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Community Activists and University  
Researchers Collaborating for Affordable  
Housing: Dual Perspectives on the  
Experience

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# Community Activists and University Researchers Collaborating for Affordable Housing: Dual Perspectives on the Experience

Amy Hillier  
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**ABSTRACT.** This paper describes and analyzes the successful collaboration between the Philadelphia Affordable Housing Coalition and the Cartographic Modeling Laboratory at the University of Pennsylvania. This collaboration resulted in a research study that helped the Coalition secure an additional \$10 million for affordable housing in Philadelphia. The perspectives of the activist and researcher on the collaboration are presented in their own voices and they describe their expectations, efforts to build relationships, define roles, and deal with different work styles and culture. Recommendations for building effective research partnerships are also provided. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address:*

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**KEYWORDS.** Community organizing, action research, affordable housing, collaboration

### *INTRODUCTION*

This paper tells the story of a successful collaboration between the Philadelphia Affordable Housing Coalition (Coalition) and the Cartographic Modeling Laboratory (CML) at the University of Pennsylvania. In June 2001, the Coalition hired the CML to conduct a study on the need for affordable housing in Philadelphia. The study received considerable attention from local print, radio, and television media when it was released two years later.<sup>1</sup> Just weeks after the release of the study, at the urging of the Coalition, Philadelphia's City Council voted to add an additional \$10 million for affordable housing to the annual city budget. This paper describes the 24 months leading up to the completion of the study. It considers the main elements of successful collaborations highlighted in the social work literature—common goals, clear communication channels, trust, and mutual respect—and how they played out in this endeavor. This is the story of a partnership that was not easy; many of these elements were missing or achieved only with great effort over considerable time. By highlighting the challenges and the lessons learned through this collaboration, this paper aims to encourage more effective partnerships between activists and researchers.

This paper is presented in two voices—that of the lead activist and lead researcher—in order to highlight the different perspectives the partners in this collaboration held on their work together. Each time the authorship in the paper changes, the author's name is inserted into the text. David Koppisch, a community organizer for the Women's Community Revitalization Center (WCRP), was the lead staff person for the Coalition. Amy Hillier, a researcher for the CML, was the primary author of the study. The first three sections of this paper—this introduction, "Elements of Successful Collaboration," and "Context for the Study"—were written by Amy Hillier.

### *ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATIONS*

The literature on partnerships between community activists and researchers is limited. Much of it focuses on participatory action research, a

specific methodology with a supporting theoretical and ethical framework that is directed at social change. Action research rejects the dichotomy between pure and applied research in favor of a conceptualization that sees action and the creation of knowledge as intertwined (Greenwood, 1998; Tandon, 1981). It promotes the active involvement of stakeholders, frequently just the subject of social research, as co-researchers (Chataway, 1997; Hall, 1981). Action research seeks to involve oppressed people in knowledge building as a form of empowerment and as a means of social transformation (Healy, 2001; Sohng, 1992; Wagner, 1991). Examples of collaborations that have not explicitly employed action research methods stress similar themes. These include the importance of mutual respect among partners, a shared belief in action-oriented participatory research, well-defined roles and lines of responsibility, and common (or at least complementary) goals.

Mutual respect among true partners is essential to successful collaborations. Activists and researchers must both be viewed as having something to contribute to the research process (Denner et al., 1999; Lennett & Colten, 1999). Writing about how to negotiate partnerships in research on poverty, Reid and Vianna (2001) explain that researchers cannot be viewed as the only experts. "Community workers and residents should also be acknowledged as having expertise" (343). Researchers can demonstrate their commitment to the collaboration and build trust with activists through frequent updates and by attending important agency events, among other methods (Reid & Vianna, 2001). By working together and building relationships, activists and researchers can develop a common language and understanding (Denner et al., 1999).

Activists and researchers need to have clear goals and harmonious agendas (Reid & Vianna, 2001; Lennett & Colten, 1999; Waterson, 2000). Partners need to be clear about what they want to accomplish and prepared for goals to change with shifts in personnel, resources, and opportunities (Denner et al., 1999). Regardless of whether the collaboration is being framed as action research, researchers must be willing to involve activists in the research process, particularly during the data collection phase. This might include design of the research instrument, data entry and analysis, and interpretation (Denner et al., 1999). Research cannot be viewed as dispassionate and objective, but instead understood as ". . . a negotiated and political activity framed by power relationships and on constantly shifting ground" (Waterson, 2000).

