

RESILIENCE for communities

Knowledge Exchange Report

July 29–30
Chicago



R4C
Identify. Understand. Act.

A collaboration between:



CITIES
NETWORK



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FOREWORD

At Resilient Cities Network, we know resilience is built by people, by residents, local governments and partners coming together to listen, learn and act. The Resilience for Communities Knowledge Exchange reminded us how powerful it is when we create space for open reflection and honest dialogue across communities and sectors.

From Boston and Houston to Melaka and Greater Manchester, the Resilience for Communities program shows that when people sit side by side to understand the risks they face and the opportunities they hold, they co-design solutions that respond to today's challenges while laying the groundwork for a more resilient tomorrow.

What stood out in Chicago was not just the exchange of ideas, but the relationships built. Our strength lies in these connections, in making sure every voice is heard, every perspective valued and every partnership rooted in the realities of the communities we serve. This is how resilience becomes real, and this is the work we are committed to carrying forward together.

KATRIN BRUEBACH

Global Director, Programs and Operations,
Resilient Cities Network





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INTRODUCTION

DEEPENING LOCAL ROOTS FOR RESILIENCE THROUGH PEER-TO-PEER KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

City residents around the world are facing a housing crisis, rising living costs and growing climate-related risks. These issues affect almost all urban residents' daily lives, but they do not affect all communities equally.

For some communities, these challenges are compounded by historic inequities that have resulted in living in higher risk areas or consistently receiving less support to meet these growing challenges. These communities have grown resilient out of necessity, but city leaders have a responsibility to work with these communities to identify and address the challenges they face.

That is why the Resilient Cities Network (R-Cities) brought cities, local and national nonprofit organizations together for two days of peer-to-peer learning and knowledge exchange on building resilient communities. Hosted in Chicago — where neighborhood action is shaping how the city responds to cascading crises — this Knowledge Exchange created space to reimagine how we work together to support communities in the face of rising risks and economic uncertainty.

We are committed to supporting community-led efforts and partnerships to build a safer future for all in the face of these challenges. This Knowledge Exchange brought together city leaders, community-based organizations, academia, resilience experts and philanthropic organizations to reflect on what's working, challenge what isn't and explore how we can build an enabling environment for community resilience to take root and grow.

The inspiration for this exchange, its direction and the insights in this report draw from partnerships and experiences developed through the R-Cities' **Resilience for Communities (R4C)** program.

The R4C program supports local leaders in Boston, Houston, Greater Manchester and Melaka to break down silos, build trust, and deliver bold, community-led resilience initiatives. In Boston and Houston, this work has been ongoing since 2021 and began with a community selection process, followed by a baseline resilience assessment, a co-design phase and project implementation in Fall 2024.

R4C is supported by the Urban Climate Resilience Program, a global initiative led by the **Z Zurich Foundation** and supported locally by **Zurich North America** to support vulnerable urban communities impacted by climate change.



THE EXCHANGE

The Resilience for Communities Knowledge Exchange, held in Chicago under the theme **Local Roots for Resilience**, brought together cities, community organizations, philanthropic organizations and private sector partners to explore how resilience takes root in neighborhoods and across city systems.

For the Resilience for Communities program, this was more than a convening — it was a chance to test ideas, compare approaches and identify what truly enables communities to thrive in the face of multiple crises.

The discussions, panels and site visits revealed clear lessons: trusted local champions are the backbone of resilience, storytelling changes how resilience is valued and investing in community organizations builds capacity that lasts.

Cities and partner organizations left with a shared recognition that scaling resilience depends on aligning city priorities, strong local ecosystems and authentic partnerships.

THE EXCHANGE BY THE NUMBERS

2 days of keynote sessions,
group discussion and
peer-to-peer exchange

5 cities

35 partner
institutions

3 site visits

9 community
organizations

56 participants



KEY OBJECTIVES OF THE EXCHANGE



Celebrate and amplify community leadership in advancing resilience across R4C cities and communities.



Collectively shape the next phase of R4C's impact, building on what we've heard, tested, and learned in the field.



Deepen peer learning and exchange between cities, partners, and funders working to build community resilience across their different cities.



Connect insights to action and identify scalable tools and approaches that support community-led solutions.

