

The Promise of Mixed-Income Communities



The failure of 20th century public housing strikes a powerful image. As these fortresses of social support went from beautiful to abominable, as hope lost its luster and evaporated, the institutional infrastructure that bolstered them was shifting.

Private companies and the public sector turned away from a direct model of support for their workers and citizens. Instead, marketplace Americans were forced to, and have, become more flexible workers, more engaged consumers of information, and more self-sufficient planners of their financial futures. By the turn of the 21st century, American society had fully embraced the ideal of free markets.

‘Hard to see it now, but Ida B. Well’s was simply beautiful.’

– Mary Louise, 41 year resident of ‘the Wells’



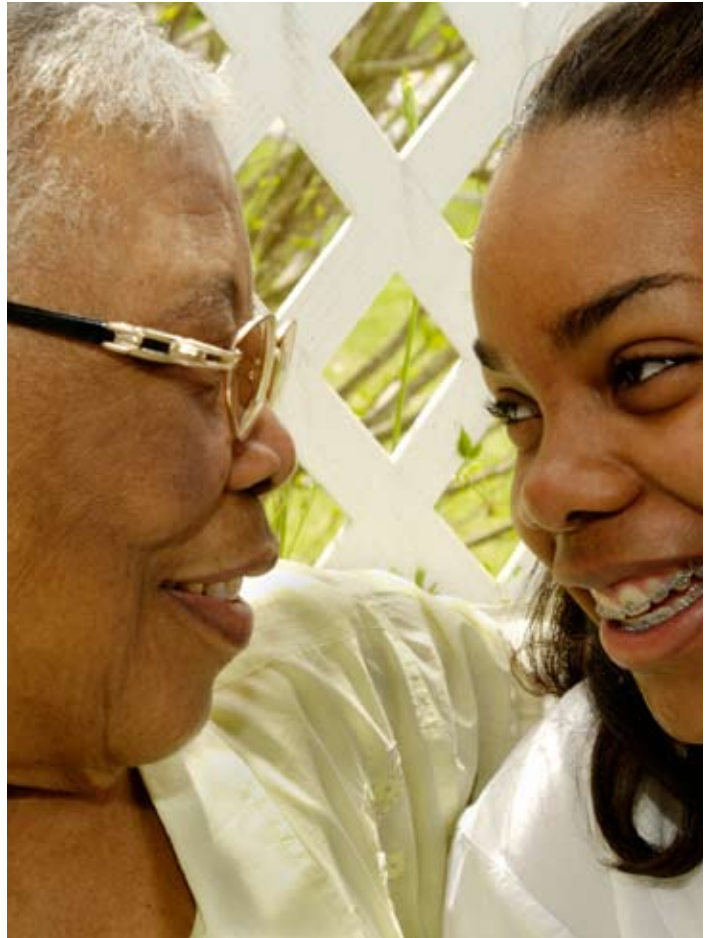
HUD's focus over the last decade and a half on the construction of mixed-income communities embodies this shift. The development of the social housing paradigm of mixed-income living implies a promise to move people who have been isolated from market forces closer to the market. This integration provides new opportunities and presents new challenges.

The Community Builders has been a foundational force in developing these places. Our innovative approach to developing mixed income communities and willingness to tackle situations of great complexity has given us a reputation as undaunted and tireless problem solvers. We have built communities that visually remove the stigma of a bygone era and bring together people of diverse incomes and experiences.

We now seek to ensure that all of our residents have the tools to be successful in this physical and fiscal environment.

*'Sometimes I'm afraid it's just the same old place
– with new paint'*

– Esther, former resident of Carter & Lang homes, current resident Park duValle



The Community Builders partnered with IDEO, an organization that drives innovation by uncovering individuals' latent needs, behaviors, and desires – to develop a deep understanding of our communities. From this foundation we would work together to redesign the operations of these sites in order to maximize the communities' potential and help our residents achieve their dreams.

IDEO employs qualitative design research to fuel its innovations. Ethnographic methods, including open-ended conversations and in-home interviews, allow the complexities of people's lives to come into focus. Instead of working with large numbers of people to find out **what** people do, ethnographic design research aims to understand **why** and **how** people do things. By understanding motivations, values, and context, they gain insight not only into what isn't working well, but also learn how they might design innovative solutions.

