Engaging Low-Income Individuals and Communities to Advocate for Antipoverty Public Policies

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Abstract

Antipoverty public policies are intended to assist low-income individuals and communities. Government grants and contracts are commonly awarded to nonprofit organizations which then implement the policies and serve low-income populations. Both government and nonprofit organizations have a responsibility to be effective in their service. Community engagement can assist effectiveness and result in improved antipoverty public policy and service provision. This paper explores the relationship between government, nonprofits, and public policy to determine the importance of community engagement in creating effective antipoverty policies. Then six engagement strategies are identified that nonprofits can and do use to engage low-income individuals and communities. For comparison, two Grand Rapids nonprofit organizations are evaluated through secondary data to determine if either organization successfully uses the suggested strategies to engage low-income individuals and communities in advocacy for antipoverty public policy.

"There are many factors to consider when utilizing participation as a core programmatic strategy, including community composition and dynamics, relationships between the poor and other institutions, and the capacity and limitations of the poor themselves. While federal policy may promote and encourage maximum feasible participations, local organizations must have the commitment, knowledge, resources, and structure to attain it (Nemon, 2007, p. 19)."

A complex relationship exists between nonprofit organizations, government, and public policy. While government is responsible for formulating public policy, nonprofits are often relied on to implement policies through grants or contracts (Balestri, 2014). Outsourcing of social services from the public sector to the nonprofit further complicates the relationship (Bar-Nir & Gal, 2011). As nonprofit organizations become increasingly involved in providing social services, they inherit both the responsibility and power to act as representatives and advocates for the communities they serve. In this role, nonprofit organizations confront connected and competing organizational factors such as
effectiveness of representation, responsiveness to the community, and contract compliance. To increase accountability and efficiency in social service provisions, it is important to directly engage and involve constituents in the decision-making processes regarding public policies that will directly impact their lives (FRESC, 2015).

In recent decades, the nonprofit sector has become more professionalized through training, formal education, increased research, and necessity. These changes have helped nonprofit organizations develop a key role in “mobilizing demand for policy change” (Bushouse, 2017, p. 58). Nonprofit organizations provide leadership to the community by creating a platform for a common cause to provide service to the community through “private actions in the name of the public good” (Bushouse, 2017, p. 52). Nonprofit organizations work to engage community members to increase their knowledge of public policies and strengthen their voice in the policy-making process. They can incorporate community engagement into their advocacy activities. Nonprofit organizations are commonly responsible for administering antipoverty public policies, such as federal community action programs, housing and urban development (HUD) programs, and Welfare to Work/Welfare Reform. Many of these programs have been critiqued as too restrictive, counterproductive, and ineffective (Danzinger, Wiederspan, & Douglas-Siegel, 2013). Nonprofits have a civic duty to operate as a voice for underserved populations and to engage with the populations they represent. Those administering antipoverty public policy should use community engagement to better inform services and advocacy activities. The use of community engagement strategies must be intentional, particularly when working with low-income individuals and attempting to address antipoverty public policy (Mosley, 2016). Low-income individuals are difficult to engage and retain as participants due to poverty-related circumstances (Nemon, 2007). The engagement activities used by nonprofit organizations must be intentional, not ceremonial, to effectuate change.

This article is organized in the following way: First, a review of the literature exploring the relationship between nonprofit organizations, government, and public policy, the role of nonprofits as representatives and advocates, participatory processes for antipoverty public policy, and community engagement activities shown to lead to advocacy in the policy-making process. This is followed by methodology, findings, and discussion to review the use and effectiveness of low-income community engagement activities in Grand Rapids, Michigan which lead to advocacy for antipoverty public policy.
Research Question

What strategies can community-based nonprofits use to engage low-income communities into advocacy for antipoverty public policies? What can be learned from the cases of Kent School Services Network and Community Rebuilders, both operating in Grand Rapids, Michigan?