Successful partnerships depend upon well-defined roles and clear expectations. As Reid and Vianna (2001) explain, problems can arise if researchers are expected to take on work they are not funded to do or if

activists are expected to do work that takes them away from direct service. Clear lines of responsibility and communication are also essential to being efficient and effective (Reid & Vianna, 2001). These themes—mutual respect and trust, common goals, and clear roles—are discussed in the sections below as they relate to the collaboration between the Coalition and CML on our study of affordable housing.

### **CONTEXT FOR THE STUDY**

At the turn of the new millennium, Philadelphia was a city of 1.5 million people stretched out across more than 100 square miles. Like many other older northeastern and midwestern cities that suffered from deindustrialization, Philadelphia lost population, became more racially diverse, racially and economically segregated, and poorer during the second half of the 20th century (Adams, Bartelt, Elesh, Goldstein, Kleniewski, & Yancy, 1991). These changes have played out against national trends that have made securing affordable housing one of the major challenges for poor households everywhere. Over the last forty years, the cost of housing has increased faster than the rate of inflation, while the real value of the minimum wage and public assistance benefits have decreased significantly (Hillier & Culhane, 2003). As a result, approximately two-thirds of households in Philadelphia with annual incomes under \$20,000 pay 30 percent or more for their housing, with most of them paying much more (2000 US Census). For housing to be affordable, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) policy holds that households should pay no more than 30 percent of their income for rent or mortgage and utilities. The age of Philadelphia's housing also makes it difficult for low-income households to find decent quality housing, while the dominant row house style makes accessibility a problem for an unknown proportion of the 150,000 people in the city with physical disabilities (Hillier & Culhane, 2003).

Like other cities, Philadelphia depends primarily on funds from HUD to subsidize housing for low-income households. The largest chunk of federal funding—\$300 million—is earmarked for public housing. The \$80 million Philadelphia receives annually from the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds most of the other affordable housing programs, with the exception of those targeted for special needs populations. Federal income guidelines allow much of this money for low- and moderate-income households to be directed toward those with incomes well above the \$30,000 median income in Philadelphia (Hillier &

Culhane, 2003). Mayor John Street's Neighborhood Transformation Initiative (NTI), a product of his campaign promise to direct more resources to the city's neighborhoods, became the major policy and funding initiative of his administration. It called for the city to borrow \$300 million in bonds over five years, primarily to fund demolition and land acquisition to fight blight and for some construction of new affordable housing, although not necessarily housing affordable to the poorest households in Philadelphia. While NTI was designed primarily as an anti-blight initiative rather than a housing program, it represents the only new pot of money for housing-related initiatives.

### ***GETTING STARTED: EXPECTATIONS***

***Author: David Koppisch, Activist***

In 2000, when we first began to discuss creating a coalition, no one was doing what needed to be done. No one was trying to build organized power to significantly change housing policy and redistribute public funds more in favor of poor Philadelphians. Housing activists, community development corporations (CDCs), and social service agencies were alienated from one another, competing for limited political attention and resources. We at the Women's Community Revitalization Project (WCRP) bristled at the prevailing myth accepted by the political and media elite that Philadelphia was an affordable city. We knew from daily experiences with poor households that Philadelphia was actually losing affordable housing and that housing costs were rising faster than incomes.

The idea of forming a coalition came out of the WCRP, a non-profit organization based in North Philadelphia, created in the late 1980s to purchase and rehabilitate vacant houses for women fleeing domestic violence. WCRP developed criteria for potential allies. Does this organization serve and represent very low-income families who are in need of housing? Is this organization willing to work in coalition? Can this organization organize its constituents? Does this organization understand how to build collective power? Is this organization willing to take political risks? Can we trust this organization? In November of 2000, we convened the first gathering of potential coalition members. By the third gathering we drafted a statement of goals and devised a structure for how we would operate as a coalition. Six organizations formally joined—a welfare rights group, a large disabilities service agency, a grassroots disabili-

ties advocacy group, a transitional housing provider, a homeless service and advocacy group, and WCRP.

The groups agreed that the primary, long-term goal was to convince the city government to spend more of Philadelphia's housing dollars on permanent, accessible housing for households living on less than \$20,000 a year. WCRP dedicated half of the time of one of its staff members to organize the coalition. The introduction of the Mayor's Neighborhood Transformation Initiative (NTI) in April 2001 dramatically changed the political landscape and the Coalition's work. Every housing-related organization in the city began jockeying for a piece of this new \$300 million pie. Four groups within the fledgling Coalition decided the NTI program would do more harm than good to poor Philadelphians and we agreed to challenge it. Two other groups felt they needed to protect their relationship with the Mayor and quit the Coalition.