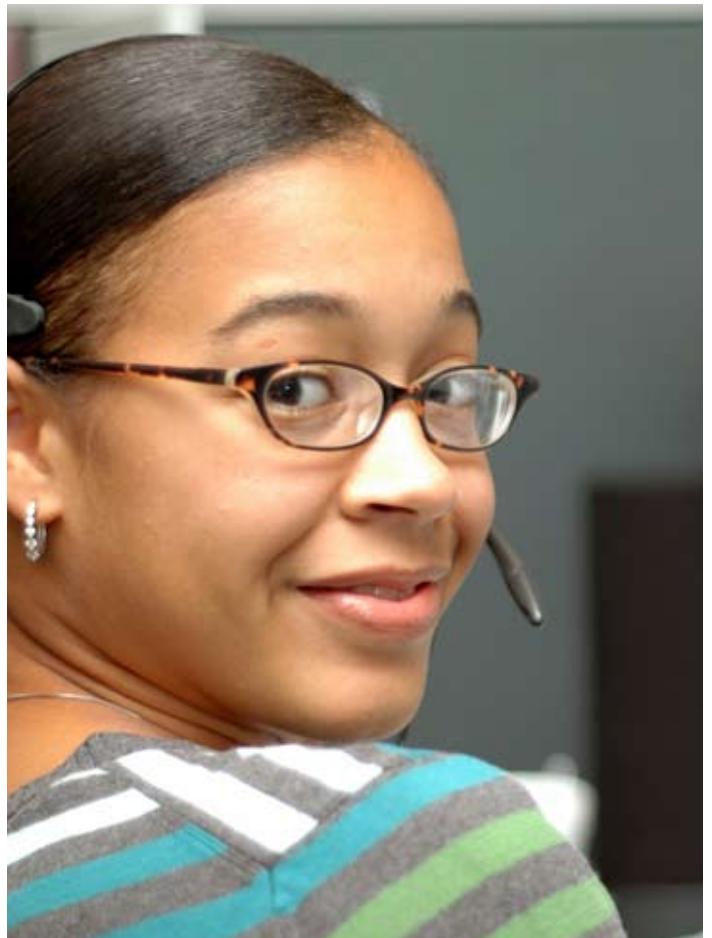
Quantitative research is vital to the success of an innovation as well. In particular, it is essential when it comes to testing and validation. In this project, The Community Builders partnered with Bridgespan to build on their existing data and lead the charge in assessing feasibility, sizing the market, and defining new metrics of success that would allow evidence-based evaluation.



In March 2007, a team of IDEO researchers immersed themselves in three of our communities: Plumley Village, a Section 8 community in Worcester, Massachusetts; The Villages at Park DuValle, an established mixed-income community in Louisville, Kentucky; and Oakwood Shores, an in-development mixed-income community in Chicago, Illinois.

They hosted community meetings, lived with three families, and interviewed a wide range of residents. They focused on extremes of age, household size, income, duration of tenancy and engagement with the community. The extremes exaggerate desires and behaviors that the middle share – and allowed the researchers to gather insights more quickly. IDEO also shadowed site staff and had extended conversations with area stakeholders: from city council-members and housing officials, providers of community services like food pantries and health clinics, to urban studies professors. They also enlisted teenagers as their youthful eyes and ears – equipping them with video cameras and journals to record their thoughts and observations.

This is what they learned.



Mixed-income communities have successfully removed the physical manifestations of bygone housing policies. The new communities blend two systems – the regulated public housing system and the consumer driven market system – obscuring which families fall in which column. No longer categorized by income according to address, the burden of identity-creation rests on the individual and his or her actions. And yet, assumptions about the old categories run deep, creating barriers to socialization.

Lacking both the historic framework for interacting with neighbors and a new alternative, its hard to find one's place here. Residents who had lived in the destitute shell of former public housing appreciate their new and improved accommodations, but lament the loss of a close-knit community. Residents across all income levels feel uncertain of their place in the community and alienated from neighbors. They don't have the opportunity to see how similar they really are to one another.

IDEO discovered that across the income divides, people who have chosen to live in these communities share a common set of values and aspirations. They value family, money, and recognition. Their aspirations are consistent as well: they want to build their credit and own homes, they want to achieve financial independence, they want their children to graduate college and become wealthy. In short, people of all incomes want the things that are offered as the by-products of success in the market. Independent of their personal relationship to the public housing or market systems, residents hold the same values and want the same things.

However, the two systems that co-exist in mixed-income communities operate in fundamentally different ways – the rules are radically different and the behaviors that result reflect the institutional dissimilarities.

'Now you don't know who's who. But you know who's not who.'

