Background**

For more than 10 years, the Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance-Jacob France Institute (BNIA-JFI) has been committed to enabling decision-making for neighborhood change, using accurate, relevant and accessible data and information for improving the quality of life in Baltimore neighborhoods. Along with an alliance of diverse organizations, BNIA-JFI empowers neighborhoods with measures and indicators to track success across common goals. BNIA-JFI produces an annual report called *Vital Signs[[1]](#footnote-1)* that "take the pulse" of Baltimore's neighborhoods by measuring approximately 110 quality of life indicators for all 55 Community Statistical Areas (CSAs). These indicators were established through a community-based visioning process in 2000 and have been used to track and monitor quality of life in neighborhoods as well as plan for the future, advocate for change, leverage funds through grant writing and community-based research.

The 10th edition of *Vital Signs* was released in May 2010 and shows that the City has seen improvement in many of the indicators tracked in *Vital Signs* reflecting the community-based efforts made to achieve these results. For example, the City in general is safer, healthier and more sustainable; the crime rate has declined by nearly 45%, the teen birth rate has declined by 32%, and the percentage of residents not using a car to travel to work has increased almost 11%. Neighborhoods like Midtown and Fells Point experienced the greatest improvements in crime rates; teen birth rates declined dramatically in Cherry Hill and Brooklyn/Curtis Bay; and in Harbor East/Little Italy, 2/3 of workers now commute to work by alternative means of transportation. Use of the City’s newly-implemented 311 service-call system for access to City services rose over the decade; for example, Baltimore residents increased calls to report dirty streets and alleys at a rate of more than 69 per 1,000.

However, these overall City improvements hide the fact that not all of the City’s neighborhoods have benefited equally. In the City’s most distressed neighborhoods, the compounding effects of population loss, increases in vacancies and foreclosures, increases in the percentage of residents spending more than thirty percent of their household income on their housing expenses, recent increases in crime rates, and increases in unemployment continue to affect the lives of thousands of residents.

Access to the *Vital Signs* indicators as well as ongoing analysis by BNIA-JFI staff is meant to serve as a resource for further improving the quality of life in every neighborhood. After a decade of producing community-based indicators, we have learned which indicators continue to reflect neighborhood issues, which indicators are no longer relevant, and which indicators are missing because new issues have come to the fore.

**Planning for the Future**

Beginning in June 2011, BNIA-JFI began a strategic planning process to assess relevant neighborhood indicators for Baltimore City that should be incorporated into subsequent reports beginning with *Vital Signs* 2011 and beyond. The elements in the process included the following:

* *Public History Project:* A project was launched in November 2011 to document the origins and history of the organization through archival research and structured interviewing with founding persons. Participants were asked about their views on how the *Vital Signs* indicators could continue to serve neighborhoods over the next decade. A series of products were developed including full documentation of the organization’s origins and development, a brochure celebrating the 10-year history of BNIA-JFI, and a video documenting the history of the organization.
* *Engagement of Steering Committee*: The BNIA-JFI steering committee was newly-constituted in June 2011 and now consists of over 25 members representing community groups, non-profits, governmental agencies, higher educational institutions and foundations. Through bi-annual meetings with the committee during the past 18 months, new indicators were vetted for utility and relevance.
* *Indicator Roundtables*: New indicators were discussed with the over 150 attendees in 2011 and 2012 at *Baltimore Data Day*, an annual workshop for neighborhood data users. During July 2012, a series of 5 roundtable conversations were hosted by BNIA-JFI. Number of attendees ranged from 10-25 for each conversation.

Based on the input from these projects and conversations, we have developed a revised set of indicators (see Appendix A) that not only build off existing expertise in data acquisition and analysis but also increase organizational capacity to better serve a wide variety of stakeholders given changes over the past decade in community needs as well as technology. In order to achieve both of these goals, we have identified the following areas for development of indicators and resources needed:

1. **Research & Development of Neighborhood Indicators**
2. **Greater Coordination among Local Data Providers and Users**
3. **Convening Role for Local Measures of Neighborhood Sustainability**
4. **Community Outreach via Social Media, Education and Training**
5. **Greater Accessibility via Open-Source, Online Interactive Data Searching**

BNIA-JFI will continue to serve as a “comprehensive” indicator site, providing cross-cutting data on a wide-variety of quality-of-life issues; however, with the proliferation of Open Data portals and other web-mapping sites (including PolicyMap, American Factfinder, etc) we aim to focus attention on information that is “hyper-local” and available for the 55 Community Statistical Areas with at least an annual frequency. This requires continuous communication and greater coordination with several data providers particularly City agencies, data users at various scales of proficiency and university/foundation researchers.