Coalition leaders agreed that we needed a research document to use as a tool to help us build power and win more resources for affordable housing. We knew that many of the political decision-makers viewed some Coalition members as gadflies, or worse, as do-gooders they could ignore politically. We hoped a research document, authored by a respected university researcher and professionally produced, would legitimate us and help us get in the door of political leaders and housing officials who otherwise might not listen to us. Not all of us understood the limitations of such research at the outset.

Coalition members believe that all research is political, that there is no such thing as dispassionate social science research, and that there was nothing wrong or even unusual about research serving predetermined advocacy goals. We wanted *action research* in the most general sense that the research findings should support our advocacy agenda. We wanted the research study to affirm what we experienced and felt at the grassroots level—that Philadelphia had a housing crisis. But we also wanted it to clearly point a finger at the local political figures and housing officials who were not doing anything about this crisis and to make concrete recommendations for what Philadelphia could do to fix the crisis. We were focused on local policy changes because we felt we could affect those. We wanted the final research document to be accessible to policy makers and our constituents, alike, a hope we eventually realized was unrealistic.

***Author: Amy Hillier, Researcher***

The CML is a small research center affiliated with the School of Social Work at the University of Pennsylvania that specializes in the cre-

ation of Web-based mapping tools. Our major ongoing project, the Philadelphia Neighborhood Information System (NIS), distributes housing, demographic, crime, and cultural data over the Internet through a series of mapping applications.<sup>2</sup> We are also involved in a number of smaller mapping and data analysis projects using geographic information systems (GIS) and we collaborate with researchers around the university who want to incorporate spatial data and analyses into their projects. The partnership with the Coalition provided an opportunity for us to move into the area of social policy. Much of our work had been focused on housing abandonment and we had a substantial warehouse of administrative data relating to housing conditions in the city.

After the Coalition approached us about conducting the study, we worked with them to create a scope of work for our collaboration. This was a common practice within the University—to formalize a business agreement in a written contract. The final scope of work called on us to conduct a study that described trends in the affordability of rental housing, assessed the extent to which low-income households were being served by existing housing programs, and identified strategies for increasing the amount of affordable housing in Philadelphia. In addition to a final report, we committed to delivering monthly written updates, profiles of city council districts describing their housing and population characteristics, and a presentation to Coalition members on our interim findings. We also obtained an exemption from review by the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) because we planned to rely primarily on administration data and interviews with public officials.

From the start, we shared a basic understanding of the significance of the affordable housing crisis with the Coalition and a commitment to focusing on the needs of Philadelphia's poorest households. But we were never in complete accord about how that problem should be addressed. The Coalition was interested in a winnable agenda, in part because it needed short-term victories to gain political strength and membership. They saw the CDBG money as the most appropriate target and set about to convince the city government officials to spend more of it on poor rental households. We believed, on the other hand, that the report should focus on the underlying causes of the problem and on long-term solutions. Misguided federal policy, not local spending decisions, was to blame for the affordable housing crisis. Only by affecting federal policies relating to the minimum wage, Earned Income Tax Credit, public assistance, and public housing could we bring about relief for low-income households. We ultimately compromised on the organization and

emphasis of the final report, but we never resolved this underlying difference in priorities.

**MOVING FORWARD:  
UNDERSTANDING WORK STYLES, BUILDING  
RELATIONSHIPS AND DEFINING ROLES**

*Author: David Koppisch, Activist*

The Coalition's goal was to build and exercise power. We understood that power only operates through relationships and that relationships can only be established and maintained through face to face contact. This meant meetings, lots and lots of meetings. This is how we worked; this is how we got things done. Early on, the Coalition agreed to conduct monthly, all-day meetings. Member organizations were required to send their directors or some other decision-maker. One key Coalition leader was deaf and used a wheelchair, so every meeting had to include an interpreter and be held in an accessible building. We engaged in simple rituals, such as reciting poems about social justice, to focus our work and ground it in personal values. Every meeting included exercises and time dedicated to sharing personal housing struggles. We spent many meetings articulating what each of our organizations needed to get out of this Coalition and what we expected of each other in terms of support, confidentiality, and respect. We all believed that our power as a coalition depended upon the strength of our relationships. Written materials were much less important and effective in communicating with each other. Constant verbal communication and multiple meetings was the organizing style preferred.

The Coalition's relationship with the city government was another matter. Each Coalition member had a unique history with city officials. The social service oriented members had congenial—and dependent—relationships with city agencies. They received city contracts and had directors with close personal relationships with city officials or city council members. Some of the activist-oriented members had histories of street protest, storming city government offices and getting arrested, resulting in very antagonistic relationships with city agencies and officials. This range of experiences presented a major challenge for the Coalition as it decided on strategies. Some Coalition leaders firmly believed and lived by the famous Frederick Douglass quote, "Power concedes

nothing without a demand.” Others operated by the notion that you “attract more bees with honey than vinegar.”

