



Working Together To Build Strong Communities

**PO Box 1469 | Durham, NC 27702**

**[www.communitysolutionsnetwork.org](http://www.communitysolutionsnetwork.org)**

## **What is the North Carolina Community Solutions Network?**

The NC Community Solutions Network is a diverse group of nonprofit, governmental and community leaders from across the state with the audacious goal that every community in North Carolina will have access to culturally-based, affordable technical assistance and resources to support locally-initiated collaborative community building efforts.

NCCSN believes that communities can best solve complex problems and create future equity and justice when they are inclusive and meaningfully involve all stakeholders in the privileged work of community building; build relationships of trust and respect across lines of race, class, and power differences; seek to build on all their assets—physical, organizational, cultural or historic, and human; and embrace the paradox that the most crucial knowledge, wisdom, and perspectives reside within the community and that outsiders can be a helpful catalyst for unleashing a community's potential.

## **How do we define collaborative community problem-solving?**

Through interviews across the state, the Network discovered the existence of seven conditions present in successful community problem-solving efforts. Community builders from inside and outside the community help a community integrate group process, planning, and technical support to bring about these seven conditions.

### **1) Community Will**

Communities that successfully solve some of their most intractable problems have a sufficient number of leaders of key constituencies who want to change and are committed to seeing that the community becomes more just, fair, or democratic.

### **2) A Critical Mass of Trusting Relationships**

Another foundation is a sufficiently powerful web of trusting relationships among leaders of key constituencies in the community. Barriers of race, culture, class, gender, power, and personal history all make trusting relationships difficult to create, all make it harder for leaders to cross the divides in their community to create the collaborative partnerships necessary to tackle the multidimensional issues now challenging them.

### **3) A Vision of Shared Responsibility and Action**

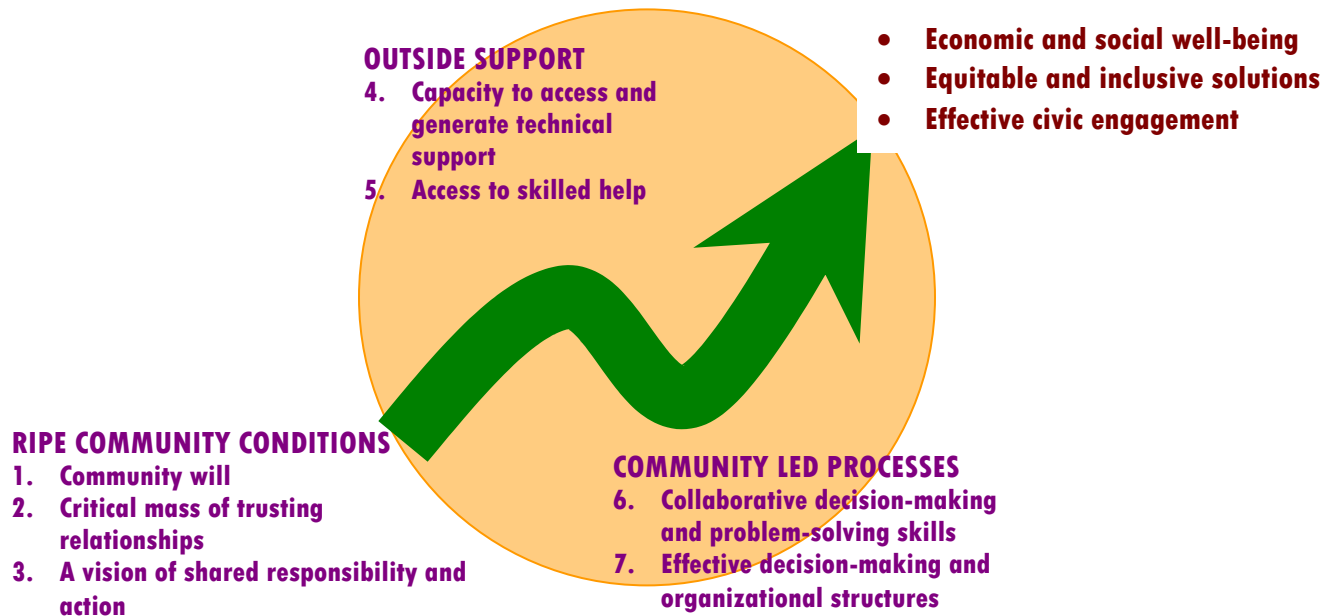
Closely related to community will and a web of trusting relationships is an understanding among leaders and citizens that people *throughout the community* are *mutually* responsible for and capable of action. The problems currently confronting communities cannot be solved unless the entire community is engaged. Too often change efforts emerge from one segment of or sector in the community without any effort to bring other groups to the table from the outset.