Review of the Literature

The relationship between nonprofits, government, and public policy is complex, in general, and important for prevention and treatment of poverty. Within the multi-sectoral relationship, nonprofit organizations can act as representatives and advocates for citizens. Community engagement with low-income individuals provides a source of information to effectively guide government-nonprofit relationships and the policy-making process to improve services and community results.

Nonprofit Organizations, Government, and Public Policy

Federal, state, and local governments award grants and contracts for social service programs to nonprofit organizations and the two sectors are increasingly dependent on each other. Nonprofits rely on the government for funding and government relies on the nonprofit sector for policy implementation and service provision. Government uses nonprofits for policy implementation and service delivery, because they are embedded within communities and resource networks in more meaningful ways than government agencies (LeRoux & Goerdel, 2009). Grants and contracts with nonprofit organizations also allow government to reduce their staff sizes, overhead, and payroll expenses.

Since the 1990s, public services have undergone “privatization, decentralization, and devolution,” (Bar-Nir & Gal, 2011, p. 2). Outsourcing services through grants and contracts from the government to nonprofit organizations creates a shift in government-nonprofit dynamics. The privatization, decentralization, and devolution of government services, largely social services, to nonprofit organizations increases their power in public policy issues (Bar-Nir & Gal, 2011). Once a nonprofit is awarded government funding, they are largely bound by the rules and requirements of the grants and contracts; however, the wording of a grant or contract allows for organizational discretion to effectively
serve local or regional clients. Nonprofits can use their resources, autonomy, and networks to implement policies in ways that favor their mission and communities.

During this era of social service devolution and decline in the social safety net, government has deployed counterproductive social service policies (Danzinger et al., 2013; Nemon, 2007; Patterson, Silverman, & Santiago, 2015; Price, 2010). At the same time, the distance between the recipients of social service programs and their knowledge of the mechanisms of the policy process is increasing (Bushouse, 2017). The government must listen to citizens and provide the most desired and suitable public goods (Balestri, 2014). This responsibility also applies to nonprofit organizations.

Nonprofit organizations are advocates for the needs of civil society, particularly within marginalized communities. Nonprofits’ familiarity with their communities gives agency leaders key insights and abilities to be important players in the policy-making process. Communities directly impacted by any given public policy are an invaluable resource in policy design. When citizens are not involved as decision-makers, competing agendas, special interests, and politicians can lead “the democratic process to inefficient outcomes,” (Balestri, 2014, p. 538). It is important that nonprofit organizations engage with citizens to advocate for public policy that is efficient. Nonprofit organizations are a vital piece of civil society and democracy (Bushouse, 2017).

**Nonprofits as Representatives and Advocates**

Boris and Mosher-Williams define advocacy as “attempts to change policies or influence the decisions of any institutional elite, government, and state institutions through enhancement of civic participation to promote a collective goal or interest,” (Schmid, Bar, & Nirel, 2008, p. 581). Advocacy activities include, but are not limited to, public education, research, constituent action, agenda setting, policy design, and policy implementation (Reid, 2000, p. 3). Nonprofits can take the place of citizens and communities in the public policy process by acting as representatives and advocates for their constituents (Mosley, 2016). They can also provide a platform for community involvement in the policy-making process (Balassiano & Chandler, 2010). To do this, it is important for nonprofits to have the organizational and technical capacity for advocacy and community engagement, which are factors for advocacy success (Balassiano & Chandler, 2010; LeRoux & Goerdel, 2009).
Government and nonprofit agencies attempt to engage citizens and communities in advocacy and decision-making, but most of the participatory processes for citizens are largely found to be ceremonial, including “task forces, advisory boards, and community councils” (Mosley, 2016, p. 78). These forms of participatory processes or community engagement are ineffective because they require time and expertise that average or marginalized citizens likely do not possess. Ineffective, unsustainable, and ceremonial engagement activities provide nonprofit organizations with opportunities to step in and advocate for public policies in favor of for their constituents. In comparison to marginalized citizens, nonprofits are more likely to have the capacity and expertise to effectively participate in the policy-making process.