–Barbara, Oakwood Shores Resident



“When you grow up in the projects, you learn to say: ‘I don’t think I’m better than anybody else.’”

– Latanya, Park DuValle Resident



“I grew up in public housing. I’ve worked hard, I pay market rate rent. I earned my right to privacy.”

– Sandra, Oakwood Shores Resident

The Public System has institutions and incentives that promise

Equality of Result.

These are the sentiments that define it:

Wait, Wait, Wait... Receive!

Better Safe than Sorry.

The Safety Net can become a Spider Web.

The Market has institutions and incentives that promise

Equality of Opportunity.

These are the sentiments that define it:

Climbing the Ladder.

Without Risk There's No Reward.

Market Forces are Slippery and Unforgiving.

THE PUBLIC SYSTEM

Wait, Wait, Wait... Receive!

The system is an on and off switch.



“I waited for my Section 8 for 21 years! Don’t know what changed, but I finally got it!”

– Nettie, Oakwood Shores

THE MARKET

Climbing the Ladder.

Progress is achieved incrementally through hard work.



“I started working in the court system 15 years ago, and I worked my way up. Over time, I was doing pretty well for myself, and could retire with a pension”

– Carolina, Oakwood Shores

THE PUBLIC SYSTEM

Better Safe than Sorry.

Risk-aversion arises when there's a potential for loss of assistance.



“I lost my place on the housing list when I got engaged. When that didn’t work out, I had to start at the bottom again. I tell my man now that he’s disposable.”

– Matilda, Oakwood Shores

THE MARKET

Without Risk there's No Reward.

True profit can be gained only through embracing uncertainty.



“Sure, it was a little wild, buying this house and moving out here. My friends thought I was crazy, they still do, but I have faith that it’s all going to pay off in the end.”

– Harold, Park DuValle

THE PUBLIC SYSTEM

The Safety Net can become a Spider Web.

Once someone has embraced the system of social support it is very difficult to leave.



“I never thought I’d be on assistance, then one day I was. Next thing you know, I looked up and I’d been stuck for 17 years. I wrote down all the reasons why, and I’ll tell you what – those were some crappy reasons!”

– Melissa, Oakwood Shores

THE MARKET

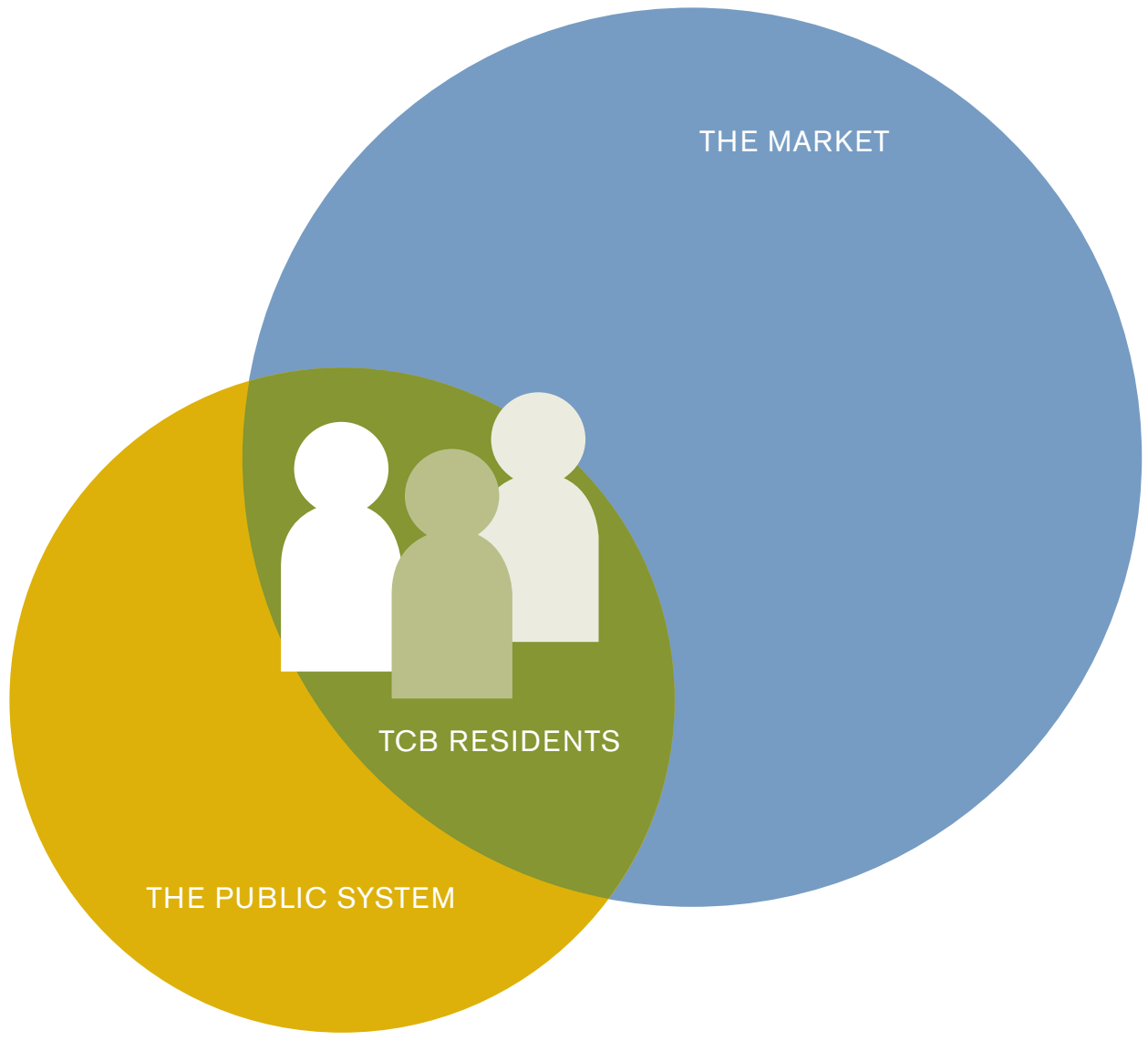
Market Forces are Slippery and Unforgiving.