1. **Research & Development of Baltimore’s Neighborhood Indicators**

When the *Vital Signs* indicators first came out in 2002, the innovation at the time was allowing communities to see the integration of information previously difficult to obtain and visualize. Today, the *Vital Signs* indicators, along with the City’s and State’s focus on “Stat” operations, Outcome Budgeting and other performance-based measurement systems, have become more institutionalized across various stakeholders.

*Purpose of Indicators*

In order to remain relevant to Baltimore communities and community-based initiatives, the proposed *Vital Signs* indicators should serve as a **common or shared measurement system** that reflect current paradigms of intervention. This will allow all stakeholders to track the impact of mutually reinforcing activities towards achieving a common set of goals or common agenda among organizations.

With the goal of developing a shared measurement system, we analyzed national trends, academic research, local plans, and community input to ensure that the overall set of indicators is relevant to Baltimore’s community-based stakeholders.

* *National best practices*: BNIA-JFI has been is the Baltimore partner of the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP) since 1999. Through the NNIP network, BNIA-JFI is connected to 35 other cities for learning and staying ahead of the curve regarding research and development of neighborhood based data-driven initiatives. The new proposed set of indicators reflects the need to include a shared set of data for easier cross-site comparative analysis.
* *Local planning processes*: Several local and regional plans over the past decade have included specific indicators to monitor the effectiveness of plan implementation, such as the City’s Comprehensive Master Plan, Sustainability Plan, Healthy Baltimore Plan and the regional Sustainable Communities Initiative. The proposed set of Vital Signs indicators are intended to serve as means of tracking and evaluating the relevant neighborhood impacts of city and state plans.
* *Grant writing resources*: Analysis of grant applications for programs such as Community Development Block Grant, Association of Baltimore Area Grantmakers Common Grant, and Maryland Sustainable Communities Grant identified several indicators that organizations need in order to satisfy basic data requirements for community-based grant writing for funding.

*Analysis of Administrative Data Sets*

BNIA-JFI staff has gained significant expertise in the development of *Vital Signs* on the technical requirements and ethical standards of practice on the analysis of administrative data obtained from public and/or governmental agencies. While some data have become easier to acquire (via open access portals such as Open Baltimore), many data sources require the establishment of a legal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the agency and the University of Baltimore to ensure confidentiality and responsible use. Staff has had to stay informed of laws pertaining to data confidentiality (FERPA) and use of the data is then subject to UB’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure ethical use of confidential records. In order to archive the data in a way that is electronically secure yet easily retrievable, we are in the process of creating a relational, geodatabase to automate the archival processes and integrate stored data with new incoming data. BNIA-JFI is currently in need of an electronic filing system design for archiving historic data and documentation of the workflow as data is transformed from its raw format to publication.

1. **Greater Coordination among Local Data Providers and Users**

Although access to raw data used for calculating neighborhood indicators is easier today due to more electronic administration of public data and the establishment of legal protocols governing access to and responsibility for confidential information, the proliferation of data sources has required BNIA-JFI staff to engage in more frequent communications with data providers and data users.

*Greater Coordination with City Agencies/Organizations*

In addition to the long-standing relationship established between BNIA-JFI and CitiStat, Baltimore City Public School System, Baltimore Housing and Police Department, we need to build capacity regarding data that exists in other departments on the OpenBaltimore platform as well as administrative records that require confidentiality agreements to acquire. Below is the list of agencies and/or organizations that staff needs to coordinate data acquisition:

* Mayor’s Office of Information Technology
  + 311 and other OpenBaltimore data
* Department of Health
  + Mortality rates from the Community Health Profiles and new indicators on sexually transmitted diseases
* Department of Finance
  + Historic Preservation and other homeowner Tax Credits
* Department of Public Works
  + Event permits
* Mayor’s Office of Employment Development
  + One Stop Shop clients and other workforce development measures
* Enoch Pratt Free Library
  + Library membership
* United Way of Central Maryland
  + 211 calls for housing and utility services

*Analysis of Federal sources of small-area data*

Several federal agencies had also developed means of accessing small area data that can be used to develop localized neighborhood based indicators.

