



UNDERSTANDING OUR COMMUNITY + ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ECOSYSTEM | Part One

*A Look at the Capacity + Resources of Neighborhood-Based
Development Organizations*

INTRODUCTION

To shed light on the health and efficacy of the community and economic development ecosystem, [Invest STL](#), in partnership with the [Civic Insight](#) (previously called Center for Civic Research and Innovation [CCRI]), initiated a four-part ecosystem assessment in 2023.

This brief explores the services and operating capacity of 22 community-based development organizations (CBDOs), including the organizations' connection to their community, programmatic focus, and resources for operations and staffing. Future components will further explore resident-led organizations, the intermediary organizations and systems that support community-based development organizations; funders and resource landscape; and the policy focus and momentum of the field.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to our collaborators for their partnership and support to make this brief possible: Civic Insight, the [Community Builders Network](#) (CBN), the [St. Louis Association of Community Organizations](#) (SLACO), and the many community organizations and individuals who shared valuable experiences and insights.

SUMMARY

Neighborhood-based organizations in the St. Louis region play a critical role in connecting residents and addressing local priorities. However, acute underinvestment in these organizations is exacerbated along geographical and racial lines. This limits the capacity of community-based development organizations and their ability to be responsive to hyperlocal needs.

Intentional funding strategies beyond programmatic support must align resources for activities closest to resident priorities and sustainable operations and staffing, especially in neighborhoods already enduring a legacy of divestment. Shared minimum standards for operations and programming, supported by aligned funding, will encourage a consistent network of care and partnership in neighborhoods.

RESEARCH APPROACH

In Spring 2023, CBN, Civic Insight, and Invest STL partnered to conduct a survey of community-based development organizations. CBDOs are nonprofit organizations that “carry out both development (including real estate and business development) and other nondevelopment activities, such as community organizing... advocating for policy and program changes, and providing services to households and other organizations.”¹ Because they are based in and shaped by local communities, CBDOs reflect “diverse organizational characteristics, priorities and activities.”² The survey aimed to capture a snapshot of the current state of CBDOs in St. Louis, reflecting on their operational, financial, and programmatic challenges and successes. To ensure participation from a representative cross-section of organizations involved in community development, the survey was shared and distributed through established networks such as CBN, Invest STL, and SLACO. Sections of the assessment covered the following topics: organizational history, governance, staffing and volunteers, real estate practices, community engagement practices, financial management, advocacy and collaboration, program effectiveness, and capacity building needs.

Secondary Data

The [Community Opportunity Alliance](#) (COA) commissioned the [Urban Institute](#) to conduct research as a foundation for a multiyear initiative exploring the characteristics and financial health of CBDOs across the United States. From 2022-2024, the Urban Institute and other partners, including [ThirdSpace Action Lab](#) and COA, released reports analyzing tax filings and survey responses from over 6,000 organizations, in addition to qualitative findings on residents’ views of community development organizations. The national survey included similar sections and, in some cases, identical questions as the local survey tool. Where relevant, national and local data are cited to give context to local survey results.

To facilitate comparison with secondary data, this analysis includes survey results from community development corporations and place-based economic development organizations for a cohort of 22 organizations.

LIMITATIONS

While the survey aimed to provide a comprehensive overview of the operational and programmatic capacity of CBDOs in the St. Louis region, there are several limitations to consider.

The distribution of the assessment relied primarily on networks associated with Invest STL, CBN, and SLACO. While this broad outreach effort was effective overall, it may not have reached smaller or more independent organizations.

Additionally, although the surveyed organizations represent a significant portion of the region, the respondents skew toward agencies working within the City of St. Louis more than those in St. Louis County or East St. Louis.

Furthermore, the length of the survey (over 60 minutes) likely deterred some organizations from participating or fully completing the assessment.

As with all self-reported data, there is a risk of variation in how organizations interpret questions, which could affect the consistency of responses. The survey was conducted within a specific time frame in 2023, therefore changes in economic conditions or funding landscapes since then may not be reflected in the findings.