PARTICIPATING CITIES



PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS**BOSTON**

YouthBuild Boston

Tufts University

Chinatown Main Street

CHICAGO

Arup

Blacks in Green

Center for Neighborhood Technology

Architecture for Public Benefit

Elevate

Impact for Equity

Grow Greater Englewood

Polk Bros Foundation

CMAP

Greater Chatham Initiative

Our Urban Dreams

American Planning Association

Revolution Workshop

Faith in Place

MK Corona

SN Climate Consulting

Dr Pedro Albizu Campos High School

Zurich North America

Chicago Community Planning Academy

Z Zurich Foundation

Modelling the Future Challenge

PolicyLink

HOUSTON

Alief Votes

Target Hunger

NATIONAL

LISC

Urban Sustainability Directors Network

Main Street America

YouthBuild Global

NEW ORLEANS

Together New Orleans

NEW YORK

Resilient Cities Catalyst

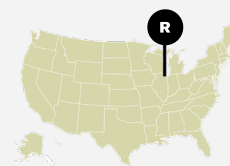
Resilient Cities Network

PARTICIPATING CITIES



Angela Tovar, Chief Sustainability Officer and Commissioner of the Chicago Department of Environment offers opening remarks.

CHICAGO

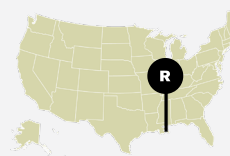


As host city, the City of Chicago Department of Environment welcomed participants to hear their community resilience journey since joining the 100RC program over 10 years ago. The city and department championed their commitment to resilient communities and the right to clean air, water and a healthy future. Through highlighting innovative partnerships with community-based and faith-based organizations, many of which were in the room, the city explained how they were doing more with less in terms of promoting resilience across the county's third largest city.



Anna Nguyen, External Affairs Manager of the New Orleans Office of Resilience & Sustainability and Joshua Cox of Community Power South shared New Orleans' experience with resilience hubs.

NEW ORLEANS

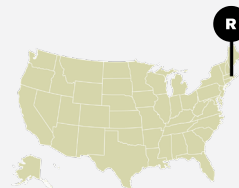


The City of New Orleans Office of Resilience and Sustainability and community organization Together New Orleans shared experiences from their network of 18 (and growing) resilience hubs in the city dubbed Community Lighthouses. This innovative program brings together local government, civic groups, faith-based partners, and others to program and build resilience infrastructure where it is needed most in close partnership with local partners. Their goal is to scale up to 86 resilience hubs across the city using this participatory approach.



Ksenia Acquaviva, Senior Project Manager for Coastal Resilience shared the City of Boston's integrated approach to building flood resilience.

BOSTON



The City of Boston's Office of Climate Resilience shared how they are taking proactive steps to encourage flood and heat resilience in the short-term by working with small businesses, residents groups and other local partners, and how this strategy supports more substantial long-term capital investments. Local organizations like Chinatown Main Street and YouthBuild Boston shared how their actions contribute to the city's heat resilience strategy.



Chase Kronzer and Kelly Hurn of the Mayor's Office of Recovery and Resilience pose with community partners Alief Votes and Target Hunger.

HOUSTON

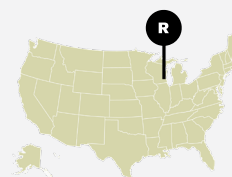


The City of Houston's Office of Resilience and Recovery shared its strategy to bring together community members and local businesses to align on what their communities need to build resilience to emergencies. Together with these neighborhood councils and roundtables, the city aims to establish a resilience hub within a five-mile radius of all residents.



Cara Pratt, Sustainability & Resilience Manager, shared the City of Evanston's experience streamlining energy efficiency incentives for

EVANSTON



The City of Evanston shared experiences from its home retrofit program, identifying the benefits of energy efficiency improvements to homeowners, connecting them to qualified and affordable contractors and setting up straightforward incentive programs for community members to increase the value of their homes while reducing costs and energy consumption.

LOCAL PARTNERS

City of Chicago Department of Environment

The City of Chicago Department of Environment leads the work to equitably advance Chicago's climate and environmental priorities. From the Chicago Climate Action Plan to the City's targeted energy efficiency investments, Chicago is integrating sustainability in the places residents work, live, learn and play while preparing for a resilient future.

Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) supports northeastern Illinois in addressing regional land use and transportation challenges. CMAP hosted the Local Roots for Resilience Knowledge Exchange at their offices in the iconic Old Chicago Post Office Building, and several senior staff members took part in the discussions. Participants also received a tour of the facility and its innovative green roof.

Center for Neighborhood Technology

The Center for Neighborhood Technology (CNT) delivers innovative analysis and solutions to support community-based organizations and local governments to create neighborhoods that are equitable, sustainable and resilient. As a consulting partner, CNT staff brought local insights, connections and expertise to the design and execution of the Exchange.

PARTICIPANT REFLECTIONS

The Local Roots for Resilience Knowledge Exchange created an exciting learning and network-building platform for cities, community organizations and other partners around their shared goals for more resilient communities.

Through panels, site visits and keynote discussions, the Exchange provided opportunities to learn from the work of other cities, community organizations and their partners. These opportunities to exchange notes about one another's work created new connections that will catalyze new ideas and actions. Together, we are connecting the dots to understand how we can support our common mission of stronger communities in uncertain times.

PARTICIPANT HIGHLIGHTS

100%

Of attendees who completed a post-event survey said the event contributed to their understanding of resilience

71%

Of attendees who completed a post-event survey said they will apply the skills gained from the event to their work

100%

Of attendees who completed a post-event survey said they will follow up with other attendees they met during the event

500+

Number of clicks by attendees on the Exchange mini-site leading to Resilience for Communities knowledge products and communications

"I walked away with an understanding of how resilience is a network of contribution that relies not solely on community organizations and not solely on government."



KEY INSIGHTS

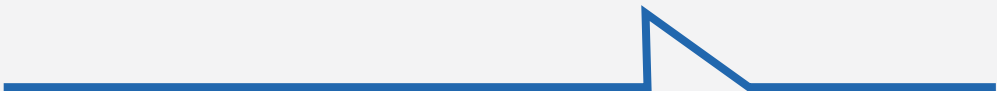
1. BUILDING LOCAL ROOTS

Community resilience begins with people who already hold trust and credibility in their neighborhoods. The Exchange confirmed that **resilience champions and strong local partners are the foundation of any sustainable approach**. When these actors are supported, they mobilize networks, convene conversations and anchor resilience in everyday life.

Local implementation partners bring essential knowledge — from cultural norms to socioeconomic realities — that shapes how resilience solutions are designed and adopted. Their ability to bridge city government priorities with community realities ensures projects are not stand-alone experiments but integral to long-term resilience strategies.

“Authentic community engagement drives greater impact. Once trust is broken, it’s really hard to serve the community in a meaningful way.”

Youth leadership stood out as a force multiplier. In Houston's Alief neighborhood, the Resilient Alief Project brought young people into the center of resilience planning. They learned grant-writing and organizing skills, led emergency preparedness workshops and became effective messengers to families who might not otherwise receive information. Their work illustrates how investing in the next generation builds both immediate awareness and long-term capacity.



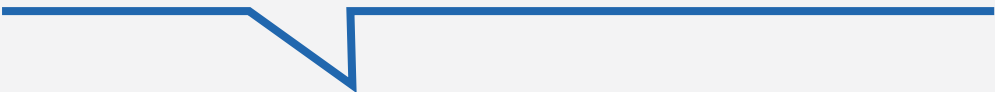
"The resilience message resonated with me. How youth can start learning and being practitioners whether, in theory or proposals but in the actual work. Resilience isn't just climate. It extends to health and other aspects."

Chicago's site visits reinforced the value of rooted organizations. **Blacks in Green's Sustainable Square Mile** demonstrated how community wealth, green enterprise and local energy initiatives can transform a neighborhood into a resilience hub. Participants saw first-hand how resilience is not an add-on but a key element of improving housing, the local economy and social fabric.

These lessons point to a clear takeaway: **cities and funders need to identify and back local champions, while investing in organizations with the credibility and capacity to lead change.** By building local roots, resilience becomes more than a short-term project — it becomes part of the community's identity and community members' vision for the future.

"People always say our communities are resilient. And I'm like, resilient from what? Let's talk about it. It's climate change, but it's also systemic injustices. We are resilient from living in food deserts. We are resilient from having our communities be pillaged and overlooked when it comes to funding and infrastructure."