One moment can unhinge years of progress.



“I got start up loans, but I didn’t really know what it would take to operate this business. When I finally did, I was already so deeply in debt, there was nothing I could do to save myself.”

– Marshall, former restaurant owner, Park DuValle

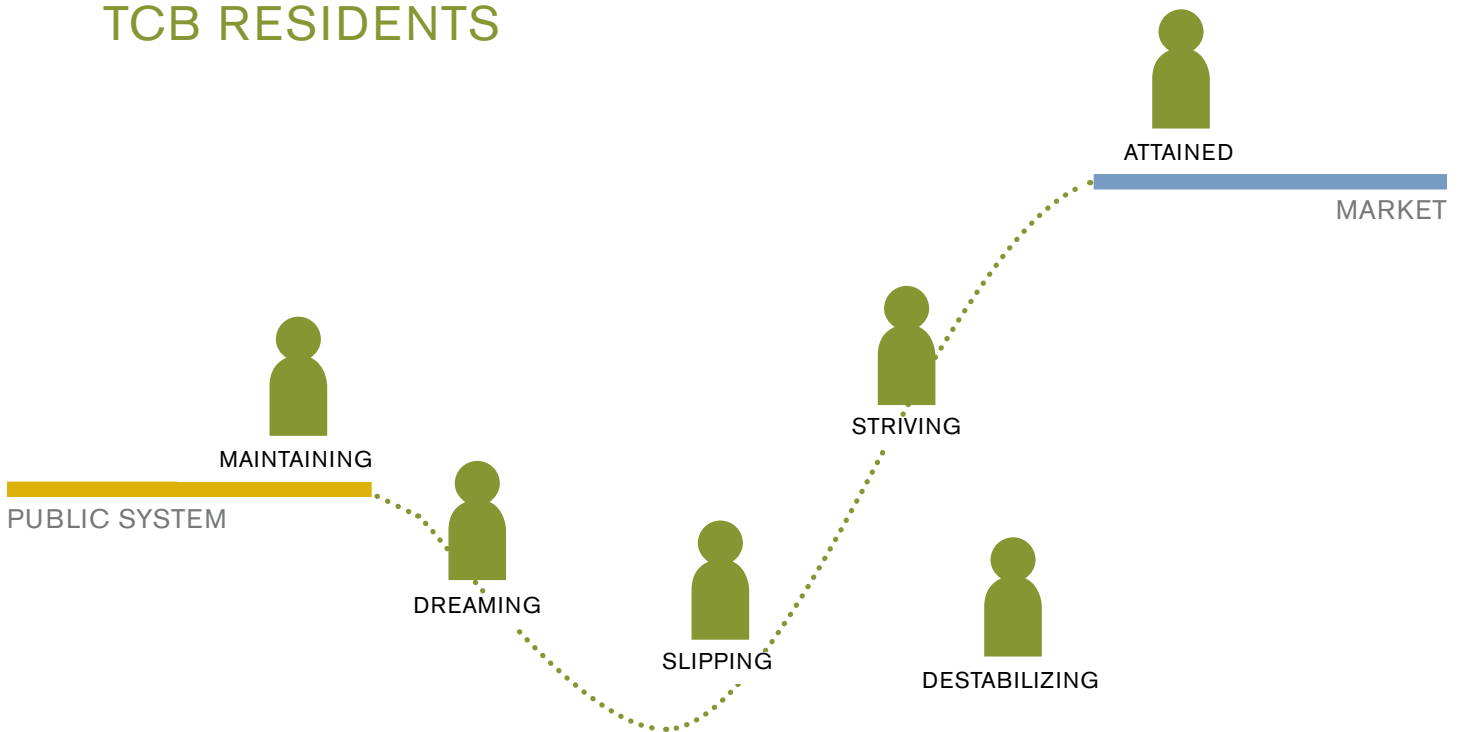


IDEO expected to find that these two systems were separate and their boundaries distinct. Residents would either have a relationship with one system or the other – the community would be the place where they mixed. Instead, they found that a majority of residents are balanced precariously with one foot in the market and one foot in the public system.

This proved to be true across the range of incomes, including market-rate residents. In many cases, residents currently functioning entirely in the market have personal histories with the public system. This knowledge translates to potential for future reliance on public support. Often their place in the market is still new, still tentative.