The relationship with the researchers was strong at times but uneven and vacillating. Some of the more direct action-oriented Coalition members had an inherent distrust of university-based researchers and viewed the University of Pennsylvania as part of the larger system they were trying to change or “bring down.” At certain points when the tension and mistrust between the Coalition and researchers was particularly high, Coalition members felt like we needed to demonstrate our power to them. It took time to build the relationship with the researchers, but several things helped. The WCRP director had a personal relationship with one CML staff person. One of the student research assistants at the CML was also a member of one of the Coalition groups. Finally, I had a personal relationship with the main researcher (we belong to the same church). These pre-existing personal relationships helped bridge communication gaps and resolve some tension between the groups. There were also regular meetings between the researchers and Coalition leaders, and lots of phone calls and e-mails between the main researcher and myself, which helped tremendously.

No clear boundaries or expectations were spelled out in the beginning about how much the Coalition would have a hand in shaping the research along the way. The Coalition created a Research Committee to articulate expectations and concerns and feed ideas to the researchers and to report back to the larger Coalition. At times the Committee had very specific questions, problems and edits to the report it wanted addressed by the researchers. We felt that it was appropriate for us to help guide the research to our exact needs. There were several Coalition leaders who often said, “We’re paying for this thing; it better say what we want it to say.”

As activists and organizers, we understood the value of conflict and confrontation. There were several organizing adages that guided our work: “There are no reserved seats at the banquet table of life, you get only what you can take,” “There are no permanent friends and no permanent enemies,” and “Like a washing machine, nothing gets clean without agitation.” We referred to “demands” while the researchers referred to “recommendations.” We believe that there is nothing personal to this work and that we all understand that we are playing politics. This played out at times in meetings and communication with the researchers. We understood that they had their self-interest to protect and we had ours and we would exert pressure to move them more towards our side, just as we would operate with a city councilman. Several times Coali-

tion leaders would say in a meeting, “If they don’t do what we want, we’ll just pull the contract.”

As the research progressed and the local political landscape shifted, the Coalition became clearer about its advocacy goals, and as we became more aware of our growing power, we wanted new and different things from the research. We felt like this was part of the natural, organic process of an unfolding relationship and journey. The researchers, on the other hand, seemed to view us as indecisive and unfocused.

In addition to the tension between the Coalition and the researchers, there was conflict within the Coalition. Some of this revolved around decisions regarding tactics, others from the resource imbalance among members of the Coalition, and still others around the natural tensions that exist between the more social service-oriented and the more social change-oriented members. WCRP was at times the object of mistrust among some Coalition peers because it was the only housing developer in the group and was perceived as being less willing to take political risks. In response, WCRP committed to contributing to the Coalition a certain amount for every housing unit it built with money won through Coalition organizing, to help fund the Coalition’s work.

A number of specific Coalition events generated conflict among member organizations because of differences of opinion about strategy and tactics. One Coalition organization planned a neighborhood tour with the Mayor without including the other Coalition groups and was seen as intentionally grabbing attention and perhaps making deals. Another time, the Coalition was given an award by a local foundation honoring its community organizing and social change commitment, and certain Coalition members felt that other members got more credit and exposure than they deserved. After a massive rally at the Mayor’s annual budget address, a staff member of one Coalition group walked into the Mayor’s office to hand him a certificate of appreciation for making an appearance at a ribbon cutting while other Coalition members picketed and chanted outside the Mayor’s office. Early in the campaign, the Coalition organized a tour for the press to see the deplorable housing conditions in the city and the person in charge of transportation rented buses that were not wheelchair accessible, thus excluding several key Coalition leaders who were disabled. There was conflict when I told a group of folks from one Coalition organization that they could not interrupt the Mayor’s Budget Speech with shouts about their own personal (not Coalition) issue; they almost quit the Coalition as a result. Most recently, a Coalition subcommittee planned a large protest that used themes from a Jewish holiday and sent out hundreds of fliers and press

releases. Twenty-four hours before the planned protest, one Coalition group decided to boycott the event because they thought it constituted cultural appropriation.

Conflict is unavoidable in this work. Nothing of much substance can be achieved without it. The testament to our Coalition is the fact that in four years, with no real dedicated funding or formal structure, it has grown and won serious victories for affordable housing in Philadelphia. The Coalition leaders understood from the outset that conflict—both internal and external—would be part of our work. Most of us were fairly seasoned organizers or activists. This sense of necessary conflict sometimes carried over into our work with the researchers. But just as we worked through these conflicts within the Coalition, we were able to work through most of the conflicts with the researchers to produce a document that was, and will continue to be, a key tool in our ongoing struggle.