Mosley (2016) states that nonprofit representation begs another set of questions: how well can a nonprofit organization represent a community, and is the community satisfied with its representation? To create effective representation, an organization must go beyond ceremonial community participation and move towards strategic and meaningful community engagement. Public administrators and nonprofit leaders should put engagement strategies in place to actively listen to the voices of the community members. Steps to do this include the following: nonprofits that are seeking to work as community representatives should be able to demonstrate to public administrators that they are committed to listening to their constituents, nonprofits of a variety of types and sizes should be included as representatives in public policy discussions, nonprofits should be held accountable for reporting information to their communities and for continually attempting to engage citizens in the policy-making process, and lastly, nonprofit managers should attempt meaningful community engagement to replace ceremonial participatory processes (Mosley, 2016).

Dodge and Ospina (2016) focus on nonprofit organizations as “schools for democracy.” Nonprofits use citizen engagement and public education to enable citizens to become agents for social change in political arenas (Dodge & Ospina, 2016). It is important for nonprofit organizations to internally recognize the potential stemming from community engagement. Internal prioritization makes community engagement more deliberate and effective (Dodge & Ospina, 2016). Framing and relational practices are two types of organization-led engagement practices that can lead to impactful citizen involvement. Framing practices are used to frame social issues in a way that gives citizens the language, knowledge, and intellectual framework for advocacy
purposes (Dodge & Ospina, 2016). Relational practices support framing practices and involve providing opportunities for citizens to exercise their voice, ideas, and policy language.

The intentional use of framing and relational practices builds a foundation that enables citizen storytelling to be a powerful tool for impacting public policy (Dodge, 2014). Storytelling adds humanistic viewpoints often missed in data, graphs, and budgets, and can shape the context for political issues with the intent to influence public policy (Dodge, 2014). Nonprofits, as representatives, have a responsibility to engage community members in intentional, strategic, and informative ways in order to further their storylines to influence policy.

**Nonprofits and Participatory Processes for Antipoverty Public Policy**

The American struggle to reduce or alleviate poverty has been a lengthy and persistent battle. Economic hardships are happening at a time where there is “continued unraveling of antipoverty programs and the erosion of the social safety net,” (Patterson et al., 2015, p. 311). Current years have been an “extremely hostile, antiwelfare political climate,” (Patterson et al., 2015, p. 316) resulting in Welfare or antipoverty programs that restrict access to services to reduce numbers of recipients. This approach to antipoverty public policy fails to assist low-income individuals and families.

As described, a complex relationship exists between nonprofits, government, and public policy, and it creates opportunities for nonprofit organizations to use community engagement to impact public policy. The implementation of antipoverty programs is frequently done through a collaborative process involving cross-sector networks. The nonprofit involvement of low-income community members in the policy process is an extension of the collaborative framework that already exists. Low-income individuals have valuable insight into the causes and consequences of poverty within their communities. Involving these individuals in the identification of poverty-related causes and issues “increases the likelihood of involvement in future planning activities,” (Patterson et al., 2015, p. 317). Nonprofit use of community engagement can provide a foundation for advocacy (Gronbjerg & Prakash, 2016).
Participation by low-income individuals in the process of poverty alleviation is a way to empower communities and “effectuate institutional change,” (Nemon, 2007, p. 14), but multiple difficulties stand in the way of effective community engagement for social and political change. Several studies found that participation varied based on community demographics, that low-income individuals often lack the capacity or resources to participate, and that there is a lack of organizational public policy expertise (Nemon, 2007, p. 15). These problems with community engagement are counterproductive to meaningful participation. Difficulty sustaining participation with low-income individuals can “result in dissonance regarding the needs, priorities, and culture,” (Price, 2010, p. 65) of the communities. Nonprofit organizations must purposefully provide low-income individuals with fundamental knowledge, support, and opportunities for advocacy.

