An Assessment of the Community Information Infrastructure in the Chicago Metropolitan Area

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National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership

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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the Chicago Community Trust asked the staff of the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP) to interview a broad range of stakeholders about the state of the community information infrastructure in the Chicago region. This was an opportune time to undertake this scan, given both the great strides the region is making in opening its public data and finding creative ways to use it to improve public policy, and the February 2012 closing of the Metropolitan Chicago Information Center (MCIC), which served as an important data intermediary in the region for over 20 years.

To learn about the provision of information for social action, public policy, and program planning, NNIP staff interviewed 17 representatives of city and county government, nonprofit service and advocacy organizations, and university-based research institutes about their institutions’ role as providers and consumers of these information services. The discussions occurred in June and July 2012 and had a particular focus on the collection and use of neighborhood-level information. In January 2013, the sponsors of this project convened a group of Chicago stakeholders, including many of the people interviewed for the report, to discuss the findings. The group’s conversation provided additional insights that clarified and updated the information from the interviews.

This report is intended as a starting point for a more long-term and inclusive conversation among local funders, academics, policymakers, and practitioners about their vision for Chicago’s community information infrastructure. It begins with background on NNIP and its perspective on community information and then describes the strengths and weaknesses of the Chicago area’s provision and use of community data. It concludes with recommendations to address gaps and inefficiencies in the information environment and key issues to consider in their implementation.

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1 As of this writing, Kathryn L.S. Pettit and G. Thomas Kingsley codirect the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP). They are researchers at the Metropolitan Housing and Community Policy Center at the Urban Institute, a nonprofit, nonpartisan policy research and educational organization in Washington, D.C.
Executive summary

The Chicago-area community information infrastructure has very strong components but also has room for improvement. The City of Chicago and Cook County governments are notable leaders in the open government data movement, but interviews underscored that data release alone will not assure adequate use of data for social change. Chicago benefits from a wealth of skilled civic-oriented institutions that are committed to helping nontechnical audiences use indicators to inform advocacy, policy, and programs. The data-related projects in and outside government have cultivated demand for information from Chicago’s community groups, but the capacity to respond is fragmented. For many types of projects, decision-makers have to go to several different institutions to get the data they need. In addition, sharing among organizations is sporadic and primarily relies on informal meet-ups and personal connections. Opportunities to coordinate to make local data services both richer and more efficient are being missed.

To address the gaps and inefficiencies in the system, it is not necessary to replace MCIC or create a new institution. Instead, there could be a collaborative model that is cost-efficient and leverages the strengths of the existing institutions effectively for the collective good. The idea to explore is to have a data coordination office that can be located at one of Chicago’s existing data-related organizations. This new office would be led by a steering committee of data providers and key users and become the hub for a new regional network for providers of community data and data-related technical assistance. The office would oversee the initial activities on behalf of the network, either by undertaking them in house or contracting externally for the task.

1. Convene network members and community information users.

In quarterly meetings, network members would discuss their accomplishments and plans and together find new ways to coordinate and identify new catalytic opportunities. An annual “data day” conference would have a broader audience of providers and data users from the community and government agencies and highlight use of data for planning and community change.


The office would assemble national data and local data at least for Chicago’s community areas (either contributed by network members or processed internally). The network would publish and regularly update multi-topic neighborhood profiles on the web with accompanying downloadable
data. Also, network members might jointly prepare periodic (perhaps annual) interpretative reports on neighborhood change in Chicago.

3. **Operate network help desk for data assistance.**

Users would submit requests and receive time-limited help with their data needs directly or be referred to one of the participating network members institutions for specialized topics.

4. **Produce “Data-Driven Strategies” newsletter.**

This newsletter would feature activities and plans of the network and its individual members and would be widely circulated across all potential user communities.