***Author: Amy Hillier, Researcher***

The relationship between the researchers and advocates involved many relationships—the institutional relationships between the Coalition and the CML, the working relationship between the lead researcher and the lead organizer for the Coalition, the research committee created by the Coalition, and the full coalition, and the pre-existing personal relationships between researchers and activists. While I was in contact most regularly with the lead organizer, it was the Coalition’s research committee that included key members of the Coalition who were in a position to make decisions for the larger group. The research committee negotiated the original contract and met with me, alone, or with other members of the research team, about six or seven times over the course of the grant period. When we did sit down together, we were able to talk through many of the issues that the lead organizer and I found difficult to resolve on our own. But this research committee was very inconsistent, meeting only occasionally and often operating without the most influential members at key points, which contributed to my frustration.

I also had a relationship with the whole Coalition. Eager to build trust and credibility, I attended parts of several Coalition meetings. My efforts to interact with the Coalition directly highlighted for me the weakness of the research committee model. On two occasions during Coalition meetings, I found myself challenged on points I believed the research committee and I had already resolved, and I found myself questioned by a member of the research committee who had missed out

on meetings and conversations between the research team and the research committee. Feeling vulnerable and outnumbered, I decided only to attend full Coalition meetings when absolutely necessary and when there would be clear parameters for the discussion.

I also attended three rallies organized by the Coalition or Coalition members, hoping to show my support for them and build more personal relationships. One involved a protest for more accessible housing for people with disabilities followed by a march and a sit-in. I attended hoping to learn more about the Coalition members focused on housing issues for people with disabilities, an area about which I knew very little. I ultimately maintained a stronger relationship with this part of the Coalition, perhaps in part because I showed interest in their particular housing concerns. I attended two other public meetings: a town meeting with a city council member held during the evening in a poor neighborhood and a city hall press conference several months before the study release.

Unlike the Coalition, the CML had strong relationships with many city officials, including those at the Office of Housing and Community Development (OHCD), which oversees spending of CDBG funds. We received data and a limited amount of funding from city agencies for some of our other projects. Although Coalition members expressed concern about our unwillingness to challenge the way our city partners were addressing the affordable housing crisis, I viewed these relationships as a major asset in this collaboration. We were able to secure information from city officials, through interviews and reports, largely because we had these pre-existing relationships.

We had a very different way of working than did the Coalition. We valued efficiency; they valued dialogue. We relied primarily on e-mail for our internal communication and worked independently, for the most part. This was not the case for the Coalition. Most members, particularly the ones with whom I worked most closely, had e-mail accounts, but not all of them checked their e-mail regularly and none of them relied upon e-mail as their primary means of communication. I learned that, to communicate effectively with them, I needed to meet in person and make telephone calls much more frequently than I was used to. While this was not particularly efficient from my point of view, it was much more effective. Attending Coalition meetings gave me the best taste of the different work styles and culture. The Coalition's hired consultant took half an hour before the meeting to set things up, draping African clothes over tables, playing soft music, putting toys around the room, and papering the walls with blank newsprint. The meetings did not start on time or keep on schedule; they were more focused on mak-

ing sure that everyone had a chance to speak and that they developed a consensus.

At the CML, we valued having everything in writing, a function of our reliance on e-mail, our need to have a written contract in place in order to access our grant money through the University's research office, and because our professional world gives greater value to the written than spoken word. Coming out of this culture, I included in the initial scope of work a commitment to writing monthly memos for the Coalition updating my work. I wrote memos for six months of the grant period. It became clear to me that the research committee members were not reading the memos, or that they considered them insufficient. Not until we talked about the issues I described in the memos, either by phone or in meetings, was I confident that there was real communication. Also, at the CML, we never relied on conference calls; we would either have a meeting without someone who was unable to attend or reschedule it. The Coalition relied on speakerphone regularly during meetings with us, to include someone who was traveling or sick or otherwise unavailable to be there in person. I found this arrangement difficult.

While we formalized our expectations about the content of the final research in or original scope of work, we never discussed the research process. The biggest unasked question was, what role should the activists play in the research? None of us—activists or researchers—was trained in action research. While we supported the Coalition's broad goal of securing more resources to affordable housing, we saw a clear distinction between our work as researchers and theirs as activists. Only if we, the researchers, owned the research questions, methods, and analysis could this be the credible, academic product that the Coalition wanted. I was committed to including the activists in the research process to the extent that they could share what they knew about the affordable housing crisis, but paying for the study did not entitle them to any additional influence. At the same time that I was trying to build relationships and show support for the work of the Coalition, I was also trying to establish our different roles in the research process. I invited Coalition members to give interviews and comment on several drafts of study, but I had no interest in being bullied into reinterpreting the data to match their agenda. At the same time that I wanted the activists to respect that I was the researcher, I wanted them to become researchers, themselves. I did not mind addressing their specific data questions, even when they were outside the work of the study, but I wanted them to learn

to find and interpret quantitative data from sources like the US Census on their own.