Effective antipoverty policies can be transformative. To be effective, policies should have “cross-sector efforts, community engagement, and multifactorial approaches that consider the role of the people as well as the place,” (Sandel et al., 2016, p. 128). Underrepresented or marginalized communities should be represented on all relevant committees or boards, leadership should be developed from within underrepresented communities, and organizational transparency and funding diversity should be sought to reduce power struggles between underrepresented communities and establish community leaders (Sandel et al., 2016). In summary, to effectively use community engagement to impact antipoverty policies, there needs to be a universal understanding of poverty’s causes and effects and a more informed engagement and mobilization of low-income individuals to advocate for policy change (Nemon, 2007).

**Effective Community Engagement Strategies for Low-Income Communities**

Antipoverty policies risk “missing the mark” (FRESC, 2015) without the meaningful community engagement of low-income individuals in the policy-making process. Efficient and effective policy is inclusive of the communities it serves. High-quality community engagement can lead to policy legitimacy, community support, a sense of ownership, creation of
additional resources, understanding and progress made towards inequities and disparities, better policies and projects, and reduction in long-term expenses (FRESnC, 2015). Nonprofit community engagement should actively seek participation from underserved communities – in this case, low-income individuals – and establish supports for meaningful and sustainable engagement in advocacy and the policy-making process. After reviewing current research on the relationship between nonprofits, low-income community engagement, and public policy, several engagement strategies were identified as common and effective. This is not a complete list of engagement strategies for low-income communities; however, each example has been demonstrated to be produce desired outcomes.

**Be active and obtain community knowledge.** (Balestri, 2014; Price, 2010; Sandel, 2016): Nonprofit organizations advocate for communities as representatives. To ensure accountability and effectiveness, nonprofits must have community knowledge prior to initiating community engagement activities. In terms of poverty, organizations should understand poverty statistics within their service area: rate of poverty, poverty and gender, poverty and race, homelessness rates, hunger rates, current relief programs, duplication of services, etc. Reinforcing a nonprofit’s responsibility to be responsive to their constituents calls for an active and intentional presence in community affairs. Community action and presence lend to sending and receiving information and building relationships.

**Demonstrate commitment and capacity.** (Balassiano & Chandler, 2010; LeRoux, 2011; LeRoux & Goerdel, 2009; Nemon, 2007): It is critical for nonprofits to internally recognize and prioritize community engagement for public policy advocacy. Nonprofit organizations must then develop the capacity to sustainably engage low-income communities in ways that are meaningful and results-driven.

**Provide decision-making roles.** (FRESnC, 2015; Mosley, 2016; Nemon, 2007; Price, 2010): Nonprofit organizations focused on poverty relief should ensure that all boards and committees, especially those with decision-making power, include low-income representation.

**Provide multiple points of organizational access.** (FRESnC, 2015; LeRoux, 2011): It is difficult to initiate and sustain engagement with low-income communities. Points of entry should be strategic and convenient for low-income individuals: free entry, after work hours, located near
public transportation, embedded in other community activities, and/or on-site childcare (FRESC 2015). Multiple points of access translate to more chances to learn from community knowledge, voices, and ideas.

**Participate in a community resource network.** (Nemon, 2007; FRESC 2015): Nonprofit organizations actively work within community resource networks. Nonprofits seeking to engage low-income individuals can do so using the collaborative community resource network in which nonprofits and low-income communities already participate. Networks are a more efficient and familiar means of engaging with low-income individuals and communities.

**Provide policy education and community advocacy opportunity.** (Balassiano & Chandler, 2010; Bushouse, 2017; Dodge, 2014; Dodge & Ospina, 2016; LeRoux & Goerdel, 2009; Nemon, 2010): Low-income communities should receive poverty-related policy education in order to maximize understanding of relevant policies. As understanding evolves through education, organizations should then create opportunities for low-income individuals to advocate for informed policy changes. Through this process, nonprofits can “proactively cultivate new community leaders,” (FRESC, 2015) and provide opportunities for storytelling to reframe the issue.