Finally, while comparisons with national data are informative,

differences in local context may limit the direct applicability of these comparisons. **Despite these limitations, the survey results provide valuable insights into the capacity and challenges faced by local CBDOs.**

SUMMARY OF PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

For the purpose of comparison with secondary data, this assessment analyzed survey results for 22 local CBDOs, including 19 community development corporations and 3 place-based economic development organizations.³ A future assessment will include a larger share of affordable housing developers along with other neighborhood development support providers. Nineteen are members of CBN, and 3 are members of both CBN and SLACO.

Organization age ranges from less than five years to 50 years for two community development corporations. Nearly half of the cohort has been operating for more than 25 years (45.45%), with more than one-third operating more than 42 years (36.36%). The average Executive Director has been leading their organization for 8.2 years.

Approximately three-fourths of local CBDOs focus on a single or small cluster of neighborhoods, while the rest serve broader areas (10 or more neighborhoods, or more than one municipality or county).

Sixteen local CBDOs focus on neighborhoods in St. Louis City. Eight of these focus exclusively on neighborhoods north of Delmar Blvd., including the Delmar commercial corridor. Eight either currently or have historically focused on neighborhoods south of Delmar, including 3 which have expanded to offer services north of Delmar or region-wide. Four organizations support communities in St. Louis County, and 2 in St. Clair County, IL.

Programmatic Focus

Local CBDOs support a broad array of neighborhood and housing services within their respective communities. In the 12 months preceding the survey, local CBDOs repaired and/or preserved 354 resident homes, cleaned or maintained 193 vacant lots, supported 392 businesses, and served over 19,000 individuals and families with limited financial resources. Most local CBDOs (72.73%) provide neighborhood revitalization and stabilization, and 68.18% produce affordable housing or provide home repair. Over half provide community gardening, greening, and beautification (59.09%), and nearly

half provide economic development, including supporting small businesses and attracting new businesses or development (45.45%). At the time of the survey, local CBDOs reported there are 324 housing units that require repairs. Nearly 50 units are uninhabitable, double the amount of substantial repairs completed in the year preceding the survey (25 units total). Midsize organizations, with budgets between \$250,000–\$1M, own over half of the units needing repairs (54%) and those currently uninhabitable (57%).

Over 5,000 individuals and families with limited financial resources receive housing services through local CBDOs, primarily through large organizations that own 84% and manage 95% of reported housing units.

When asked to indicate up to 5 programmatic areas where they would benefit most from capacity-building, local organizations most often prioritized economic development. This signals that economic development is a potential growth and investment area.



Organization Size + Revenue

Most organizations (72.73%) have operating expenses under \$1M, and nearly one-third (31.81%) have a budget size below \$100,000 (TABLE 1). Of the 18 organizations with paid staff, the smallest employs one part-time position, while the largest has 85 full-time employees.

On average, large local CBDOs (budgets over \$1M) generate more than half of their revenue from earned income, likely driven by developing and managing housing.⁴

In contrast, small organizations (budgets below \$250,000) depend more on government and foundation grants. For organizations that have received funding to develop, maintain, and/or repair housing, private grants were the single largest source of funding (53%), followed by U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Community Development Block Grant program (41%).

TABLE 1. LOCAL CBDO SUMMARY STATISTICS

Organization size	Budget expenses	% with six or more months in reserves	Share of Survey Respondent Workforce	Median full-time staff positions
Large (6 orgs)	\$1,000,001 or more	50.00%	77.62%	5.50
Midsize (6 orgs)	\$250,001 - \$1,000,000	66.67%	15.71%	2.50
Small (10 orgs)	Less than \$250,000	11.11%	6.67%	0.50

Source: 2023 Local CED Assessment Survey Data

FINDING 1. *Community Aligned*

Local CBDOs are influenced by community perspectives, which guide operational decisions and engagement in local advocacy to an extent. There is more work to be done for CBDOs to be shaped by their focus communities.