5. **Develop and host shared data catalog for the network.**

A shared data catalog would document data holdings in a consistent way across network organizations. It will enable data analysts to consult with one another about common datasets and spark ideas about collaboration opportunities. It could also reduce duplication of effort if one organization can see what others have already processed. Wherever possible, the data would be posted publicly. Some data would not need to be publicly posted, and organizations could note any restrictions on use of the data. Since the primary purpose is to facilitate working together, the expanded catalog itself could be shared only within the network members, as determined to be appropriate by the organizational members of the steering committee.

As described in the paper below, some of these activities are already occurring, but intermittently and often in isolation. Details about each of these recommendations, criteria for a potential home for the coordinating office, and the importance of branding are discussed below. Together, the network and its activities would raise the collective profile of data-driven decision-making, increase the usage of the current online information resources, and catalyze new collaborations among providers and users of neighborhood-level data. The policy and technology contexts for community use of data continue to evolve. The proposed network could provide a collaborative forum to take advantage of the synergies among the various community information efforts and position the Chicago area as a model for other cities.
The National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership model

NNIP is a collaboration of the Urban Institute and local partners in 37 cities to support the development and use of neighborhood-level information systems. Some partners are individual organizations, while others are pairs or networks of local organizations. While NNIP partner organizations have a wide range of institutional and staffing arrangements, they have several commonalities. First, they are all maintaining and augmenting information systems that contain address and neighborhood-level data from local administrative sources. The data are recurrently updated over time and come from a diverse array of sources. The variety of topics enables NNIP partners to make new connections between issues, such as how foreclosure affects school children; helps partners facilitate conversations among stakeholders to break down agency silos; and enhances their ability to be responsive to residents and organizations working on comprehensive planning and advocacy. Second, in addition to broad dissemination, they work directly with community groups and government agencies to use the data to understand local conditions and consider appropriate programs and policies. Third, they emphasize leveling the information playing field and building the capacity of residents and organizations in distressed communities to use data to advocate for resources and plan for improvements.

They accomplish these goals through multiple roles: assembly and transformation of raw data, disseminating data and indicators, working with individual organizations and agencies to use data in their work, and using data more broadly to strengthen civic life and governance.2 The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) is a current NNIP partner organization fulfilling some of the data intermediary roles. MCIC was also a NNIP partner organization that focused on the neighborhood data before closing in February 2012. More information and examples of partners’ work can be found at http://www.neighborhoodindicators.org.

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2 The forthcoming strategy document Local Data Intermediaries: Strengthening America’s Capacity for Data-Driven Decision-making by Kingsley and colleagues describes these roles in more detail.
Data sources

To help frame the discussion below, “community information” in the context of this report is defined by both the content and the user’s intended purposes. The stakeholder interviews concentrated on information based on quantitative and structured data listed here (examples in parentheses):

- Community-generated data (vacancy surveys, asset mapping)
- Program data (client characteristics, services provided)
- Public administrative (crime, building permits, 311, mortgage lending)
- Commercial administrative (foreclosures, home sales, Dun and Bradstreet, consumer lending)
- Individual records of confidential and identifiable data (schools, health, or vital statistics data)
- Identifiable data linked across sources (Chapin Hall Illinois Integrated Database on Child and Family Programs)
- Large survey data (5 Essentials School Effectiveness Survey)

Other types of information are more qualitative, including neighborhood news, information derived from interviews and focus groups, and unstructured data sources such as Twitter feeds. Some NNIP partners combine them with the traditional data sources listed above in powerful ways, but they are not part of the core NNIP functions.

For purposes of this report, the community aspect of community information refers to the distribution and use of the information for civic purposes, such as neighborhood planning, issue advocacy, program targeting, or policy development. This is in contrast to use of data for individual purposes, such as looking up one’s property tax bill, or commercial purposes, such as analyzing customer characteristics to plan a marketing campaign.