**Research Design/Methods**

To better understand the prevalence and efficacy of the six identified community engagement strategies, two nonprofit organizations were examined in Grand Rapids, MI. Both served low-income populations; one through educational assistance and one through housing assistance. Kent School Services Network (KSSN) provides education-related assistance to schools in Kent County and primarily focuses on low-income districts where students commonly have barriers to educational success and achievement. Community Rebuilders is a nonprofit organization committed to providing fair and equitable housing to low-income individuals experiencing a housing crisis.

Using secondary data, KSSN and Community Rebuilders were examined to discover their engagement of low-income individuals based on the six identified engagement strategies for engaging low-income communities to advocate for antipoverty public policy. Organizational
success was determined if the nonprofit organizations were clearly engaging with low-income individuals via the six methods, and if the use of community engagement was bringing low-income individuals into advocacy roles for antipoverty public policy. Secondary data sources included official websites, affiliated or linked websites, social media pages, news articles, and IRS forms. No primary research was conducted.

Findings

Kent School Services Network (KSSN), Grand Rapids, Michigan

Kent School Services Network (KSSN) works to reduce educational barriers to maximize student achievement and success. Their work is concentrated in Kent County school districts with higher poverty rates. KSSN uses a community school model with integrated service delivery. KSSN receives funding through schools matching funds, local foundations, Kent County, United Way, and other local donors (Kent School Services Network, n.d.; Guidestar, 2015). KSSN does not report lobbying expenses on its 2015 IRS Form 990 and did not elect to file IRS Form 5768, otherwise known as the (h) form (Guidestar, 2015).

Be active and obtain community knowledge. Understanding of public education, school reform, poverty, and integrated service delivery in Michigan and Kent County was foundational to the formation of KSSN through multiple studies performed by the Kent County Family and Children’s Coordinating Council (Kent School Services Network, n.d.). The information gathered from the studies was used to develop KSSN’s framework with both the community model school and integrated service delivery model. Also, KSSN’s Community Resource Coordinators are placed in schools, specifically to connect students and families with community resources, and to listen and react to student and family needs and communicate findings back to KSSN for program revision.

Demonstrate commitment and capacity. Organizational commitment and capacity for community engagement are implicitly present, but not outwardly proclaimed. The nature of the community school model is to enrich educational experiences for students by conveniently connecting them to community resources to their benefit. By design, KSSN is both committed to and capable of performing community engagement among low-income students and families.
Provide decision-making roles. There was a lack of evidence that KSSN puts low-income individuals in positions with decision-making capabilities, including a lack of representation on the governing board (Guidestar, 2015).

Provide multiple points of organizational access. KSSN, by design, is open for engagement and has multiple access points to serve the community and reduce barriers to education. Examples of access points include in-school Community Resource Coordinators, consistent presence at school events, at PTO meetings, and community events, professional connections at Michigan Department of Health and Human Services of Kent County, and day-to-day accessibility for students and families in need (Kent School Services Network, n.d.).

Participate in a community resource network. A primary function of KSSN is to build, maintain, and utilize a community resource network made up of multi-sector partnerships to serve students and families in need of various supports and assistance (Kent School Services Network, n.d.). Their resource network includes the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, community mental health, Spectrum Health, and various other local service providers. Their network is being used to assist families and perform community engagement. As an example of engaging the community, KSSN is part of a Kent County collaboration to improve and promote the importance of preschool attendance rates. The collaboration includes incentivizing preschool teachers in Kent County to film short videos of their students saying the initiative’s slogan. Parents, grandparents, students, and educators are all encouraged to be creative and engaged in the process (GRPS, 2017).

Provide policy education and community advocacy opportunity. KSSN assists parents in both Spanish and English to discuss and apply for public assistance and to access resource networks (Cunningham, 2014). As an advocacy opportunity, KSSN provides students at West Elementary School in Wyoming, Michigan with the opportunity to impact their community by growing and distributing fruit for low-income individuals and families through a school-based community orchard (Albanese, 2017).