Neighborhood plans or similar key constituent-informed processes guide the activities, programs, and offerings of 68.18% of local CBDOs, with 40.91% of organizations actively initiating and leading community planning efforts in the past five years (**FIGURE 1**). To align their work with community guidance, organizations report effective engagement strategies include face-to-face meetings (81.82%), community forums (63.64%), community advisory councils (36.36%), and email communication (36.36%). However, only 27.27% of CBDOs sought community input on their organizational strategies, suggesting there's more opportunity for constituents to directly shape CBDO services and interactions.

Beyond seeking alignment, 63.64% of organizations report advocating for community priorities not tied to their own programs, and a significant share are involved in local advocacy and community organizing (81.82% and 68.18%, respectively), outpacing the national cohort (60% and 62%, respectively).⁵

Local CBDOs also demonstrate a commitment to hiring from the community, a practice that helps residents inform the day-to-day operations of these organizations. At the time of the survey, 66.67% of staffed organizations employed residents from their service areas, while a slightly higher percentage (68.18%) have hired staff from the community in the past five years.

Implications of Finding 1

Community alignment fosters trust with residents and ensures programs are relevant and responsive. Local CBDOs are already engaged in various forms of community accountability, and they see this as an area for continued growth.

When asked to indicate up to 5 programmatic areas where they would benefit most from capacity-building, neighborhood planning received the second-highest response (45.45% of all organizations). More than one-fourth also prioritized community engagement training (27.27%).

Further, the work of bringing residents together to address community issues demonstrates strong alignment between local CBDOs and the region's most pressing needs. The United Way of Greater St. Louis' 2020 community needs assessment found community building was the highest-ranked priority need in both St. Louis City and St. Louis County.⁶

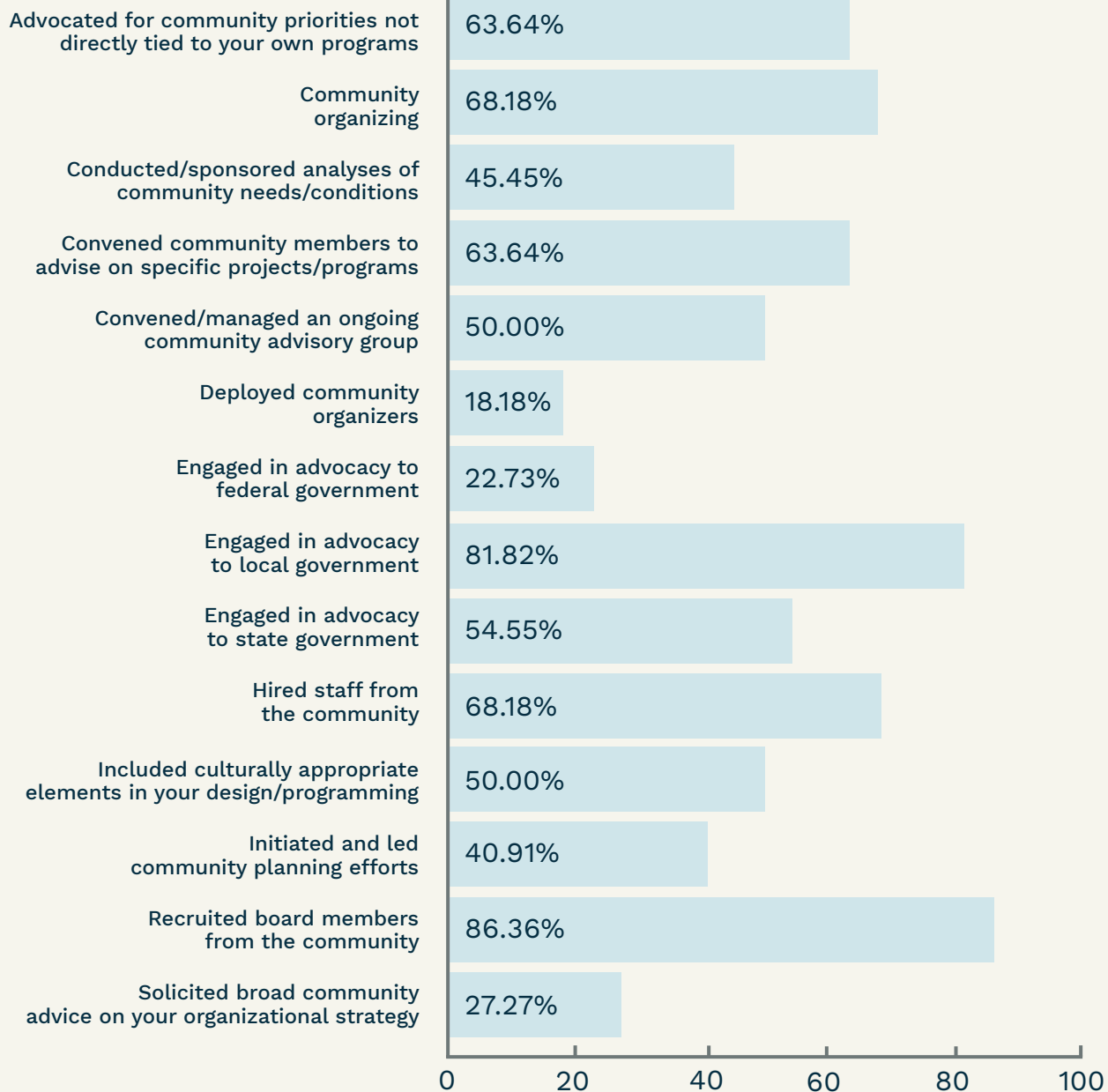
As defined within that assessment, community building encompasses “knowing others in your community and building social resources to improve quality of life,” as well as having “the resources to support community issues and policy changes.”⁷