Another question we never really addressed was, what role should the researchers play in the advocacy campaign? Everyone on the research team had experience outside the academy, with community organizing, social service delivery, or public service work. I believed that writing a report that spoke the truth about the affordable housing crisis, using all our skills as researchers and the university's press machine to publicize our efforts, would be our contribution to the cause. But it seemed at times that Coalition members wanted us to look and sound like activists.

I had a very low tolerance for conflict at the outset. Conflict is not a big part of the CML's working environment. Sure, we have disagreements, but we do not seek out conflict. Our e-mails and discussions with each other are polite, because we get along well and because it is part of the unwritten academic code to use the language of collegiality (except, perhaps, when writing blind peer-reviews). The Coalition, on the other hand, was trying to incite passions, provoke city bureaucrats, and get people fired up; they sought out conflict. The language they used in describing their work—language such as “demands” and “struggle” and “campaign”—was not the language of the academy. This spilled over into their relationships with us. What to me was significant and unwelcome conflict in our relationship for them was likely mild stuff that was little cause for attention.

### ***FINISHING AND RELEASING THE STUDY***

***Author: David Koppisch, Activist***

There was tension about the role of the Coalition and the role of the researchers all the way up to the end, when we released the study and held a press conference in April 2003. One big question was, whose study is this? The draft cover design did not include the Coalition's name, which upset several Coalition members. This is our research, they insisted. We paid for it! There was also tension about the look of our companion advocacy document that the Coalition developed. We wanted it to look similar to the research study, to let the public know that our analysis and demands were directly related to the findings in the research study. The researchers, on the other hand, wanted it to be clear that the two documents were separate. The designers drafted a cover for

our piece that used a similar typeface, colors, and photographs, which upset the lead researcher. There was also tension around distribution of the study. There was no clear agreement about how the copies of the study would be distributed. We felt like we had the right to decide who should receive copies, since they cost \$20 each. The researchers felt that they had an obligation to give copies to people who assisted with the research or who read drafts or gave input, many of whom we did not feel needed a full copy.

Coalition leaders expected that the researchers would stand with us at a public rally and press conference to present their findings and to make clear demands of public officials. We disagreed with the researchers about whether it was appropriate for them to stand with us, tacitly endorsing our recommendations directed at the Mayor and City Council. We thought it would add to our power; they seemed nervous to be identified with a group that was potentially going to attack the city government. Our differences with the researchers seemed irreconcilable at times. But in the end, both sides moved slightly towards each other's position. The researchers did stand with us and speak at our press conference when we released the study, giving us deeper respect for them and their commitment to social change.

Since the release of the study, the members of the Coalition have used the research findings to educate ourselves, our constituents and the general public on the breadth and depth of the housing crisis in Philadelphia. We have also used them to legitimate ourselves in front of policy makers and political leaders, to show them that we are advocating for policies to improve the city at large, not our narrow self-interest. Coalition leaders have incorporated key research findings in our monthly constituency meetings that bring together homeless, formerly homeless, and other low-income residents who have housing problems. We have used a variety of teaching techniques, including interactive drama, story telling, role playing and songs, to help people understand that their personal housing struggle is part of a larger crisis documented by university researchers. We used these gatherings to help people become familiar with key statistics about the housing affordability crisis that they can, in turn, recite to politicians, the media and others. In addition, we have included some of the research findings in the flyers, brochures, and other materials that we distribute to hundreds of our constituents on a monthly.

We have also used the research findings to get press coverage on the issue and to further infiltrate the public dialogue about housing in our city. From September 2002 through August 2004, the research findings

were cited in at least 10 articles about the work of the Coalition in major Philadelphia newspapers. In April 2004, a powerful city councilwoman introduced legislation to create a \$20 Million Affordable Housing Trust Fund in response to pressure from the Coalition. The legislation contained statistics lifted directly from the research findings as justification for the need to create such a trust fund.

***Author: Amy Hillier, Researcher***

The final study relied primarily on administrative data, including information from the American Housing Survey, U.S. Census, and *Statistical Abstract of the U.S.* and used narrative, charts, and maps to present this as clearly as possible. We also conducted numerous telephone and in-person interviews with leaders from community organizations and city agencies to learn more about their work and the primary obstacles to securing more affordable housing. Many of the people we interviewed were coalition members, and their interviews were some of the most helpful and influential on the study. Members of the coalition also provided information about the budgets of real households (no names were given) living on less than \$20,000 that we presented as pie charts showing how much they spent each month on housing, utilities, food, transportation, and child care.