Major themes from interviews

*The City of Chicago and Cook County governments are leaders in the open data movement, but data release alone will not increase the community’s capacity to use data.*

The city and county governments have recently created open data portals with hundreds of files. Most remarkable is the collaboration of the city, county, and state open data agencies to create a consolidated portal (https://www.metrochicagodata.org/). The department chiefs and staff have been
actively promoting open government data through media interviews and personal participation in public events. The agencies have demonstrated they are receptive to expanding the amount of data available. The incredible progress on open data has energized civic developers, as illustrated by Open City, a volunteer group that creates apps “to improve transparency, efficiency, and decision-making for governments and democracy.”

There is still progress to be made in open data in the Chicago area. For example, property assessors’ and transactions data are still not readily available; all the organizations interviewed purchase sales, foreclosure, and property characteristic data from proprietary sources. While there is exciting potential for connecting the technology community and more traditional organizations dedicated to neighborhood organizing and improvement, the open data portal had not changed the strategies or everyday activities of any of the groups interviewed, with the exception of the Smart Chicago Collaborative. In addition, the payoffs to date have concentrated on improving government transparency and citizen services (such as payments or bus trackers), not neighborhood planning or policy issue analysis.

New tools and designs will certainly be developed in the future to improve usability and broaden the portal audience. Even with advances in delivery systems, data portals alone will never fulfill all community information needs for two reasons. First, many individual-level government data must remain confidential, like schools and vital statistics, and require responsible handling and aggregation for release to the public. This latter task could be undertaken by government agencies, like the impressive release by the city public health agency of maternal and infant health indicators for community areas. However, not all agencies have the technical capacity or the motivation of a public information mission to take on this responsibility. Second, sorting through which sources to use and transforming the raw observations to meaningful indicators will still be beyond the capacities of non-technical users. As described below, staff members from academic centers and nonprofits currently act as translators, working with their audiences to interpret the data for the specific decision at hand. The need for this role will persist and even grow as more and more data become available.
Chicago has a wealth of skilled civic-oriented institutions that are committed to working with non-technical audiences to use indicators to inform advocacy, policy, and programs.

All the organizations interviewed were committed to producing or using policy and program-relevant analysis and offering some level of community outreach or education. The organizations vary in mission (research, advocacy, planning) and in focus area (community development, education, children and youth, etc.). The mix of data-related institutions results in services provided from a broad array of perspectives to a diverse set of target audiences.

Table 1 gives examples of the impressive collection of data dissemination and support services that the organizations are currently providing. To disseminate data, several organizations publish spreadsheets and/or simple presentations of indicators. More sophisticated examples are the MetroPulse platform with a wealth of indicators for city Community Areas and surrounding counties, and the forthcoming Health Atlas with hospitalization indicators from the Smart Chicago Collaborative. The Consortium for Chicago Schools Research partners with the Chicago Public Schools to survey students, parents, and teachers and share the school-level data with the public through the “5 Essentials School Reports.”

The hands-on technical assistance to use data ranges from short-term, informal arrangements to long-term partnerships. Several staff mentioned helping nonprofit organizations, journalists, and students with time-limited ad hoc requests for data. For example, Social IMPACT and Woodstock Institute annually answer an estimated 80 and 200 requests respectively with little outreach. Information organizations also provide ongoing support for the advocacy and program planning of action coalitions, such as the Institute for Housing Studies support for the Affordable Housing Preservation Compact. Other organizations offer data, analysis, and training to government agency and agency grantees with policy, planning, and operations. One illustration of this relationship is Chapin Hall’s work with the Chicago Department of Family & Support Services and their grantees to inform and improve foster care services. Serving community organizations, LISC’s Testing the Model program is piloting in-depth support for neighborhood initiatives to identify desired program goals and use data to improve operations and track progress. On the technology side, Smart Chicago Collaborative is working to break down the other barriers for low-income families, such as access to broadband access and digital training. They are also developing apps for community problem-solving, supported in part by the community information challenge grant from the Knight Foundation.
### Table 1: Selected Community Data-Related Activities  
(focus issue areas in parentheses)

