Mattapan United:
Resident Driven Community Organizing Blueprint

Our Vision

"Mattapan United envisions a community working together to build a stronger, safer, healthier, and more vibrant community where people identify Mattapan as a dynamic, desirable place to live, work, and visit." (Taken from the community contract.)

June 21, 2014

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I. Reason for being

Why organize?

While there had been some conversations within the community about organizing, the catalyst that drove the formation of Mattapan United was a shooting/murder of 3 adults and a child on a street in Mattapan in 2010. There was public outcry and Action for Boston Community Development (ABCD), Boston LISC, residents, and City Councilor Charles Yancey came together and in an effort to unite Mattapan, Mattapan United (MU) was born.

Mattapan is largely a neighborhood of African Americans and immigrants from the Caribbean that fell victim to the practices of redlining and blockbusting in the late 1960s and 1970s that witnessed a transition from the predominantly Jewish population who moved to the suburbs to the current make up of the community. The aforementioned practices resulted in much neglect for the community. Over the years a number of neighborhood associations have developed across Mattapan. These associations represent streets or small blocks of streets. And while they provide important value to the community their reach are quite narrow in that they only represent the small areas within their footprints. They do a good job working with elected officials and others to get their needs met, but often operate in silos. Mattapan United was and is an effort to represent the entire community. Mattapan United has now become the go to agency in Mattapan, and is sought out by anyone who wants to do business in Mattapan, whether economical or political.

So you have decided to organized, now what?

So you have decided to come together and organize for the benefit of the community. That is worthy and commendable. Now what? What kind of organizing group are you going to be? What is your strategy for getting “there?” (What exactly is “there”?) What is your purpose? What is you short and long term strategy? How do decisions get made? How do you determine your action strategies? How do you determine what the community’s needs are? What skills are needed? How do you acquire the necessary training/skills and technical assistance you may need? How do you engage residents and secure buy in? How do you ensure accountability within the group and set rules of standards. These are just a few of the questions that Mattapan United had to answer as our group formed and evolved.
II. Direction

Lead Organizer

The direction one chooses to go after identifying the need to form an advocacy apparatus is extremely important, because it sets the stage for so much to include strategy and planning, the ability to move beyond simply having conversations and convening meetings, and potential for future success. At the early stages of developing Mattapan United so much was nebulous. The founders understood there was an inherent need. That desire for qualitative change, however, needed to be translated into action. The first step in that important journey was hiring a lead organizer. The lead organizer is the champion who embodies the values of the group; the leader who tirelessly represents its mission and goals. This role is a key position and must be someone who knows the community, knows what the issues are, and who is able to interact with residents on multiple levels in consideration to class, race, immigrants, education, etc. This person has to be comfortable engaging residents, organizations, partners and other stakeholders, in a socially adroit manner, while possessing the skills to both articulate and advocate the group’s vision cogently. The person, obviously, must also possess organizational skills necessary to lead a group and advance its agenda. The lead organizer is the face of the group who interfaces with the community and partners, representing the group on a full time basis. He or she is the leader who convenes and leads meetings, is the chair of the steering committee, and is the natural liaison between the convening agency and the funder.

MU lost its original lead organizer early in the process, but the Executive Director of our convening agency, Action for Boston Community Development (ABCD) provided stellar leadership that really drove the process. Her passion was infectious and she embodied the ideal of the resident driven community organizing process. She was the anchor who kept us striving in the early stages that prepared the group to take on a more leadership role when we created a steering committee with bylaws and co-chairs. For anyone interested in using this model to build an organizing apparatus, care must be taken to minimize confusion or tension between the decision making role of the lead organizer (along with the co-chairs) and the Executive Director of the convening agency. Tensions can arise when roles are not clearly defined and agreements are not made ahead of time as to how responsibilities are shared. Finally, the question has been asked before why is Mattapan United different from organizations that have come before it. The answer that I have heard given is because MU has funding. I think there is a lot of truth to this statement. Thanks to the largesse of Boston LISC who committed to funding MU for 3 years as well as providing technical assistance the organization was able to meet the financial burden of hiring a lead organizer.