### **4) Effective Decision-making and Organizational Structures**

Successful community problem solving efforts need structures for governance, planning, community engagement, and accountability that build and promote trust, inclusion, and constructive engagement. Meaningful inclusion of low-income citizens is a particular challenge, even for the most well-intentioned efforts.

### **5) Collaborative Decision-Making and Problem-Solving Skills**

To create such structures and, more importantly, to make them work requires leaders and citizens in communities to develop a range of new skills, including process skills, interpersonal skills, analytic



and planning skills, and management and technical skills. Some of the most important skills are related to leadership: the ability to quickly earn the trust of people who typically mistrust each other -- particularly on issues of race; the capacity to work within structures of collective leadership; and the ability to frame issues that capture the imagination and inspire the creative potential of citizens throughout the community.

#### 6) Capacity to Access and Generate Technical Knowledge

Beyond skills and structures, leaders and citizens who engage in community innovation and problem-solving efforts develop working knowledge of trends, best practices, emerging thinking, and policy contexts in the areas they are seeking to influence. Many of the problems most pressing on North Carolina communities are particularly vexing because there is no settled analysis of what should or can be done. This means that communities have to have both working familiarity with existing best practices and a capacity to create and apply fresh ideas about tough issues.

#### 7) Access to Skilled Help

No one community has access to all of the capacities it needs to undertake an ambitious community-change agenda. Community leaders need access to different kinds of

help at different times as they develop their problem-solving capacities.

### What are the principles at the root of our work?

The NC Community Solutions Network uses a comprehensive set of principles to guide its practices of community problem-solving.

#### Communities can best solve complex problems and create futures of equity and justice when they:

- are inclusive and meaningfully involve all stakeholders in the privileged work of community building.
- build relationships of trust and respect across lines of race, class, power differences.
- seek to build on all of their assets—physical, organizational, cultural or historic, human (particularly across a continuum of ages).
- embrace a paradox: that the most crucial knowledge, wisdom, and perspective reside within the communities themselves, and that often a helpful catalyst for unleashing such latent potential comes from people outside of the community.

**Processes designed to assist communities solve complex problems and create futures of equity and justice are most effective when they:**

- combine reflection and action, so that concrete changes in the community begin to occur even during the process of planning and so that concrete action occurs as a result of any deliberative “problem-solving” process.
- take into account the cultural and historic context of the community, drawing on both the strengths and the barriers created by that culture and history.
- integrate leadership development into all phases of the work in the community.
- provide enough time—often years—for true change.

**People or organizations who live outside of a community, and who wish to help that community solve complex problems and create futures of equity and justice, can best do so when they:**

- participate in the work of the community with an explicit commitment to expand the community’s capacities to solve its own problems and create its own future.
- engage with the community in a spirit of partnership and learning for all parties.
- ensure that some kind of institutional base of support remains for the work of ongoing collaborative change to continue.
- do all possible to build community capacity and systems for ongoing learning and recognize that some relationship between the community and an outside provider in the future may be useful, given the ongoing dynamic of community change.