* American Community Survey (ACS): staff follows technical documentation from the Bureau regarding methods of comparing data across years and for aggregating margins of error
* Local Employment and Household Dynamics (LEHD) On the Map: staff is researching the possibility of incorporating the CSA areas to produce some indicators on work-based trips
* Federal Communications Commission (FCC): data on digital access categories is currently available by census tract; staff needs to determine a method for aggregating categories for CSAs.
* USPS Data on “No Stat”: HUD is making these data available for researchers and practitioners to explore their potential utility for tracking neighborhood change on a quarterly basis

*Greater Coordination among Area Institutions for Research-Based Community Indicators*

Many area universities are engaging in primary research agendas that have produced information actionable at the neighborhood level. BNIA-JFI intends to coordinate release of the Vital Signs indicators by incorporating the research results from other institutions in order to tap into expertise in these specific areas:

* **Indicators on neighborhoods accessibility via transit and other modes**: work with the University of Maryland, National Center for Smart Growth in conjunction with the Center’s work with the Sustainable Communities Initiative
* **Indicators on healthy food access**: work with the Johns Hopkins University, Center for a Livable Future on developing Health Food Accessibility Index and Fast Food Density (Measures of Food Swamps)
* **Indicator for tree canopy**: work with the University of Maryland Baltimore County, Forest Service, Baltimore Ecosystem Study to update the 2004 tree canopy indicator
* **Indicator on water use**: work with the University of Maryland Baltimore County, Center for Urban Environmental Research to develop measures of neighborhood water use
* **Indicators for public art:** work with the Maryland Institute College of Art to utilize the Public Art Mapping data

1. **Convening Role for Measures of Neighborhood Sustainability**

As part of BNIA-JFI’s strategic direction for the next 10 years, aggregating non-administrative/community-based sources of data will be important for providing communities with indicators tracking “sustainability”—in particular indicators that tract activities that support better water quality, energy efficiency and walkability.

*Water Quality by Neighborhood*

Over the past year, BNIA-JFI has been in discussions for coordinating the mapping of projects for the Baltimore Urban Waters coalition. In an effort to “revitalize urban waters and the communities that surround them” [[2]](#footnote-2), collaboration among inter-governmental, inter-jurisdictional and non-governmental entities is critical to gaining a common understanding of localized problems and developing an integrated set of strategies for achieving community revitalization. Understanding urban waters and the Baltimore communities that surrounds them requires ongoing information about the social, economic, and environmental characteristics of the localized areas that comprise the City and Region. The sources of data regarding urban waters are varied, ranging from water quality monitoring efforts by public agencies, NGOs, and community groups to “greening” and capital improvement projects conducted by neighborhoods, private businesses and local governments. Beginning September 2012 based on a grant from the USDA, BNIA-JFI will be developing a mapping tool to aggregate data on community gardens and made accessible to the public, with specific links to community/watershed organizations and other stakeholders. BNIA-JFI will develop community-based indicators for inclusion to annually reported Vital Signs. <http://www.urbanwaters.gov/pdf/baltimore.pdf>

*Energy Use, Energy Efficiency and Energy Assistance*

One of the biggest issues that gained importance for neighborhoods over the past decade is the use, conservation and cost of residential energy. In order to better understand the interventions, programs and potential data that might be useful to analysis new neighborhood indicators, BNIA-JFI participated in several projects and activities to gain internal expertise. These include:

* Analysis of Phase II Baltimore Energy Challenge: energy bill analysis of participants which required working with BGE Office of Load Analysis and Settlement
* Served on the Advisory Team for Baltimore Housing’s Green and Healthy Homes Pilot Project: Assisted in development of neighborhood based indicators for the City’s CREATES proposal to the PSC
* Participated in the GHHI Learning Network Data and Evaluation Working Group: this group had been hosted by the Coalition to End Childhood Lead Poisoning and could alternatively be hosted at BNIA-JFI, if appropriate

*Walkability and Sustainable Transportation*

Based on the Indicator Roundtable discussion on Sustainability, it became clear that many stakeholders are interested in accessing more data that is either collected by the Department of Transportation or coordinated through DOT. In particular, the development of neighborhood Walkscore and Transitscore needs to be highly coordinated with DOT and the Central Maryland Transportation Alliance, among others.