Needs assessment

What are the needs of the community? How does the community view itself? What changes would the community like to see? What defines improved quality of life for the community?
These are very important questions. How one chooses to answer them is vital. Mattapan United was adamant from the beginning that we would not set ourselves up as experts on the community’s needs by telling the community what it needed, and was singularly determined to ensure that the process and our efforts were community driven. We wanted to make sure that the community’s needs as identified were actually informed by residents. In that regard we created a one on one interview template and then went out into the community door to door interviewing residents and stakeholders in their homes, places of work, and ABCD office. We started with ages 15 and above. We then categorized the completed interviews by age range to identify differences in perspective. We also looked at commonalities across age. The interview data was also organized in different categories as themes arose: public safety, workforce development, need for a youth council, etc. After completion UMass Boston Center for Social Policy, who was contracted by Boston LISC, and a select sub group of Mattapan United members further analyzed the data. From this came the first official draft of what the community’s needs were as informed by the community. In an effort to reach a wider swath of Mattapan this data was used by UMass Boston and vetted by Mattapan United’s Community Assembly to create a survey that seven hundred residents responded to thereby giving MU further insights into the community’s needs. MU then held a public visioning meeting for which there was a substantial turnout where residents were placed in groups and had open discussions on their vision of Mattapan, needs, and strategies for improving quality of life. The information gleaned from the visioning meeting was then distilled into the 7 action strategies that became MU’s community contract. This, in our view is what it means to be community driven. MU did not decide what the community’s vision or needs were, the community did. The 7 action strategies forms the basis of Mattapan United’s community contract and are Community Fabric, Business Development, Housing, Safety, Open and Clean Spaces, Jobs, and Health.

III. Infrastructure

Steering Committee

It is extremely important to have an established and official governance body for the group with bylaws and decision making authority. Mattapan United’s Steering Committee is the governance body for MU. The steering committee is comprised of thirteen members with all but the lead organizer being volunteers that includes residents and stakeholders from the community. The lead organizer chairs the committee with 2 volunteers elected to serve as co-chairs. The chairs are the direct interface/liaison between the convening agency (ABCD) and the funder (LISC), authorized to act on behalf of Mattapan United. The full steering committee approves or disapproves all decisions made on the behalf of MU. The steering committee is taken from the larger Mattapan United Community Assembly who initially submitted their names for membership accompanied by a brief narrative supporting their membership. The steering committee approves the action strategies and allots funding for the community assembly. The committee meets once a month.
Community Assembly

Mattapan United also includes a community assembly, which is comprised of residents and stakeholders. Along with the regular members who comprise the assembly, the process is open to the public so anyone may participate. Within the community assembly is where you find the different action groups that represent one of the 7 action strategies that is part of MU’s community contract. Each action group has a chairman. The action groups are responsible for formulating strategies based on their goals, and then submitting their respective plans to the steering committee for funding, guidance, vetting, and approval. The community assembly meets once a month.

Standards and by-laws

Standards must be established that governs both the behavior and action of the community assembly and the steering committee. Robert’s rules of order is a good place to start. It is important that the group functions in a way where there is shared leadership and each person’s input is respected. Be open to listening to perspectives that you may not have considered or don’t share. Keep an open mind. Progress may depend on it. Members are part of the group because they are passionate about their communities and want to see positive change. Great care should be taken, however, not to let that passion lead to over speaking others, cutting people off, treating members and or partners like enemies simply because there are differences of opinions, or engaging in behaviors that are generally toxic to open, transparent, and constructive discourse. It is extremely important that members hold each other accountable. Disrespect should never be tolerated. If necessary a code of conduct may be established. Strive to be professional and not overly emotional. Be informed by data.

Deal with it directly if individuals are not a good fit and are creating a toxic environment. There is nothing worse than having the group’s energy and momentum sapped and degraded, because an individual or individuals are creating undue stress for the others. Recognize members not only for what they contribute, but for showing up, and taking time out of their lives to be part of the process for change. There is a tremendous opportunity cost for members who are volunteers with so many other demands on their time. This should never go unrecognized or unappreciated. Celebrate accomplishments large and small.

The community assembly drafted and adopted the 7 action strategies for MU while the steering committee created the bylaws that govern the committee. On both occasions Boston LISC provided much needed technical assistance and support by contracting with a consult to aid MU. This happened over a series of meetings.