Residents who contributed to the assessment associated community building with having neighborhood-based organizations and leadership, promoting equity, and addressing power hierarchies.⁸

These findings highlight the critical role that local CBDOs can play in supporting community cohesion. With the right support, they can continue to drive local change where it is most needed.

FIGURE 1. SHARE OF CBDOS ENGAGING IN COMMUNITY ACCOUNTABILITY ACTIONS, 2018-2023

COMMUNITY ACCOUNTABILITY ACTIONS



Source: 2023 Local CED Assessment Survey Data

FINDING 2. Geographic + Racial Disparities in Resource Allocation

Inequitable resource allocation persists for local community and economic development efforts. CBDOs focused on North St. Louis City neighborhoods and those with directors of color operate with fewer resources, reserves, and staff.

Of the eight organizations that focus exclusively on North St. Louis City neighborhoods, none have budget expenditures over \$1 million (**TABLE 2**). While making up more than one-third of the survey cohort, they represent 12.38% of the local CBDO workforce represented in the survey, with an average of 1.38 full-time employees. Three of these organizations are volunteer-run.

TABLE 2. CBDO SUMMARY STATISTICS BY GEOGRAPHY

Geographic focus	% with budget size greater than \$1M	% with six or more months in reserves	Share of Survey Respondent Workforce	Median full-time staff positions
North St. Louis City (8 orgs)	0.0%	12.5%	12.4%	1.0
South St. Louis City (8 orgs)	50.0%	50.0%	37.1%	3.5
St. Louis County, MO (4 orgs)	50.0%	50.0%	46.2%	4.0
St. Clair County, IL (2 orgs)	0.0%	50.0%	4.3%	1.5

When comparing subsets of staffed organizations, those led by directors of color operate with one-fifth as many paid staff compared to those led by white directors, while employing a higher proportion of residents and people of color **(TABLE 3)**. Only one out of the eight organizations led by directors of color has a budget over \$1 million or financial reserves to sustain six or more months of operation, compared to 62.5% and 75% of organizations led by white directors, respectively. Financial reserves help leaders respond effectively to crises and enable access to diverse funding sources, such as government grants that operate through reimbursement.

Differences in revenue may be driven in part by differences in owning and managing housing, which generate earned income. The same percentage of organizations in both subsets report producing, owning, and/or managing real estate assets (7 of 8 organizations led by directors of color, and 7 of 8 organizations led by white directors). However, organizations led by directors of color own and manage 16.3% and 4.3% of housing units reported in the survey, respectively, while organizations led by white directors own and manage 83.5% and 95.6%, respectively. Constrained program income may elevate the importance of foundation grants, which is the largest source of revenue for organizations led by directors of color (34.1% of revenue), as well as organizations based in North St. Louis neighborhoods (21% of revenue).