1. **Outreach via Social Media, Education and Training**

The goal and mission of BNIA-JFI is to strengthen the practice of data-driven decisions to support stronger neighborhoods, improved quality of life, and a thriving city by empowering Baltimore residents, neighborhoods, and organizations with the data and analyses required to shape and impact policies that affect them and to support improvements within Baltimore. BNIA-JFI continues to assist community-based organizations in strategic planning, grant writing and neighborhood advocacy. As part of this mission-driven work, BNIA-JFI staff responds to over 250 requests per year for data, information, maps, and technical assistance, as well as providing trainings and presentations. With the revised set of indicators proposed for 2011, we anticipate more focused outreach to apprise stakeholders of the change. The BNIA-JFI’s website experiences over 9600 unique visitors each year and our Facebook and Twitter sites have a growing flowing since launching 2011.

BNIA-JFI began in 2010 to host *Baltimore Data Day*, a one-day conference designed to bring together community organizers, nonprofit agencies, researchers and government entities in order to expand their abilities to use technology and data for the improvement of local communities. Since the inaugural program in 2010, the visibility of BNIA-JFI has grown significantly. Participation in the conference has expanded considerably with over 200 participants in this year’s conference.

Because the indicators are available online, we have also seen an increased use of the data in college curricula and research agendas. While BNIA-JFI greatly benefits from the knowledge gained through these collaborations, staff also provides curriculum support to the faculty and students engaged in these efforts. Below are some of the programs that BNIA-JFI provides technical assistance for:

* Based on a long-standing relationship, BNIA-JFI has provided several indicators for students at the **Johns Hopkins Institute for Public Policy, Baltimore Policy Project** (BPP).
* BNIA-JFI is partnering with **Morgan State University** on a community planning process called the Morgan Mile Initiative, funded in part by the EDA and a Mobile App project developed by computer science students, funded in part by the DHS.
* Beginning Fall 2012, the **Maryland Institute College of Art Data Visualization** **Residency** Program will be analyzing and testing the BNIA-JFI data to develop state of the art techniques to find patterns in the data.
* Also in Fall 2012, students in **Towson University’s Information Technology Capstone** course will be assisting in the design of a data repository/catalog for data used in developing Vital Signs.

1. **Greater Accessibility via Open-Source, Online Interactive Data Searching**

BNIA-JFI proposes to create a comprehensive and interactive website using available open source development tools to provide data, indicators, and mapping for Baltimore City, its communities, and neighborhoods. The website will be an extension of BNIA-JFI’s ability to assist, train, and educate a variety of audiences and stakeholders about Baltimore City, its communities, neighborhoods, and residents.

The BNIA-JFI website as proposed will contain the following features:

* *Data Search Tool* -- that allows users to more interactively generate queries on longitudinal data, specific indicators, neighborhoods and years. The Search Tool will also allow for interactive mapping of data, indicators, and locations (such as police and fire stations, hospitals and health care centers, and transit stations) can be placed on as many as two maps that can either show separate areas or can be linked together to show a single area.
* *Data Analytics* – the website will allow users to analyze data and indicators collected by BNIA-JFI. Data can be viewed in tabular, chart, graph, or on a map.
* *Reports* – users will be able to view research reports created by BNIA-JFI staff, University faculty and staff, and other researchers that are affiliated with BNIA-JFI.
* *Maps* – users will be able to generate and download self-generated as well as pre-loaded maps. These may include asset maps, general reference maps, and maps of Vital Signs indicators.

While BNIA-JFI currently has a website that provides data on Baltimore City’s communities, this site lacks interactivity, the ability to be frequently updated (beyond uploading static documents and annual data), and the specialized mapping features that this new website will possess. The current site has only static data and the data are only available at the Community level and do not allow users to choose a level of geographic comparison or a time frame.

**Funding**

The Annie E. Casey Foundation continues to support BNIA-JFI annually for the acquisition, analysis and accessibility of comprehensive community-based indicators available online at [www.bniajfi.org](http://www.bniajfi.org). The ongoing work of BNIA-JFI is additionally supported through research projects utilizing the archived databases.

Appendix A

[List of Indicators for Vital Signs 2011-2015](file:///R:\BNIA\VitalSigns\Vital%20Signs%2011\VS11%20Complete%20(inc%20Proposed)%20Indicators.xlsx)

1. Given the lag time in data releases, the annual release of Vital Signs represents indicators for the preceding year/18 months. Therefore, Vital Signs 2011 will be released in March 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Vision of the Urban Waters Federal Partnership [↑](#footnote-ref-2)