In 2012, the KSSN community school model led Michigan Governor Rick Snyder to begin replicating it statewide, through a program called Pathways to Potential (MDHHS, 2017). The statewide program receives training and support from KSSN, is administered by the Michigan
Community Rebuilders, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Community Rebuilders’ mission is to rebuild “hope through housing opportunities for families and individuals with support services during transitions,” (Community Rebuilders, n.d.). The nonprofit uses the Housing First model, which prioritizes providing clients with housing services before other resources or services. They are well known for serving homeless veterans, but also serve a wider variety of homeless populations including families, young adults, and people with disabilities. Community Rebuilders receives funding from federal and state programs, rental income, local foundations, and donations (Community Rebuilders, n.d.; Guidestar, 2015). Community Rebuilders does not report lobbying expenses on 2015 IRS Form 990 and did not elect to file IRS Form 5768, otherwise known as the (h) form (Guidestar, 2015).

Be active and obtain community knowledge. Community Rebuilders demonstrates extensive knowledge of poverty, homelessness, and Veteran homelessness. Organizational community knowledge is displayed regarding antipoverty and housing assistance public policies. To respond to community needs, Community Rebuilders strategically employs policy and program specific housing resource specialists to assist and work with Kent County’s homeless population (Community Rebuilders, n.d.).

Demonstrate commitment and capacity. Community Rebuilders demonstrates both organizational commitment to low-income community engagement and the capacity for it. The organization states that it views housing as a basic human right, and that it aims to serve its clients with dignity and respect through including clients in goal setting for achieving self-sufficiency (Community Builders, n.d.). Staff and community-based workers are considered partners in assisting clients and are easy to contact. Detailed staff contact information is provided online (Community Rebuilders, n.d.).
Provide decision-making roles. Community Rebuilders does not appear to place low-income individuals on its governing board (Guidestar, 2015). However, its program “The AFTER Hub” seeks members for a veterans advisory committee. The goal of this committee is to “engage the larger veteran community in identifying unmet service needs and pursuing opportunities to meet those needs,” (Community Rebuilders, n.d.). More information is not provided.

Provide multiple points of organizational access. Low-income individuals can engage with Community Rebuilders through free community events, trainings, and through strategic organizational outreach for low-income and homeless individuals, both veterans and non-veterans (Community Rebuilders, n.d.).

Participate in a community resource network. Community Rebuilders participates in a resource network to assist in providing low-barrier transitional housing during an episode of homelessness. This is done as a collaborative, cross-sector effort to assist clients in meeting other needs for self-sufficiency directly after receiving housing via the use of the Housing First model (Community Rebuilders, n.d.). In a more targeted resource network, the organization has a program called “The AFTER Hub” (Community Rebuilders, n.d.). It is a community-based collaborative for the reduction and prevention of veteran homelessness. The program focuses on the importance of “Veterans Serving Veterans” (Community Rebuilders, n.d.) to reduce Veteran homelessness.

Provide policy education and community advocacy opportunity. “Veteran Voices” is a service provided by Community Rebuilders and part of the previously mentioned “AFTER Hub” (Community Rebuilders, n.d.). In the “Veteran Voices” programs, “veterans provide community organizations and staff with training on best practices for serving, engaging and successfully recruiting veterans for their programs and services,” (Community Rebuilders, 2015). Also, “Veterans Serving Veterans” is used to provide both policy education and community advocacy opportunities for antipoverty public policy issues. Veterans who are well versed in pertinent antipoverty policies are entrusted to assist veterans who have not gained policy knowledge with navigating the veteran, housing, and/or welfare systems (Community Rebuilders, n.d.). Additionally, Community Rebuilders started a citizen advisory board open to service recipients and the general public that seeks input from the community to advocate for transparency and effectiveness in housing services.
Table 1: Community engagement strategies met by each nonprofit organization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Engagement Strategies</th>
<th>Community Rebuilders</th>
<th>Kent School Services Network (KSSN)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Be active and obtain community knowledge</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demonstrate commitment and capacity</td>
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<td>Provide decision-making roles</td>
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<td>Provide multiple points of organizational access</td>
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<td>Participate in a community resource network</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provide policy education and community advocacy</td>
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Discussion