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<tr>
<th><strong>Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago</strong> (children and youth, workforce development, social services)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Provides analytic and technical assistance to help the city Department of Family and Support Services and its grantees fulfill the Head Start Community Assessment requirement.</td>
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<td>Publishes community-area profiles on Early Childhood Programs Supply and Demand and Young Children in Chicago.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Developing internal metadata for city databases for the Chicago Department of Innovation and Technology (for purposes of publishing in Open Data Portal).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recurrently assembles and links confidential individual-level data (Medicaid, foster care, and many others) to conduct analysis to inform policy and programs.</td>
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<td>Acts as local evaluator for the Choice Neighborhood Initiative.</td>
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<th><strong>Chicago Agency for Metropolitan Planning</strong> (regional environment, transportation, housing, economic development)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Develops, maintains, and promotes MetroPulse, an interactive query system with data and visualizations for community areas, cities, and counties (also several related sites planned such as jobs and parcel information).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Developing a CKAN open data portal with CMAP data, but that can be replicated for local suburban jurisdictions.</td>
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<td>Operates the Local Technical Assistance program, providing assistance to communities across the Chicago metropolitan region to undertake planning projects that advance the principles of GO TO 2040.</td>
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<th><strong>Consortium on Chicago Schools Research</strong> (elementary and secondary education)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Maintains archive of public school enrollment and performance data since the 1990s.</td>
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<td>Conducts, analyzes, and disseminates the School Effectiveness Survey.</td>
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<td>Conducts long-term studies of particular Chicago Public School policies and practices.</td>
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<th><strong>Institute for Housing Studies, DePaul University</strong> (affordable housing policy and practice)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Provides data and analytic support for the Affordable Housing Preservation Compact.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assists the Southwest Organizing Project with data and technical assistance through the Testing the Model program.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Analyzes various aspects of neighborhood housing markets in Chicago with downloadable data to inform policy and practice.</td>
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<td>Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>LISC-Chicago</strong> (comprehensive neighborhood development)</td>
<td>Pilots Testing the Model, in-depth support for neighborhood initiatives to identify program goals and then use their data to improve operations and track progress. Offers market profiles and comprehensive retail scans for Chicago neighborhoods through MetroEdge. Manages the New Communities Program, a long-term intensive initiative to support the comprehensive development of 16 Chicago neighborhoods.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Metropolitan Planning Council</strong> (regional environment, transportation, housing, economic development)</td>
<td>Developed 14 “livability metrics” to apply to decisionmaking around bus transit. Worked with Logan Square community group on green infrastructure.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Smart Chicago Collaborative</strong> (digital literacy and open data/technology for civic improvement)</td>
<td>Developing Chicago Atlas to visualize and access data on health indicators by community area. Developing a comprehensive early childhood education web portal. Developing apps through “Civic Innovation in Chicago” project to solve community problems with local government data.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Social IMPACT Research Center</strong> (poverty, economic security, housing)</td>
<td>Assists 35–40 organizations with ad hoc data requests, many about American Community Survey (about 1 day/week). Conducts training on American Community Survey data. Publishes data tables on several topics for Chicago Community Areas and Illinois counties. Evaluated Put Illinois to Work program.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Woodstock Institute</strong> (foreclosures, mortgage lending, access to credit, asset-building)</td>
<td>Answers about 200 data requests a year averaging 1.5 hours each on foreclosure and asset-building. Developing CKAN data catalog system for Woodstock’s and legacy MCIC data. Provides data and analytic support to Regional Homeownership Preservation Initiative. Publishes analytic updates and data on foreclosure trends for cities and community areas. Publishes analysis of racial disparities in mortgage lending and access to consumer credit in the Chicago six-county region. Publishes analysis of concentrations of foreclosure-related vacancies in Chicago neighborhoods.</td>
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The data-related projects in and outside government have cultivated demand for information from Chicago’s community groups, but the capacity to respond is fragmented.