Residents in all of The Community Builders' properties are in motion between the promises of the market and the support structures of public assistance. The disconnections and gaps between these two systems cause pain, isolation, and disenchantment. The period of transition is fraught with difficulty and self-doubt. To reach their goals of wealth, home ownership, and independence, they will need to traverse the “canyon” that lies between these systems. They will have to become savvy market players.

TCB RESIDENTS



ATTAINED are successful in the market

MAINTAINING are supported by the public system

STRIVING are swimming upstream

DREAMING are getting ready to take a leap of faith

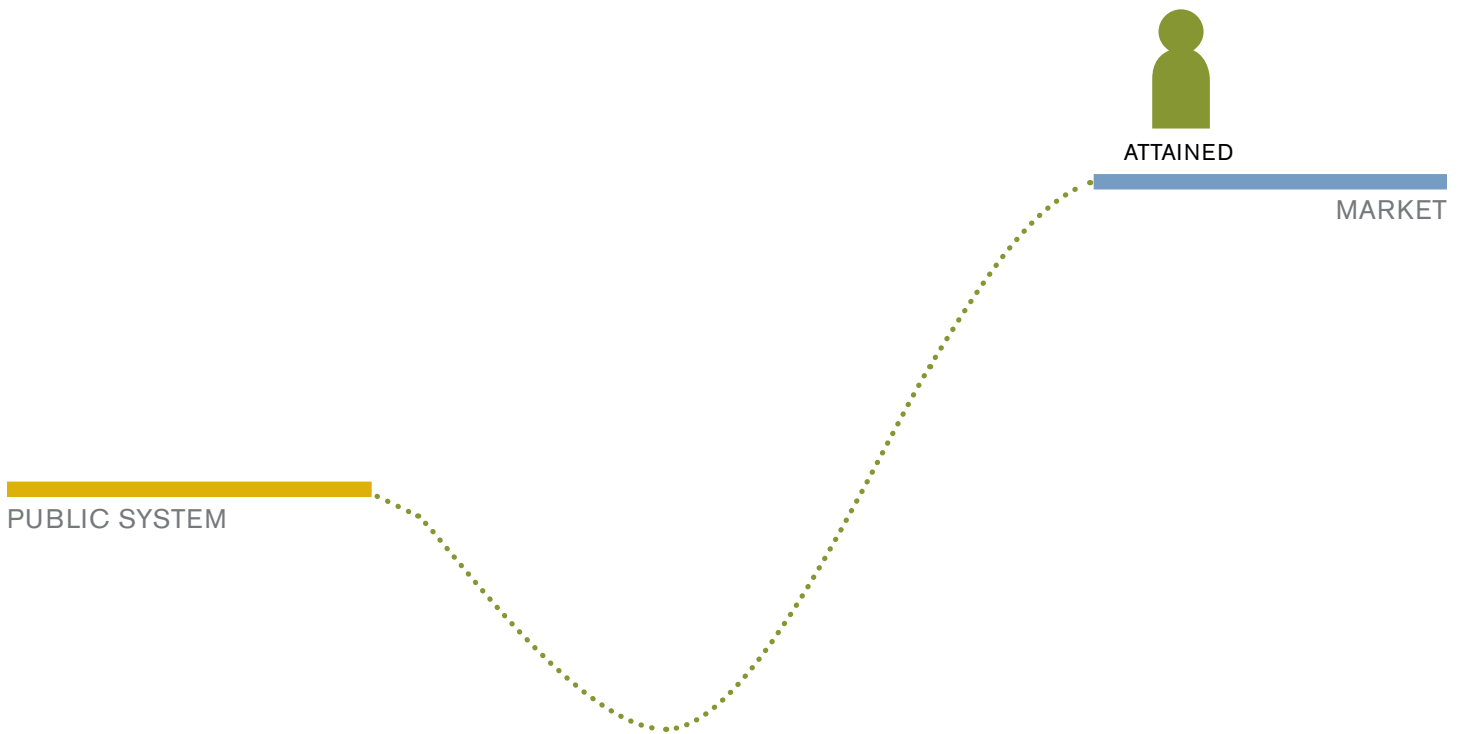
SLIPPING are losing their gains and sliding back towards support