Skills/Training

It is important that skills and expertise that are needed to be successful are accessed early in the process. MU was fortunate in that we had the very capable ABCD and Boston LISC as
convening agency and funder respectively. We were able to benefit from ABCD’s Executive Director early in the interim when we didn’t have a lead organizer, who was very involved and provided key leadership by keeping us motivated and on track. Furthermore, we benefited from the leadership and assistance that Boston LISC’s Program Officer Melissa Jones provided. The Program Officer was in a lot of our meetings early on and helped to guide the process by providing useful feedback that we all benefited from. Additionally, Melissa provided opportunities for direct learning by arranging for some members of MU to sit with other Resilient Families/Resilient Communities members at Boston LISC’s office and had a series of conversations with LISC Program Officers from across the country (via speakerphone) about their experiences working with other community organizing groups. We also watched video about the organizing experience in Chicago. MU is also fortunate that the steering committee while comprised of primarily all volunteers have members of varying professional backgrounds who have skills that lend themselves well to the business of the steering committee. LISC has also sent a number of us to different national conferences.

IV. Action: Moving from organizing to advocacy

Outreach

The single most challenging part of organizing is probably outreach. How do you get people to want to participate? There really is no magic bullet here. People are busy. There is apathy. Others are disillusioned, distrustful of the process and don’t believe they have any real ability to affect change. There are a whole host of reasons why people don’t engage. At the end of the day, however, you have to try to reach people. Part of any outreach effort is to impress upon people how being engaged can tangibly benefit them or their children’s lives. That means that you have to have a message. You have to speak to things that are important to the people. And you have to be able to explain how their engagements could lead to change. This is particularly challenging in the early stages when you don’t have any success to show. The one on one interviews that Mattapan United conducted in the beginning of its formation can help. A number of people including me decided to join Mattapan United after being interviewed. There are people who are really passionate about the community, the issues, and being part of the solution. Identify these individuals as best you can soon. They can help motivate others to participate.

One of the things that Mattapan United did early on was take over a website that had been dormant, rebuilt it, and made it a community portal. Everyone who comes to a meeting is put on a distribution list so that whenever there are any announcements they are part of an e-blast. The mymattapan.org portal has become an outlet for community events and all that is going on in Mattapan. Organizations are encouraged to send us information so we can post it to the site as a means of informing residents. Any elected official or city or state official who wants their information conveyed will, by way of their aid send it to us to put on the site. MU has an AmeriCorps volunteer who manages the site and keeps it active.
Partnerships

Once you have organized around action strategies the next step is to move towards advocacy. This requires building relationships, partnerships, and possibly coalitions. In this regard MU has built a number of important partnerships. MU partners with Codman Square Community Development Corporation (CDC) as we both work towards transit equity. In this partnership Codman Square CDC funds a transit organizer that works for Mattapan United. MU partners with Mattapan Community Health Center and Mattapan Food and Fitness as we look to improve health in our community. Mattapan United partners with the Fairmount Strategic Design Team, which is a collaboration of local CDCs and a number of other partners whose task is to formulate and recommend policies that ensure equitable distribution along the 9.2 miles Fairmount commuter rail corridor that traverses multiple communities, and for which there is a proposed stop at Mattapan. Mattapan United has a fantastic partnership with Boston Police Area B-3. For the last 2 years ABCD and MU has funded a youth police academy in collaboration with Area B-3. The youths are picked up at the ABCD office by the police in their cruisers and are driven to the police academy where they spend time training and going through many of the training activities that the police do. This is a pretty intense training and the youths really enjoy it. This is really a wonderful opportunity for local youths both to interact with police in a manner they are likely not accustomed to and to see the police in a different light. Mattapan United is currently in the process of working on a public safety initiative with area B-3. One of MU’s closest and most important partners is Mattapan Square Main Streets (MSMS) whose Executive Director and President of the board of directors is on MU’s Steering Committee. It is important to note that 2 other important institutions in Mattapan, Mattapan Community Health Center and Mattapan Food and Fitness are also represented on MU’s Steering Committee.