In several interviews, people mentioned the growing appetite for data and indicators. The open data portals, Apps for Metro Chicago contest, the capacity-building of the nonprofit groups involved in New Communities, the launch of the MetroPulse data system, and the Spring Data Dive with DataKind are all examples of tools and initiatives that demonstrated the need and potential of objective information. Together, they have helped raise the expectations of resident groups, service providers, journalists, and city agencies for good information for their decision-making.

Though not comprehensive, one MCIC resource mentioned during the interviews as not replaced was their “Facts Online” section, which had community-area profiles with data primarily from the decennial census. (MCIC had plans before they closed to update these profiles with more current data and additional functionality.) The current web sites with curated data are generally siloed by topic—a Chicago neighborhood group would need to search Woodstock’s web site to find foreclosure indicators, Chapin Hall’s for social service program indicators, MetroPulse for American Community Survey demographics, the Institute for Housing Studies site for housing market indicators, the Chicago Collaborative for School Research’s site for education indicators, and so on. Without a consolidated location to access these sites or one-on-one relationships with the given groups, a community group would likely just not take advantage of the range of existing data.

Beyond the online resources, ad hoc technical assistance is being given, but very unevenly across topic area and by chance. Both Woodstock and Social IMPACT track inquiries through their help desks, but other organizations interviewed provide this help informally, depending on internal resources and workload. Typical requests indicate the need for a grant proposal, to support an advocate’s testimony or enhance a newspaper story. In general, the availability of assistance is not well advertised because of limited staff resources and sometimes due to the view that these tasks diverted from the primary focus of the organization. Nonprofit staff members or individuals looking for ad hoc data assistance may have established a personal contact at an information organization to call with questions, but non-technical users not fortunate enough to be connected are unlikely to know where to go. Access is also not spatially even. For example, the University of Chicago centers often assist groups in nearby Woodlawn, and other New Communities areas may have met data and research staff as part of that program and then later called upon them informally. In contrast, suburban governments and nonprofits are less likely
to have access to expert help than ones in the city. The U.S. Census Bureau staff used to refer people who requested data for Chicago Community Areas (locally-defined planning geographies) to MCIC, which was a designated Census Information Center. Their referral procedures for these inquiries are unclear after MCIC’s closing.

An added cost of the siloed nature of the Chicago community information environment is that there is less opportunity to spur cross-topic analysis and action—housing and schools, built environment and health, and so on. Residents don’t experience these issues one by one, but as an integrated experience. For example, crime occurring on the path to a school or in a neighborhood may affect parents’ school choices for their children and their willingness to walk or have their children play outside, therefore affecting education and health outcomes.

**Sharing among organizations is sporadic and primarily relies on informal meet-ups and personal connections.**

Interviews revealed informal and sporadic communication among the information and research organizations. Meet-ups such as “Urban Geeks Drinks,” Open Government Chicago group, Data Potluck, and various developer groups serve as important ways to meet colleagues and exchange updates and new ideas. However, it was mentioned that the evening meetings are difficult for those with long commutes or family obligations. Staff members from the information organizations also interact at one-time or periodic meetings. Some topical meetings, such as an epidemiological advisory group, offered the occasional opportunity to meet staff from other organizations. A day-long meeting in April 2012 was organized by Urban Systems Collaborative and hosted by the Metropolitan Planning Council. The meeting brought together a gathering of urban planners, software designers, developers, architects, and community members to “discuss the information that feeds their work, where breakdowns in information flows are occurring, and where innovation could better assist them in connecting ideas.”

The interviewees were appreciative for the chance to exchange information and to see the examples from other cities, but no one was clear about any plans for follow-up. Overall, there seemed to be an appetite for more interaction among the individuals who were interviewed.