DESTABILIZING are off the path and can undermine others

The Community Builders' residents find themselves on different trajectories toward their own market-oriented futures. This is how we think about the people in our communities. Trajectories are not demographic segments or groupings that define people socially, culturally, or economically. Instead, they describe the path of movement that residents are experiencing in the present moment. A particular individual may have several different trajectories in her or his life.

Six trajectories define the dynamics of motion within our communities. Two trajectories are static and provide the community with the predictability and reliability it needs. These are the **Attained** and the **Maintaining**. For these groups, we seek to improve upon our provision of support.

The other four are in motion – **Striving**, **Dreaming**, **Slipping**, and **Destabilizing**. Individuals at all income levels and ages occupy each one of these dynamic trajectories, and these define our key areas of opportunity. It is when people are in motion that they can gain momentum with a boost or have inertia slow them down. It is here that interventions and opportunities stand to make the most difference.



“People don’t know that sometimes you have to break the rules if it’s the right thing to do. I try to teach others by my actions.”

– Truman, Park DuValle



“It’s not the cards you were dealt in life, it’s what you decide to do with them that matters.”

– Helen, Park DuValle

Attained

‘I’ve been successful in my life
and I have something to share.’

The Attained are people who have achieved success in the market. They have moved to a mixed-income community because they believe that market success should be available to everyone, regardless of socio-economic background. Often, they grew up in the public system and have through force of will and fortuitous opportunity improved their lot in life. They have something to share and are eager to participate in community life.

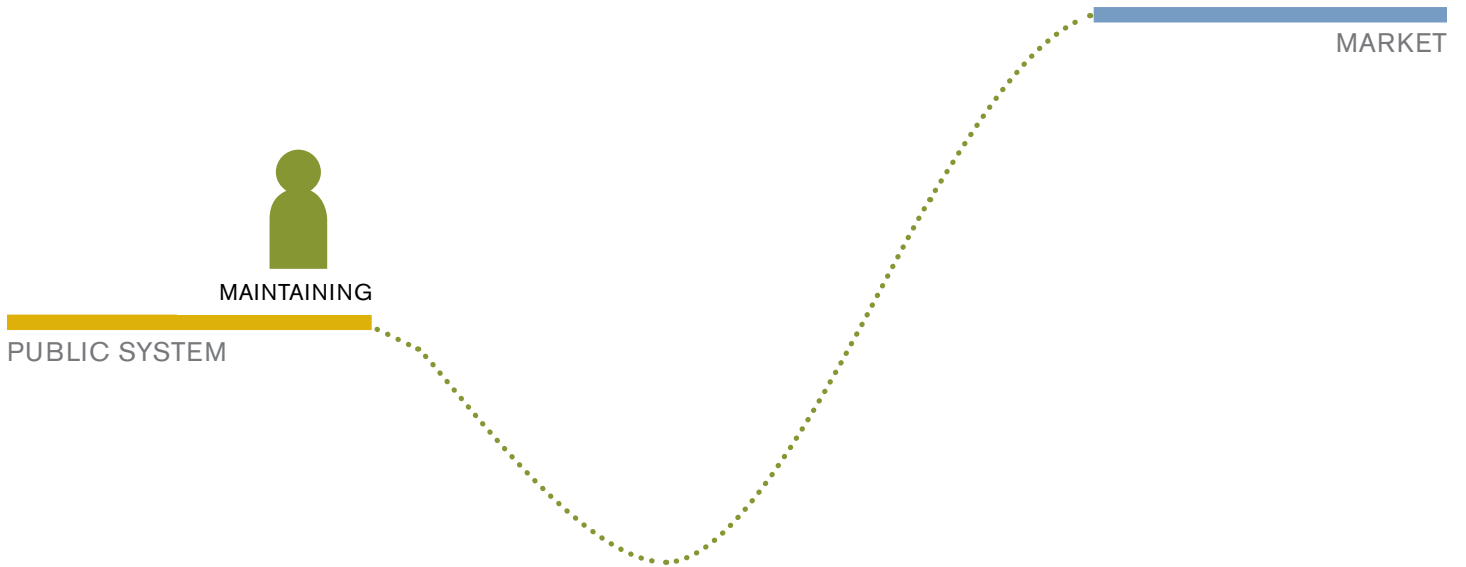
How might we leverage their wisdom?