TABLE 3. CBDO SUMMARY STATISTICS BY LEADERSHIP

Metrics	Led by director of color (8 orgs)	Led by white director (8 orgs)
% with budget expenses of \$1M or more	0.0%	62.5%
% with six months or more in reserves	12.5%	75.0%
Share of Survey Respondent Workforce	15.7%	78.1%
Median full-time positions	1.5	4.5
Average % of staff who are residents	41.6%	23.5%
Average % of staff who are people of color	91.7%	35.3%

Source: 2023 Local CED Assessment Survey Data

Implications of Finding 2

Despite underinvestment, CBDOs focused on North St. Louis City cleaned and maintained half of all vacant lots reported in the survey, a critical step toward safety and desired community uses. Staffed organizations led by directors of color supported the majority of all businesses reported in the survey (55.87%).

The importance of these services — and the private funding that sustains them — highlights the need for changes in local funding.

A report from the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis on philanthropic giving to community and economic development finds the majority of philanthropic dollars goes to organizations with budgets between \$2M-\$10M.⁹ This would preclude local support for the majority of the survey cohort, including all staffed organizations led by directors of color, and all CBDOs based in North St. Louis City.

Further, the report finds Black-led organizations in the sector receive less support from local foundations.¹⁰ Other research sheds light on funding barriers for leaders of color, and Black leaders in particular. The Urban Institute finds that among CBDOs nationally, directors of color more frequently report facing entrenched political and funding barriers than their white counterparts.¹¹

Echoing Green's research on equity issues within philanthropy adds that "inequitable access to social networks" leave leaders of color with fewer opportunities for "building rapport with potential funders."¹² The survey may point to similar challenges — when asked to indicate organizational areas where they would benefit most from capacity-building, five of eight staffed organizations with directors of color ranked relationships with banking managers as a priority, compared to zero organizations led by white directors. Ultimately, Echoing Green finds these barriers result in fewer unrestricted dollars for Black leaders and organizations serving Black communities, constraining organizational capacity and growth.¹³

FINDING 3: *Staffing + Volunteer Dependency*

A large share of community economic development professionals are compensated below the living wage threshold, further affecting equity and sustainability within the ecosystem.

According to survey responses from staffed organizations, nearly three-quarters of the local CBDO workforce represented are people of color (72.1%, with 17 organizations reporting race data) and women (72.5%, with 14 organizations reporting gender data). Organizational staff are on average 56.9% Black or African American, 39.8% White (non-Hispanic), 2.1% Hispanic, 3% Asian, and 1.2% identify as some other race or ethnicity (**TABLE 4**). Approximately one-third (32.9%) of staff at surveyed CBDOs live in their organization's service area, with 17 organizations reporting residency data.

Looking deeper, staffing at local CBDOs highlights both the strength and vulnerability of these organizations. Four organizations are entirely volunteer-run, providing critical services without compensation. Among the 15 organizations that reported salary data, an average of 30.1% of paid employees earn less than \$30,500 annually, and nearly half (44.8%) earn under \$49,000 annually.

The living wage for a single adult with no children in the St. Louis metro is estimated at \$43,888 (based on MIT's \$21.10 hourly rate¹⁴), which means approximately half of paid staff in a typical organization are likely to earn below a living wage. In a dual-income household with one child, each partner would need to earn \$42,744 to meet a living wage, which may still leave a notable share of the CBDO workforce behind. If a single adult has one child, the living wage rises significantly to \$76,710, and up to 85.2% of the local workforce represented may live under that threshold.

TABLE 4. LOCAL CBDO STAFF RACE + ETHNICITY

Race + Ethnicity	Share of Survey Respondent Workforce
Black or African American	68.14%
White (non-hispanic)	27.94%
Hispanic	1.96%
Asian	0.98%
Some other race or ethnicity	0.98%
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.00%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0.00%

Source: 2023 Local CED Assessment Survey Data

Implications of Finding 3

Funders of community development work must consider how increasing the operational capacity of local CBDOs will impact the community and advance equity.