In many ways the study confirmed what coalition members already knew, but even they were surprised by the scope of the affordability crisis in Philadelphia. The final report stressed seven major arguments: (1) housing affordability is primarily the result of inadequate income, caused by the lack of jobs paying a living wage and the erosion in the value of public assistance benefits; (2) the poorest households struggle the most to pay for housing, particularly the more than 200,000 households in Philadelphia with incomes under \$20,000; (3) for people with physical disabilities, it is especially difficult to find affordable housing; (4) low-income households have problems finding quality housing in quality neighborhoods, because of the age of housing and because of crime; (5) housing subsidies are needed to make housing affordable for low-income households, but only one in three households with incomes under \$20,000 receives a housing subsidy; (6) the lack of housing affordability for low-income households is a national crisis as well as a crisis in Philadelphia; (7) closing the housing affordability gap requires increasing incomes—through increasing EITC, TANF, and SSI benefits—and directing more federal, state, and local money to affordable housing.

We shared several drafts of the report with the Coalition, and some Coalition members gave us detailed comments. One of the biggest concerns of Coalition members about the early drafts was the emphasis on the national housing crisis and need for new funding priorities at the national level. Coalition members wanted the report to give more attention to the power of Philadelphia housing officials to bring about change by spending more of the city's housing budget on households with the lowest incomes. We ultimately agreed to start each section of the study—including the recommendations—with our Philadelphia findings and to save our material about the national situation for the end.

The tensions resulting from our struggle over ownership of the study and poorly defined roles came to a head most clearly while planning for the release of the study. The Coalition agreed from the outset to pay for the publication of the study, so they worked with the graphic artist on the cover and controlled the printing (including the cost) and distribution of the study. At their request, I provided them with a list of people we wanted to receive copies of the study so that they could send their advocacy materials to them, as well. I was surprised and disappointed when I found out that not all those people received copies. Eventually the Coalition gave us additional copies and we paid for some more copies to be made.

The Coalition wanted to hold a joint press conference at the University; we wanted only to have a press release but no event. Our concern was precipitated by earlier press coverage of the study, coinciding with the original planned release date. A local reporter represented the comments and advocacy materials of the Coalition as our research study findings, leading us to question the care with which the Coalition would take with a second media encounter. The Coalition seriously discussed holding a press conference at the University without us. Eventually we agreed to speak at a press conference they organized downtown at City Hall. My co-author and I politely accepted Coalition t-shirts that day but did not wear them during the event. Later a key Coalition member made a point of asking me to wear my t-shirt next time to “show solidarity.” I believe we did show solidarity by working through the more difficult moments with the Coalition to produce a research document together that spoke the truth about the desperate need for more affordable housing.

We were all pleased with the coverage the local newspapers and radio gave the press conference and study release. In addition to summaries of the study, the newspaper coverage included some of the personal stories that the Coalition prepared as well as their list of recommenda-

tions. I had an op-ed printed in the newspaper and my co-author and I were invited to speak on a local cable television show hosted by a leader from the Kensington Welfare Rights Union, a member of the Coalition.

### ***LESSONS LEARNED AND MOVING FORWARD***

***Author: David Koppisch, Activist***

In the end, after a sometimes rocky and tense journey together, we all gained more from the collaboration than we would have on our own. The community activists learned about the process and power of research and statistics and the researchers learned about community organizing and politics. All of us were challenged to examine the biases we had about each other and each other's work when we began. Based on our experience, here are some specific lessons learned and recommendations for community activists who are considering a collaborative relationship with researchers:

1. Choose researchers who believe that research is a tool for social change, who agree with your advocacy agenda, your political strategies, and your policy changes. Activists need research that will help them win their case. The Coalition set out to demonstrate that there was indeed an affordable housing crisis in Philadelphia and that those in power at the local level could and should do something about it. We needed researchers who believed in this cause and who could compile a stack of evidence to prove this. We did not need research that showed that Philadelphia's housing problem was created by national or international forces that were beyond the control of local leaders. This was a tug of war at times between us and the researchers. While the researchers' position might be true, our case was not with the federal government or global capitalism; it was with Philadelphia's city council and mayor.
2. Be clear who the audience is for your research document—policy makers, community residents, or other activists?
3. Be open to learning about how to be a researcher; it will strengthen your organizing skills.
4. Choose researchers you can work with and trust. You do not have time or energy to be organizing against your paid researchers.
5. Choose researchers who are willing (and able) to take political risks. At times, Coalition members perceived that the researchers

were unwilling to strongly criticize what the mayor, his housing agencies, and the public housing authority were doing wrong, both in the report and to the media. We should have talked more directly about the researchers' self-interest at the outset so that we could have determined whether we needed to collaborate with researchers who were willing to take more risks.