How might we enlist them as mentors?

How might we make them more visible to the community?

How might we give them the value and respect they deserve?

How might we attract more of them to the community?



“Nobody else can take care of him the way I do, they just let him off the hook because of his problems – what am I supposed to do? Just give up on him?”

– Steph, Park DuValle



“Right now my kids are doing just fine – that’s why I’m here... to make sure they have the opportunities I never did.”

– Lisa, Plumley Village

Maintaining

‘I have what I need to make it through each day.’

The Maintaining are rooted in the status quo, often living a daily life that is all-consuming. They live on-site because it’s a safe place to reside, and quite often, to raise their children. Many full-time caretakers are currently Maintaining. Their lives are defined by their families and their home is their world. They are often disconnected from the community because of this physical remove and as a line of defense against being judged negatively by others.

How might we help them maximize where they are?

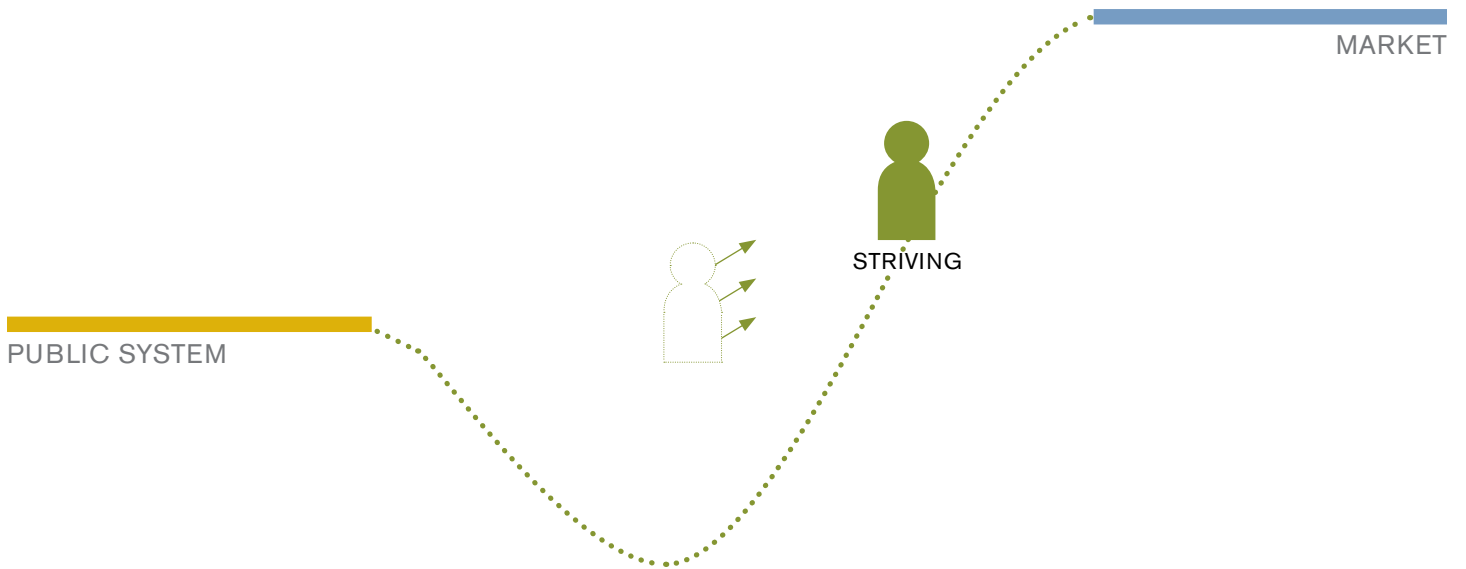
How might we connect them to the community remotely, through cable, online?