Disparity in compensation contributes to challenges in attracting talent, high turnover, and potential burnout among underpaid staff or volunteers. Ensuring that salaries meet at least the living wage can significantly impact staff morale and

organizational stability, and staff longevity supports the relationships and trust at the heart of effective community development.

Having staff teams that reflect the community greatly benefits community-based efforts. However, current resource constraints undervalue the people behind the work, disproportionately affecting people of color, women, and local residents, ultimately running counter to the purpose and intentions of community and economic development.

FINDING 4: *Crisis of Underinvestment*

A severe lack of operating resources undermines the capacity and long-term viability of local CBDOs.

Despite their strong showing in community engagement and services, local CBDOs are significantly under-resourced. The median local organization budget falls between \$250,000-\$500,000,¹⁵ approximately 3-5 times lower than the national median budget of \$1.36 million.¹⁶

Data from 2018 tax filings indicate that compared to CBDOs in other Midwestern metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs), the St. Louis MSA has the lowest median budget size and highest proportion of small organizations **(TABLE 5)**.¹⁷

TABLE 5. REGIONAL COMPARISONS OF CBDO CHARACTERISTICS

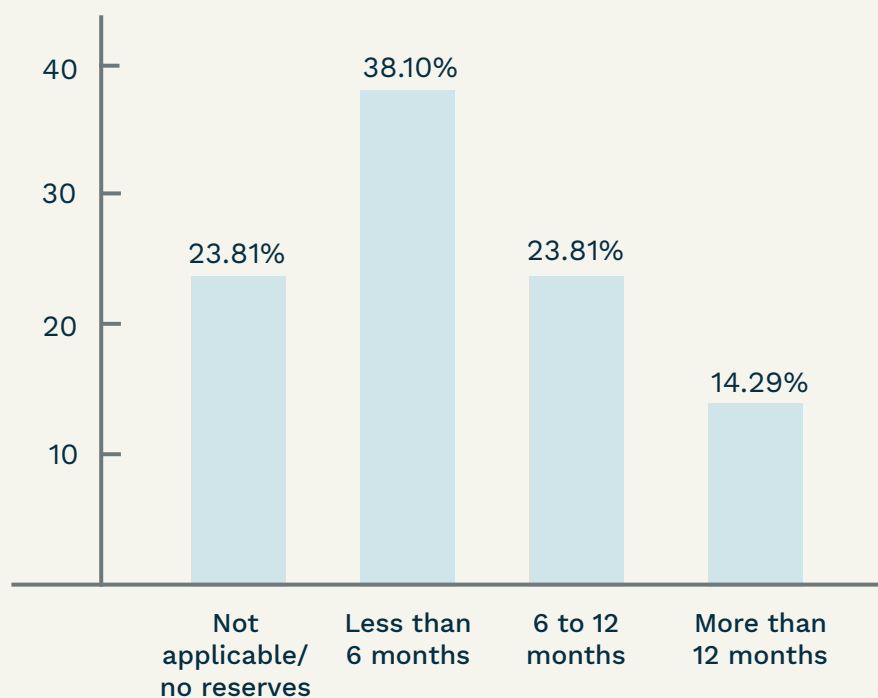
Metropolitan Statistical Area	Number of CBDOs in sample	Median CBDOs budget totals	Share of small organizations (expenses new or below \$250k)	% CBDOs with less than 3 months of operating reserves
Milwaukee-Waukesha-West Allis, WI	48	\$996,468	18.75%	20%
Cleveland-Elyria, OH	62	\$921,308	17.74%	33%
Pittsburgh, PA	70	\$850,960	25.71%	27%
Indianapolis-Carmel-Anderson, IN	42	\$798,611	21.43%	31%
Detroit-Warren-Dearborn, MI	120	\$668,376	31.67%	41%
St. Louis, MO-IL	50	\$353,006	44.00%	36%
Survey Cohort (Self-Reported Data)	22	\$250k-500k	45.45%	23.81%

Source: 2018 tax filings as analyzed by Urban Institute (2022), 2023 Local CED Assessment Survey Data

When asked how long their organization's financial reserves can sustain operations, 38.10% of local CBDOs report having financial reserves for less than 6 months, and nearly 1 in 4 local CBDOs (23.81%) do not report having financial reserves **(FIGURE 2)**.