Nina Idemudia,
CEO, Center for Neighborhood Technology





SITE VISIT

A local community development institution embraces resilience

Blacks in Green (BIG) is dedicated to building community wealth and wellbeing in the context of a changing climate on Chicago's South Side. For community development institutions, resilience may not be explicitly named in their organizational mission, but strengthening the financial, social and physical sources of community wealth and resilience are at the heart of what they do. As part of the Local Roots for Resilience Exchange, participants toured BIG's Sustainable Square Mile, a model neighborhood initiative that embodies resilience through initiatives like neighbor-owned green enterprises to locally-produced renewable energy.

2. SHAPING NARRATIVES AND INFLUENCE

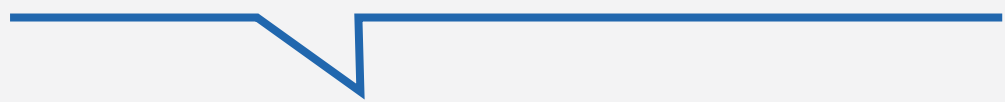
Resilience goes beyond infrastructure. It is also about the stories communities tell, the voices that reach decision-makers and the spaces where advocacy takes root. The Exchange highlighted that **narratives are powerful tools** for shifting how resilience gains traction and drives action.

Community storytellers, local media and trusted institutions can reach audiences that government messaging often misses. In Boston's Chinatown, for example, a community-led Heat Action Plan was developed in multiple languages with residents and small businesses. This practical approach ensured that heat adaptation was not an abstract concept but a set of clearly communicated solutions people could understand and use.

"We have centered equity and justice in our work unapologetically, and we're doubling down on that. We believe that regardless of your zip code, regardless of your background, you should have access to clean air, clean water and a healthy and resilient future."

Angela Tovar,

Chief Sustainability Officer & Commissioner,
Chicago Department of Environment



Local businesses and Main Streets bring perspectives that are rarely included in resilience planning, yet they are central to community recovery, preparedness and building future-ready neighborhoods. **Main Street America's Disaster and Resilience Toolkit** showed how these networks can prepare for disasters and advocate for policies that speed recovery. Communities with active Main Street organizations tend to rebound faster after shock events because recovery depends on both economic and social factors.

These discussions made clear that **storytelling is more than communication, it builds influence**. When communities shape their own narrative, they also shape policy priorities, attract funding and generate broader public support. Cities and partners that invest in local storytelling, advocacy and trusted messengers cultivate a broader base and deeper support for resilience.

“I saw how valuable it is to take a wraparound approach to the work, making sure everything is connected and people are supported in a more complete, thoughtful way.”

The lesson is clear: **supporting community voices is a strategic priority.** By amplifying stories from the ground, resilience becomes embedded in governance, budgets and the public imagination. The Exchange showed that when diverse voices are brought together — from Main Streets to City Halls — new partnerships for influence emerge, shaping both policy and investment decisions. **This is the strength of R-Cities’ enabling ecosystem approach: it turns local action into systemic change.**



PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

A resilience toolkit for Main Streets

Main Street America and its 1,000+ local affiliates support local economic development, and they also play an essential role in supporting and advocating businesses when it comes to emergency response. Main Streets enable local recovery after disasters through services from helping file insurance claims to navigating local, state and federal recovery programs to cover cleanup costs, temporary housing, employee expenses and lost inventory. Main Street America’s Disaster and Resilience Toolkit offers an example of how local actions can scale across national nonprofit networks.



3. INVESTING IN COMMUNITIES' FUTURE

The Exchange underscored that building resilience calls for more than vision — it requires sustained investment. Community organizations and local governments are already stretching limited budgets to deliver essential services. Without new approaches to finance, resilience efforts risk remaining small-scale or short-lived.

City funds can be deployed strategically. By investing in the organizational capacity of community-based organizations (CBOs), cities ensure that trusted partners are equipped to expand services and respond rapidly during crises. Participants highlighted how collaboration with CBOs avoids duplication, strengthens delivery and maximizes the impact of scarce resources.

Private sector partnerships offer untapped potential. When businesses treat resilience as core to their markets and workforces, they contribute more than one-off funding. Examples shared in Chicago showed how industry expertise — from construction firms to technology companies — can be integrated into resilience projects, creating solutions that are both innovative and financially viable.