Community assembly

As the assembly’s plans have completed or near completion MU has been using the assembly’s time to present public forums. The organization presented a public safety forum a few months ago where the entire Boston Police Area B-3 command staff were in attendance to speak to the community, give updates, and field questions. MU recently hosted the second part of an education forum as we bring together educators and residents to have discussions on education and how it impacts our community. During last year’s election MU hosted a forum where the different candidates for Mayor, City Council, and State Representative spoke to the community about their platforms. In conjunction with that MU partnered with other Mattapan organizations to host a public forum for approximately 8 candidates who were running for the District 4 city council seat. MU is looking to do an economic development forum next. Mattapan United most recently hosted a youth job fair for youth 14 and up in partnership with the Mayor’s office, Mattapan elected officials to include the Suffolk County Sherriff, ABCD, Youth Jobs Coalition/Raise Massachusetts, and Bikes Not Bombs who were on hand to fix youths’ bikes for free. Other partners were also present to provide youths information on the process for signing up for both summer and year round jobs, internships, and volunteer opportunities. The event was
highly attended by youth with State Representative Dan Cullinane the keynote speaker. These forums are great opportunities to stay engaged with the community. Mattapan United has become a community funder. The organization received an $80,000 action grant last year from Boston LISC. MU invited community residents and stake holders to a community champions meeting, which received a packed room in attendance, and encouraged all who had an idea for a project to submit a proposal with detailed budget and outcome. Seventeen projects were submitted within the time frame specified and ten approved. Local entrepreneurs were able to achieve small projects they may not have had otherwise as a result of the funding that MU provided.

MU’s Community Fabric Action Group through the Mattahunt Wheelock partnership partnered with the Mattahunt Community Center to host a family fun filled back to school jamboree where over one100 families attended and 150 back packs distributed with donated school supplies from Cradles to Crayons. The housing action group provided foreclosure prevention services by purchasing a large bill board in Mattapan Square giving information in 3 different languages of how to seek services. This culminated in a foreclosure prevention open house where MU in collaboration with ABCD, who provides foreclosure prevention services as part of their programming, was able to provide much needed foreclosure prevention services to many for free. MU’s Jobs and Public Safety Action Group sponsored a 16 week computer literacy course for Mattapan residents, which resulted in all participants graduating.

Voice

A large part of advocacy is having a voice: having access, having influence. You have to be seen as credible and legitimate, however, and that’s why being professional is so important. Cultivate a relationship with your local elected officials and their staff. Invite them to meetings, celebrations, and or milestone events. Stay engaged. Meet, check in, and keep the lines of communication open…if they believe in and support your efforts/project that can only help. It is also important to cultivate relationships with other partners to include city and state agencies. Know who the players are. Know where to get information and who has it. Try to deal in facts. And always maintain relationships and continue outreach with residents. As community needs shift or expand you have to be able to shift gears and adopt new strategies if necessary to meet the change.

Boys and Girls Club

MU was instrumental in bringing the Boys and Girls club (BGC) to Mattapan. The Executive Director of ABCD Mattapan first spoke with BGC leadership on behalf of MU about the possibility of locating in Mattapan. MU’s Steering Committee then met with the BGC and decided to be partners in an effort to come to Mattapan. MU advocated for this, and through 3 community meetings with the BGC, Mattapan residents who were initially resistant to BGC, shifted and accepted the agency. BGC is currently rehabbing the old Mattapan library and is due
to open for service October of 2014. One of the deficits that MU identified from the beginning through the first one on one interviews was the need for youth resource. BGC coming to Mattapan is the first step in addressing that need.

Transit Oriented Development (TOD)

I am co-chair of the Working Advisory Group (WAG) a Mayoral appointed body that works with Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) to look at jobs, economic improvement, public realm, and development around the proposed Cummins Highway/Blue Hill Avenue commuter rail station. Mattapan United supports the project and is a partner with the Fairmont Collaborative who looks to bring transit equity to all of the communities along the 9 mile Fairmount corridor. The work of the WAG centers around transit oriented development (TOD), which looks to create development density within a half mile radius of a transit center or stop in hopes of encouraging transit ridership and developing the surrounding community. Mattapan residents have the longest travel time to work centers out of the 3 Resilient Families/Resilient Communities neighborhoods that Boston LISC is working with. Downtown Boston is one of the two most traveled to work destinations for Mattapan residents. The commuter rail line would cut their commute time by 75%.