Resources are concentrated in organizations with budgets over \$1M, which employ the majority of the workforce (77.6% overall) and own and manage 84% and 95% of reported housing units, respectively, enabling them to generate over half of their revenue from earned income on average. However, an economic crisis like the pandemic would leave even these organizations vulnerable, as 1 in 3 have less than three months in reserves.

FIGURE 2. SHARE OF CBDOS BY MONTHS OF OPERATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY FROM FINANCIAL RESERVES



Source: 2023 Local CED Assessment Survey Data

Capacity needs reported in the survey reflect organizations' limited resources and staffing (**TABLES 6 and 7**). When asked to indicate up to five organizational areas where they would benefit most from capacity-building, 72.73% ranked fundraising as a priority, followed by board effectiveness (50%). An even higher percentage, 81.82%, reported needing additional support in grant management, fundraising, donor management, and human resources.

TABLE 6. TOP FIVE CAPACITY BUILDING TRAINING PRIORITIES FOR LOCAL CBDOS

Nonprofit + Organization Development Areas	% of CBDOS that ranked area in top 5
Fundraising	72.7%
Board Effectiveness	50%
Performance Measurement and Evaluation	45.5%
Volunteer Engagement and Management	45.5%
Partnerships and Collaboration	36.4%

Source: 2023 Local CED Assessment Survey Data

TABLE 7. TOP FIVE BACK-OFFICE FUNCTIONS NEEDING ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

Back-Office Support Areas	% of CBDOS reporting they'd use additional support
Grants research, management and reporting	81.8%
Fundraising and donor management	81.8%
Human resources	81.8%
IT services	77.3%
Research	72.7%

Source: 2023 Local CED Assessment Survey Data

Implications of Finding 4

Failure to address the crisis of underinvestment in CBDOs will leave neighborhoods and residents without the support they need most. Funding strategies must address structural barriers, noted within this document, and a fundamental disconnect between local funding and community priorities.

The United Way of Greater St. Louis' Community Needs Assessment highlights the mismatch between the prioritization of community building as a regional need and its subsequent public and private funding.

The assessment finds that while community building is the highest ranked priority need for both St. Louis City and St. Louis County,¹⁸ community building is ranked 7th and 12th in funding levels, representing only 5.01% and 0.72% of the dollars flowing to both communities, respectively.¹⁹

National analysis of revenue flows to CBDOs may give insight into this local issue. Government and

philanthropic investments in CBDOs disproportionately flow to organizations that provide social services, leaving community-based efforts related to organizing and planning, key strengths of the survey cohort, underfunded.²⁰ This trend devalues what residents say they value most about community development organizations — attention to root causes through organizing and advocacy, and resident representation (including paid roles) in neighborhood efforts.²¹

Intentional funding strategies, such as the City of Milwaukee's allocation of nearly \$900,000 in CDBG funds to community organizing alongside general operating support for community development corporations, can help ensure that community-aligned work receives sustained investment.²² At the level of individual grant programs, public and private grantmakers can assess alignment of funding and community priorities and address barriers such as minimum budget requirements or reimbursement models — which preclude support for organizations like those represented in the survey.

CONCLUSION

To strengthen local CBDOs and the region's neighborhoods, funders and other partners must confront a crisis of underinvestment with equitable, long-term operational support. Capacity-building programs can play an important role by blending programmatic training with board or fundraising training for a comprehensive approach. However, designing programs with budget minimums, staffing requirements, or uncompensated time commitments risk excluding the organizations most in need of support.

Ultimately, addressing historic and ongoing underinvestment requires more than technical assistance; it calls for strategic, sustained funding to bridge resource gaps across geography and race.

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