“Insurance really does play a critical role in helping people and businesses and communities to be more resilient. We provide that financial backstop that exists when there is a loss, to provide a safety net, if you will, to compensate for the losses they sustain, to help them to get back on track and get back to their families, their communities and businesses, but more importantly, we are risk management experts.”

Kelli Borden,

Head of Underwriting Quality & Governance and R4C Program Lead, Zurich North America

Philanthropy remains a catalyst. Its flexibility allows rapid response when government processes stall. Philanthropic support can fund pilots, maintain continuity in uncertain times and attract additional partners. As one participant put it, maintaining programs is often more valuable than dollars alone because “once programs are discontinued, they are difficult and costly to rebuild.”

The site visits brought these dynamics to life. **Revolution Workshop** demonstrated how investment in workforce development simultaneously strengthens community resilience and fills industry labor gaps. **Blacks in Green’s Sustainable Square Mile** showed how economic opportunity, local energy and environmental justice can be tied together into a viable model for neighborhood resilience.

“As a foundation, we can’t sit and dictate what is best for our community. We have to work with community partners. We have to work with the NGOs on the ground, and we have to really come together and have this collaborative approach to understanding what those needs are and how we can help.”

Andrea Davis,

Regional Engagement Leader, Zurich North America

The lesson is clear: **investing in communities’ future means diversifying funding streams, aligning with local priorities and creating partnerships that last.** For philanthropy, this requires a commitment to measuring success in terms of resilience outcomes — reducing systemic vulnerabilities, strengthening local capacity, and sustaining partnerships over time — rather than short-term outputs.

“Young people may be 25% of the population, but we are certainly 100% of the future. Once we get a seat at the table, we advocate for reinvesting intergenerationally and take action to build a more resilient community”

Tommy Wan,

Program Director, Alief Votes

By aligning city budgets, philanthropy and private sector commitments, and by investing directly in community organizations, funding resilience is about more than cost-sharing. It becomes a strategy for future-proofing communities and ensuring that resilience takes root for the long term.

As R-Cities, our contribution lies in connecting these efforts — helping cities, communities and partners see how their investments add up to systemic change.



PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

YouthBuild Global

YouthBuild Global brings together 275 local affiliates, including YouthBuild Boston and Revolution Workshop, to advocate for effective pathways for young people into apprenticeship, entrepreneurship and higher education that lead to sustaining careers. One of two national organizations to attend the Resilience for Communities Exchange, YouthBuild's local roots and national presence make it an ideal partner for scaling the program's impact.



SITE VISIT

Revolution Workshop

Revolution Workshop is a YouthBuild affiliate on a mission to uplift young people who start out with limited opportunities build sustaining careers while meeting the workforce needs of the future. From hands-on trade skills to developing expertise in Autodesk Construction Cloud, blueprint reading, estimating, project management and building systems, graduates leave prepared not just for a job but for long-term careers with growth, stability and financial independence. Companies that partner with Revolution Workshop value how they are making a difference while also recruiting motivated and qualified workers into their ranks, fulfilling minority, women and local hiring requirements and qualifying for tax credits and insurance benefits.



NEXT STEPS

The Chicago Community Resilience Knowledge Exchange helped define what it takes for community resilience to thrive: strong local champions, aligned city priorities and investment models that sustain impact. These lessons will not stay in Chicago — they inform how R-Cities advances the Resilience for Communities (R4C) program and broader strategies moving forward as a city network.

What comes next:

- **Community of Practice:** launching a space for cities, funders and local organizations to continue exchanging practical tools and peer insights. These exchanges will feed back into the network, creating shared learning that strengthens resilience practice across contexts.
- **Community Resilience Solutions Guidebook:** gathering proven community-centered approaches, from youth-led initiatives to Main Street resilience, into a resource that other cities can adopt. Each case adds to R-Cities' collective knowledge base, making resilience solutions easier to replicate and adapt globally.
- **Living Stories:** A series of stories to highlight the importance of community resilience, with the first R4C Living Story launched during the Exchange. These interactive online experiences will showcase community voices, connect local impact with city priorities and feed those narratives into the wider R-Cities knowledge ecosystem.

These steps ensure that the knowledge created in Chicago strengthens our network's collective intelligence, equips more communities to act and demonstrates to partners how investments in local resilience create lasting global impact.



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