National poverty rates are consistently near 15%, wealth inequity continues to grow, and low-income families and individuals struggle to secure and maintain adequate wages and employment (Patterson et al., 2015). According to the United States Census Bureau (2016), the population in Kent County was estimated at 642,173 in July 2016, with a poverty rate of 14.5%. Throughout Kent County and Grand Rapids, nonprofits administer antipoverty public policy to alleviate poverty and mitigate its community-based causes and effects, such as homelessness, hunger, crime, access to healthcare, education disparities, and wage inequality.

Antipoverty public policy can be deeply frustrating for low-income individuals. The post-recession “depth and duration of joblessness and hardship” and “recent state-level cutbacks underscore the urgency of client-driven policy guidelines to address the diverse challenges of low-income families” (Danzinger et al., 2013, p. 305). For example, cash assistance, commonly known as Welfare, is a public program administered by nonprofit agencies throughout Michigan but is described as punitive and difficult to access resulting in poor poverty alleviation outcomes (Danzinger et al, 2013). In cases like this, nonprofits should evaluate the efficacy of their policy implementation and consider engaging low-income communities to increase successful outcomes. Other nonprofits providing forms of poverty relief have proven successful in Grand Rapids, MI. More specifically, KSSN and Community Rebuilders both actively engage and
then elevate low-income individuals to participate in varying levels of public policy advocacy. Again, advocacy activities include, but are not limited to, public education, research, constituent action, agenda setting, policy design, and policy implementation (Reid, 2000, p. 3).

KSSN used five of the six identified effective community engagement strategies. Based on collecting secondary data, they failed to provide critical decision-making roles to low-income individuals. Decision-making roles appeared to be exclusive to the governing board and KSSN staff and leadership (Kent School Services Network, n.d.; Guidestar, 2015). KSSN successfully used community engagement to change school culture through opportunity and resource provision, working with parents to achieve self-sufficiency, and creating and participating in cross-sector resource networks. KSSN demonstrated its ability to impact public policy through a statewide expansion of the community school model with leadership and training provided by KSSN. Governor Snyder’s implementation of Pathways to Potential is a public policy success for KSSN, but program advocacy in this endeavor does not appear to incorporate low-income individuals or families. This is a missed opportunity, because evidence shows that inclusion of low-income communities in the policy-making process improves commitment, quality, and outcomes (FRESH, 2015; Nemon, 2007; Danzinger et al., 2013).

The community orchard at West Elementary School in Wyoming, Michigan is a KSSN project used to feed hungry students and the community (Albanese, 2017). This community project includes the skills and input from students, including low-income students, with the intention of creating change in the community. This is not an opportunity for low-income individuals to engage in advocacy for antipoverty public policy; however, it is an opportunity to create change, provide policy education, and move toward community engagement that impacts antipoverty public policy.

There are several recommendations for KSSN to improve low-income community engagement to result in advocacy for antipoverty public policy. KSSN should proactively discuss systemic poverty with students and encourage them to mindfully consider the culture and attitudes surrounding poverty (Mistry et al., 2016). KSSN should also identify and expand policy education opportunities with parents to provide more opportunities to advocate for public policy change. KSSN should look to both low-income students and parents to cultivate leadership within their
respective communities. Most notably, it is recommended that KSSN place low-income individuals in decision-making roles.