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An Assessment of the Community Information Infrastructure in the Chicago Metropolitan Area

Recommendations

The findings above demonstrate that the Chicago-area information infrastructure has very strong components, but also has room for improvement in two main areas. Contrary to the NNIP model, no organization has taken on the recurrent assembly and dissemination of neighborhood-level national and local data across multiple issue areas. This service could offer an entry point for a wide range of users into the specialized resources of the more specialized community information organizations. The second missing component is an intentional community of data providers and technical assistance providers. Working together, these organizations could share best practices, conduct joint marketing and community education, assess of community information needs, and collaborate on selected services and projects. Because of the irregular connections among the various efforts, the region is missing the opportunity to have the individual contributions contribute to a greater whole.

To address the gaps and inefficiencies in the system, it is not necessary to replace MCIC or create any new institution. Instead, a collaborative model could be created that is cost-efficient and leverages the strengths of the existing institutions effectively for the collective good. One idea to explore is to add a small data coordination office to one of Chicago’s existing data-related organizations. This new office would be led by a steering committee of data providers and key users and become the hub for a new regional network for providers of community data and data-related technical assistance. The network would be regional in scope, but have an in-depth focus on Chicago and inner suburbs.

Network activities and roles

The office would oversee the following activities on behalf of the network, either by undertaking them in house or contracting externally for the task. The activities reflect a two-pronged strategy of strengthening the network of information organizations and building the capacity of data users.

Convene network members and community information users: Quarterly meetings of network organizational members would provide a formal setting to supplement the current after-hours meet-ups of urban and technical professionals. The meetings could include updates from the participating organizations, feature presentations on a project or publication, or guest speakers. These meetings would help expose people’s work to each other, reduce duplication, and reveal potential synergies. Longer term, it would strengthen the community information ecosystem by solidifying the relationships among organizations, so connections are not broken when inevitable staff turnover occurs.
To bring together the providers and data users, an annual “data day” for a broader audience should highlight nonprofits’ and local government agencies’ uses of data for planning and community change. Several NNIP partners have events like this with a variety of formats and content.

**Assemble neighborhood-level data and publish multi-topic neighborhood profiles:** The rigorous data analysis that is already being done in Chicago should not be duplicated. Instead, network members could contribute aggregate data annually on select indicators (foreclosure, foster care, home prices, etc.). Any indicators would include links to the source organization’s site to lead users to additional data and in-depth analysis. The home organization could compile indicators from national data, such as ACS and USPS vacancy, and open government data, such as the vital statistics. Any other local data collection could be decided as they go along, based on user demand and opportunities that arise.

The profiles, offered by many NNIP partners for their cities, should be presentations of indicators on a variety of topics, designed for a non-technical audience. The data would be well documented and available for download. These profiles need to be for Chicago Community Areas at minimum, and perhaps tracts or alderman districts. It needs to be evaluated whether the MetroPulse features are sufficient for counties and suburban cities, or if there is demand and data sources for profiles at those geographic levels also. Also, network members might jointly prepare periodic (perhaps annual) interpretative reports on neighborhood change in Chicago or in the suburbs.

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**Operate network help desk for data assistance:** Like many NNIP partners, this free assistance is geared to non-technical audiences and limited to one or two hours (often modeled after the original “Ask Allison” service in New Orleans). The staff could handle basic requests but could also have contact information for other organizations for referral on specialized topics. More elaborate requests can be referred to the appropriate organization as a potential project that would need to be independently funded. The help desk could be advertised on MetroPulse and on the area’s open data portals. Requests would be tracked to feed into plans for expanding the profiles online and hosting online or in-person trainings.

Most organizations that were interviewed field these ad hoc requests. All but Woodstock are unfunded, and staff squeezed them in as time allowed within their primary workload. The help desk questions received by MCIC in the past and by Social IMPACT currently often require simple indicators for a grant proposal, testimony, or newspaper article. A central intake location staffed by people familiar with the various online resources (the network profiles, web sites of the individual network members, national web sites, open data and other government web sites) could answer the bulk of the inquiries in a more efficient way. This would not replace specialized assistance, as with Woodstock’s service, or disrupt member relationships already in place with community groups.