6. Accept that you will have to compromise with your researchers, and that there will be limits to their research, even if they meet the above criteria.
7. Have a clear sense of how you will use research to further your goals, but do not overestimate the ability of a research document to give you power. No document, no matter how hard-hitting, controversial, or professional-looking, can substitute for organizing of real people, building relationships with decision-makers, and developing smart political strategy.
8. Be very clear up front about what you want your researchers to do publicly when you begin using the research. For example, do you want them to stand with you at a press conference or rally or attend lobbying meetings with city council members?
9. Be creative in your use of research results. Do not settle for the traditional press conference. While we did organize a well-publicized press conference and have successfully used the research results to educate our constituents, we should have thought of other ways to keep the research alive. Eventually, the media stopped considering the report findings newsworthy and we lacked a strategy for keeping attention focused on the research findings. We might have created and distributed pamphlets or tracts that used cartoons to communicate the information. We might have developed a more elaborate curriculum in order to teach high school and college students, social workers, as well as other community residents about the extent of the housing crisis. Finally, we might have conducted a more extensive media campaign, focusing as much on radio and television media as we did on print media, to promote the research findings and create more of a buzz within the city about new research that points to a crisis.

***Author: Amy Hillier, Researcher***

We learned a great deal from our experience that will make us wiser and more patient the next time we collaborate with community activists. Here are our specific lessons and recommendations:

1. Accept that conflict is an important and healthy part of the collaboration process.
2. Know that all expectations cannot be contained within a written contract. The political world in which activists operate is constantly shifting, so any collaboration with them must involve flexibility. If researchers are not interested in being challenged, frustrated, and constantly held accountable, they should not do this kind of work.
3. Come to some agreement about the role of the activists in the research process. Is action research the appropriate model? If so, researchers should work in tandem with activists to determine the research questions, data sources, methods, and organization of the research findings and to actually conduct the research.
4. Clarify whether the activists want a specific research product, such as a research study, or if they really want ongoing technical support and research services.
5. Start talking about the release early on, however premature it feels. This will force you to address the important issue of ownership.
6. Do not apologize for your self-interest. Let the activists know how the academic world works, including the incentives and limitations.
7. Clarify how decisions will be made and agree on how you will communicate.
8. Be prepared to view your success broadly. It may be the relationships you build, rather than the research product you produce, that are most important. For example, I was delighted when a member of the Coalition recruited the graduating MSW student who had been working with me for a full-time position as a housing advocate.
9. Do not give up on teaching activists how to do research; they will not be shy about teaching you how to be a better advocate.

The CML has not entered into any new research collaboration with advocates since working with the Philadelphia Affordable Housing Coalition, but it is likely that we will. When we do, we will seriously consider whether action research is an appropriate model—whether we are open to sharing the research process and have the appropriate knowledge and skills to do this well and whether the advocates are sincerely interested in being partners rather than just funders. We have a strong commitment to empowering community groups by helping them to

strengthen their skills in working with administrative data. Our experience working with the Coalition has given us a better understanding of how community organizations can use census data, summary statistics, and maps to support their work.

I have a new appreciation for the importance of dialogue for successful collaborations. Our collaboration with the Coalition could have dissolved at several different points, but we continued to talk—and still continue to talk—about our experience of working together. It is this dialogue that promises to transform researchers into better advocates and advocates into better researchers by showing them new perspectives on shared goals. The poverty at the root of Philadelphia's affordable housing crisis is perpetuated because our segregated society allows too many people to ignore the unmet needs of their fellow human beings or blame them for being failures. Collaborations that bring people with different approaches and skills together to listen to one another and recognize their common purpose can provide opportunities for personal growth and challenge the economic and social structures that reinforce inequality.

## NOTES

1. The study, *Closing the Gap: Housing Unaffordability in Philadelphia*, is available at <http://cml.upenn.edu>.

2. The NIS ([www.cml.upenn.edu/nis](http://www.cml.upenn.edu/nis)) is made up of several applications. The muralBase (<http://cml.upenn.edu/murals>), neighborhoodBase (<http://cml.upenn.edu/nbase>), and crimeBase (<http://cml.upenn.edu/crime>) are accessible to the public while only community organizations and city agencies are given access to the address-level data in the parcelBase.

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