Overall, the KSSN’s use of the community school model and an integrated service delivery model have proven effective in Kent County, Michigan. KSSN has impacted statewide education policy, particularly regarding improving outcomes for low-income students and families. The KSSN community school and integrated service delivery model have proven effective in reducing educational barriers, improving student success, and impacting public policy. KSSN actively uses community engagement strategies to incorporate low-income individuals into its organization and processes.

Community Rebuilders used six out of six of the identified effective community engagement strategies. Using the Housing First model, the organization can create change to further its mission. The Housing First model is considered evidence-based and Community Rebuilders is using it to incrementally reshape housing services for low-income individuals (Community Rebuilders, n.d.). This is relevant to community engagement because the Housing First model aims to provide housing prior to providing other social services as a way to immediately increase an individual’s self-sufficiency and capacity to overcome barriers. It is easier to maintain effective community engagement with low-income individuals after barriers for community engagement, such as homelessness, have been removed.

The nonprofit implements several federally-funded programs and has a sizable staff that engages with low-income communities to provide the related housing services. Community Rebuilders was awarded $4,496,841 in government grants in 2015 (Guidestar, 2015), in part from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG) (Community Rebuilders, n.d.). It then applied the Housing First model to these public policies to create change. Community-based impact is evident, because Community Rebuilders helped Grand Rapids become the 54th community nationwide to end veteran homelessness (Facebook, n.d.). In part, the organization’s success can be attributed to its responsiveness and commitment to community engagement. Community Rebuilders actively seeks community engagement and elevates constituents in meaningful ways to advocate for antipoverty public policy. This leads to well-informed and well-executed service provision and advocacy activities.
At this time, there is one recommendation for Community Rebuilders to improve community engagement activities within low-income communities. The organization should place low-income individuals on their governing board. Placing a community member on the governing board would give insight and impact to the decision-making process and result in stakeholder buy-in and policy approval.

Limitations: There are several limitations of this research are a lack of primary research and a very small sample size. The six identified community engagement strategies were gleaned from a review of the literature on antipoverty public policy and community engagement; however, it is not a complete list of engagement strategies. Many additional effective strategies are can be found and would potentially be a better fit for varying organizations. Analyzing organizational factors against their most effective engagement strategies would be a way to expand on this research. Differences in organizational structures would allow for fluctuations in engagement strategies. Low-income populations can also vary widely in demographics. An organization’s engagement and advocacy strategies will likely increase in effectiveness if adjusted to meet the specific and targeted needs of the community.

Conclusion

A review of the literature shows that nonprofit organizations can use community engagement to impact public policy. Community engagement is difficult for nonprofit organizations to initiate and sustain with low-income individuals, but it is also critical for achieving effective antipoverty policies. High-quality community engagement can lead to policy legitimacy, community support, a sense of ownership, creation of additional resources, understanding, and progress made towards inequities and disparities, better policies and projects, and reduction in long term expenses (FRESC, 2015). Six effective methods were identified for the use of nonprofits to conduct low-income community engagement. It is recommended for nonprofits to be active and obtain community knowledge, demonstrate commitment and capacity for community engagement, provide decision-making roles to low-income individuals, provide multiple points of access, participate in a community resource network, and provide policy education and community advocacy opportunities.
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About the Author

Tammy Britton is a 2010 graduate of Austin Peay State University where she earned a Bachelor of Science in Corporate Communications and a 2017 graduate of Grand Valley State University where she earned a Master of Public Administration with a concentration in Nonprofit Management and Leadership. Tammy is currently working as a Project Manager for Talent 2025 in Grand Rapids, MI. She has previously worked for both nonprofit and government agencies in several areas of social service including low-income housing, workforce development, food assistance, and with children of active duty service members. Tammy is passionate about reducing poverty and plans to continue her education and career in social services, specifically inclusive economic development.

Tammy now lives in Grand Rapids with her husband and three kids. She serves as Secretary and Trustee on the board for the Kenowa Hills Education Foundation. In her free time she enjoys reading, outdoor activities, watching her kids play sports, camping, and finding interesting new podcasts.