**Produce “Data-Driven Strategies” newsletter:** A quarterly e-newsletter could provide short stories about projects that illustrate community uses of data in the Chicago area, announce new projects, feature online data resources, and advertise the help desk services. To draw people into the profiles, the lead organization or members of the network could contribute fact sheets or blog entries highlighting interesting trends or geographic variations in a given indicator or topic area. This would raise the profile of data use in the times between the annual conference described above, encourage learning across topic areas, and promote the informal meet-ups or other related events to a broader audience.

**Develop and host shared data catalog:** CMAP and Woodstock are each building open data catalogs using CKAN, which is open source data portal software. A shared catalog would allow network organizations to document their data holdings in a consistent way (source, geographic level, and time periods available). It will enable data analysts to consult with one another about common datasets and spark ideas about collaboration opportunities. Wherever possible, the data would be publicly posted. At the same time, some data would not need to be publicly
posted, and organizations could note any restrictions on use of the data. Since the primary purpose is to facilitate working within the network, the catalog could be accessible only to network members and other select organizations, as deemed appropriate by the organizational members of the steering committee.

The recommended activities do not directly address the need for in-depth technical assistance to help nonprofits identify measurable goals, collect and use data for performance measurement, and evaluate their programs, as described in in the 2011 MCIC assessment of New Communities program. While not a substitute for individualized help to nonprofits or government agencies, the activities above will help these efforts indirectly. Exposure to stories of practical data use for community change and opportunities for peer learning can spur more interest in using indicators. The combined profiles and the help desk could also create a clearer path of entry for community stakeholders new to using data. This network would also be a forum for soliciting members’ views about the kind of deeper technical assistance or other types of information resources needed from their varied perspectives.

The activities attempt to link up the existing data production, policy research, and technical assistance. This network would also be a new vehicle for promoting the culture of access to data for community planning and action. As an example, the network could play a critical role in the ongoing evolution of open data in Chicago. It would present a united voice to applaud the progress to date and request high-payoff datasets based on community needs. This would provide political support to the innovative city and county leaders working for open data. One fear expressed was that open data may benefit upper-income residents, who have technical skills and the latest technology, and not relate to Chicagoans with fewer advantages. While there is a risk of open data reinforcing the existing disparities in influence and opportunities, the network can mitigate the negative effects with proactive efforts to persuade the open data agenda to be more inclusive and to raise the skill levels and technology of low-income residents.

**Benefits and obligations of network members**

The network will only succeed if the members find it worthwhile to contribute the staff time and energy necessary to actively participate. In almost all the interviews, people expressed interest in knowing more about the other organizations’ projects and ideas, but lament that pressures of everyday deadlines prevented them from following through much of the time. The chance to learn from each other would be one incentive of the network. The network could also connect them to the activities and local

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partners in NNIP (see discussion below). Another benefit of the network would be a broad promotion of the existing valuable data resources provided by member organizations. It would also be a showcase for the impressive applied analysis and community projects of the members. The requirements would be participation in quarterly meetings and contributing ideas and background information for the newsletter and meeting and conference agendas. Data providers would also contribute select indicators for community area (and perhaps other) geographies. The frequency of submission and number of indicators would vary depending on the data source and partner capacity.

Institutional home, funding, and branding

As described above, elements of this agenda are already occurring, but intermittently and often in isolation. From the interviews, it is clear that good intentions alone will fall short, and cross-topic dissemination and networking roles need to be formally adopted by a lead organization to succeed. Individual pieces of the work (such as development of web profiles) could be performed by several organizations within or external to the network, but there needs to be a lead organization with accountability to the funders and network members. Civic leadership in Chicago will need to identify an organizational home, plan for a sustainable funding base, and craft the network’s branding strategy.