Power

Certain communities in Boston have a long history of organizing. Developers who come to South Boston, for example, know before they go there that they are going to have to go through a robust community process before they can bring any project to South Boston. That is the power of organizing. Mattapan is still struggling with this and we are working on getting to that place. Also, political power is very important. Residents must vote. If politicians know they can’t rely on your vote, because many don’t vote, your community becomes marginalized. It is harder to hold politicians accountable if you don’t vote. Other communities like Jamaica Plain have extremely capable neighborhood councils that are mobilized and able to leverage that experience and expertise effectively. That is my dream for Mattapan. I believe that Mattapan needs a neighborhood council like this, and I have been considering for some time working with Mattapan leaders to create one.

V. Challenge

The biggest challenge for Mattapan United going forward is sustainability. LISC’s initial commitment was funding for 3 years, which ends December 31, 2014. It would be absolutely tragic to after developing both the credibility and capacity to make a difference the organization was to come to an unceremonious end, which unfortunately would be a reality if MU cannot secure funding. Our solution is to become a 501c3 organization. This non-profit status would give MU the independence to raise and control its own funds. That is the organization’s long term goal. Boston LISC in its generosity has offered to help MU in that process. LISC, in an
abundance of largesse has decided to fund MU past the deadline so that gives the organization a little more time to progresses towards 501c3 status. Another challenge is MU’s reach. Mattapan is a community of over 36,000 residents, yet MU only reaches a very small swath of those residents. One of the most important tasks for MU is increasing our footprint, in terms of much greater outreach across the greater Mattapan community.

Mattapan United has become a funder, facilitator, convener, an organization for connecting the greater community and highlighting its needs, a resource for enhancing existing organizations, and an organization that has cultivated healthy relationships that has resulted in being part of a network of partners that allows it not only to have a seat at the table; but to be more capable and effective advocates for Mattapan. In addition to becoming a 501c3 organization MU’s biggest challenge is building stronger partnerships, and to increase our capacity to both enhance existing organizations, and to nurture and give support to nascent voices, efforts, and endeavors…to build their capacity to be strong and effective assets to Mattapan. This will require a capacity to fundraise so that as MU identifies which organization is best suited to address a need in Mattapan, MU may be able to provide technical and financial support. That capacity I believe is the future of Mattapan United: build a network of strong partners, keep our fingers on the pulse of the community so that we are always knowledgeable of what the needs are, and provide assistance/support to whoever is best capable of responding to those needs. Finally, MU needs to do continuous and additional work fulfilling the action strategies.

VI. Conclusion

Mattapan currently finds itself at an important point in history. There are potential opportunities for a revitalization boom in Mattapan. Some of this has already started with the building of the brand new, modern Mattapan library in 2009. The old Mattapan library that served the community for 75 years, and is just a stone throw from the new library will be the site of the Boys and Girls Club, a state of the art performance and youth leadership center. The brand new $30, 000,000 Mattapan Community Health Center is the anchor institution in Mattapan and largest employer. The Center with tenants CVS and Citizens bank is an exceptional resource for the community. Mattapan Square Main Streets is a fantastic addition to the square and in the first phase of its revitalization efforts is working with local stores on store fronts and signage improvements. The proposed commuter rail station at Blue Hill Avenue/Cummins Highway is bringing renewed interest in developing unused parcels and vacant buildings in Mattapan. KIPP academy charter school has begun a community process in Mattapan as the organization looks to build a brand new middle school in the community. Other charter schools have expressed interest in locating to Mattapan. The Neponset River Greenway was given final approval for funding by Governor Deval Patrick last year (2013). When completed it will be a 10 mile bike and walk trail that will traverse 4 towns to include Mattapan and will include eleven urban wilds. Construction for a visitor center in Mattapan for the greenway trail has already begun. The revitalization of Almont Park, which will be in 2 phases, has already begun. The Park is the...
home to Mattapan Patriots, a Pop Warner football team that is 100% funded by volunteers of Mattapan residents; uniforms, supplies, everything is paid for by the staff/volunteers. There are opportunities for working with newly elected Mayor Marty Walsh who ran on a very progressive and inclusive message, and who seems to recognize fundamentally the need to build strong communities. The Mattapan Economic Development Initiative (MEDI) was a fantastic source document that we can still benefit from today. Finally, Mattapan United, who has proven to be a very strong and capable advocate for the community continues to outreach and build partnerships, support, and momentum to help lead to improve quality of life for Mattapan residents. Many of the gains noted above have been the result of community advocacy. That remains the community’s strongest and most enduring asset.