In addition to the obvious data and technical capacities, the organization that houses the new activities needs to be considered neutral, have the respect of the broader community, and be oriented to practitioners. The office would need to have a holistic perspective—across topic areas, geographic levels, and municipal boundaries. To increase the chances of success, the work of the office should reinforce or enhance the other goals of the organizational home. The office staff need to be familiar with availability of data resources across topic areas but, in addition, must have the ability to work in a respectful way to help non-technical audiences access and use community indicators.

This network as envisioned would meet the qualifications for being an NNIP partner organization and could apply for membership as a co-member of NNIP along with CMAP. Any staff of the member organizations of the Chicago network would be welcome to participate in the partner meetings and other activities (listserv, webinars). Thus, a wider group of researchers, advocates, and technical assistance providers from Chicago could benefit and contribute to the national network.

This report does not lay out business model options for the proposed network, but clearly that discussion is critical to its implementation. During the early 2013 convening to discuss this report, representatives from the data-related organizations noted the need to strategize about a sustainable
financial model for supporting the proposed network activities. Participants also expressed concern about additional responsibilities without dedicated funding and noted the ongoing challenge of supporting their current data and technical assistance activities. Participants noted the need to strategize about a sustainable model for supporting the proposed network activities. Given funding realities, the actions likely need to be prioritized and staged, and a wider group of area funders will need to buy in to the idea for long-term success.

Finally, several of the people interviewed expressed the need for independent branding of the proposed information network in order to craft an identity of a community-friendly and neutral information resource and to insulate it from advocacy and other agendas of its members. The idea of a “new” network may also facilitate buy-in from other organizations and funders. Branding would allow a clear identity for marketing in places like the city’s and county’s open data sites.

**Conclusion**

Chicago is fortunate to have local governments that are open data leaders and an array of strong organizations providing a community information data and data-related assistance. The public policy and technology contexts for community use of data continue to evolve. The mayor issued an Executive Order in December 2012 mandating that city agencies publish public data sets under their control and regularly update them. The Urban Center for Computation and Data was launched in January 2013 as an interdisciplinary collaboration that will build complex computer models based on city data and sensor networks that can anticipate the impact of policy decisions and investments on a city and its residents.

Such a fast-moving environment underscores the need for communication among data-related organizations and thoughtful strategies to take advantage of the potential synergies among the various community information efforts. The proposed network would link Chicago’s community information assets, creating a whole that is larger than the sum of the parts. For data providers, it would offer a formal peer learning network and allow them to explore collaboration across issue silos. For data users of all types—funders, practitioners, academics, government agencies, resident leaders, and journalists—the network would offer a hub for discovering community information resources in the Chicago area and a source for stories of community data use across the region. Beyond the specific action items, the authors hope that this report will be a starting point for a long-term, inclusive conversation about the vision for Chicago’s community information infrastructure. Collective planning and action to strengthen the provision and use of community information would position the Chicago area as a model for other cities.
Appendix A: Interviews

Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago: Robert Goerge, Senior Fellow, and Roopa Seshadri, Senior Researcher

Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning: Greg Sanders, Information Architect, and Drew Williams-Clark, Senior Regional Planner

City of Chicago: Brett Goldstein, Chief Data Officer

Cook County: Greg Wass, Chief Information Officer and Sebastian James, Deputy Director, New Media, Cook County Government

DePaul Institute for Housing Studies: Geoff Smith, Executive Director

Greater Chicago Food Depository: Taryn Roch, Research and Evaluation Manager (also former staff member of MCIC)

LISC: Susana Vasquez, Executive Director

LISC: Jake Cowan, MetroEdge (now at Urban Libraries Council)

Metropolitan Chicago Information Center: Emily Weseman, former staff member, and Alex Byrnes, former staff member of MCIC and now independent civic software consultant

Metropolitan Planning Council: Peter Skosey, Vice President

Smart Chicago Collaborative: Dan O’Neil, Executive Director

Social IMPACT Research Center at Heartland Alliance: Amy Terpstra, Associate Director

University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research: Jenny Nagaoka, Deputy Director

Woodstock Institute: Dory Rand, President and Tom Feltner, Vice President