How might we acknowledge their pride in home and family?

How might we celebrate everyday successes?

How might we ensure opportunities for their children?

How might we encourage and support them when they are ready to move to a different trajectory?



“Now I’m making more money, but I just can’t seem to get ahead.”

– Latanya, Park DuValle



“I want to start my own business because you’ll never get rich working for somebody else.”

– Barbara, Oakwood Shores

Striving

‘I know what I want and I’m trying hard to get it.’

The Striving are dissatisfied with the status quo and are eager to change it. They are impatient and full of internal motivation. Often, they visualize success as moving out of rental housing and becoming financially independent. Renting in a mixed-income community is a choice made in order to allow them to launch themselves into their desired future. They are moving towards a defined goal. They’re following their own plan – a plan that is often incomplete. Setbacks can squelch their forward momentum.

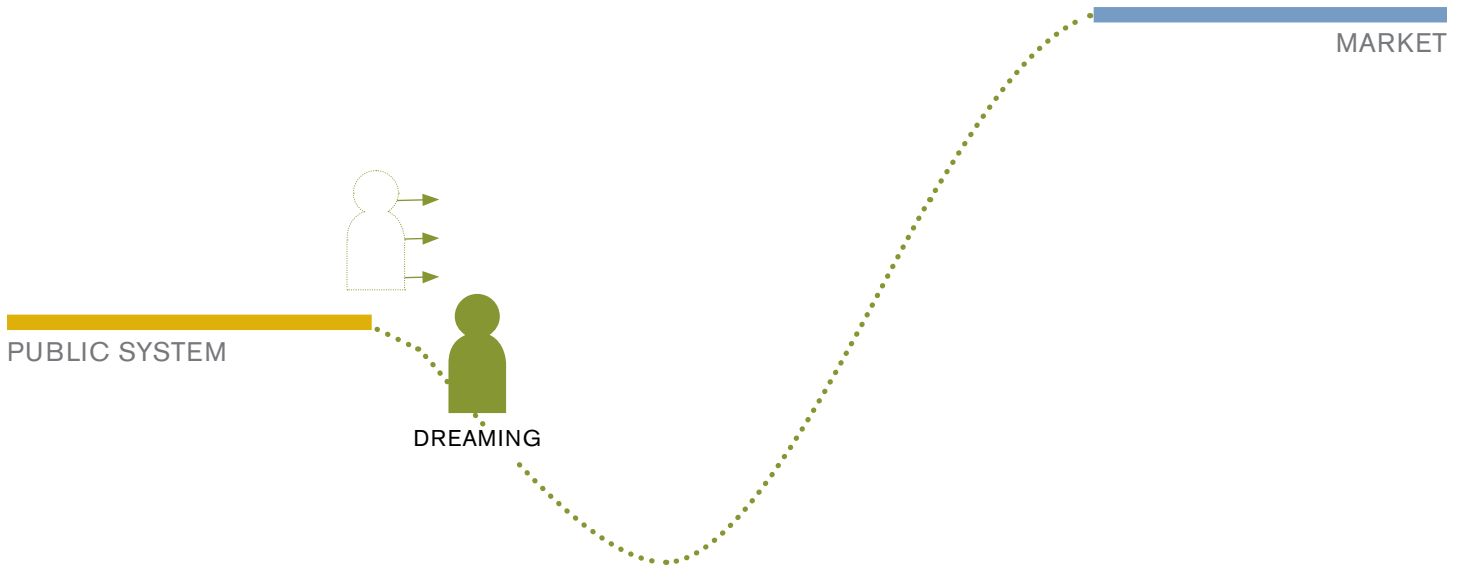
How might we smooth the bumps in the road?

How might we help them get over setbacks and anticipate obstacles?

How might we provide recognition and emotional support?

How might we connect them with expert advice?

How might we provide an extra lift to get them over the edge to success?



“I want to have a career, not just a job. And I want to pay rent – real rent.”

– Melissa, Oakwood Shores



“Got to get my license... gonna buy me a Cadillac!”

– Candy, Oakwood Shores

Dreaming

‘I know I want something, but I don’t know how to get it’

The Dreaming are spurred by a distant dream, not a goal. They are in no particular hurry to deliver on this dream – life is pretty good as it is and they are very patient. They’ve chosen to live here for the long term. They are comfortable following rules. External motivation is important to keep them moving forward.

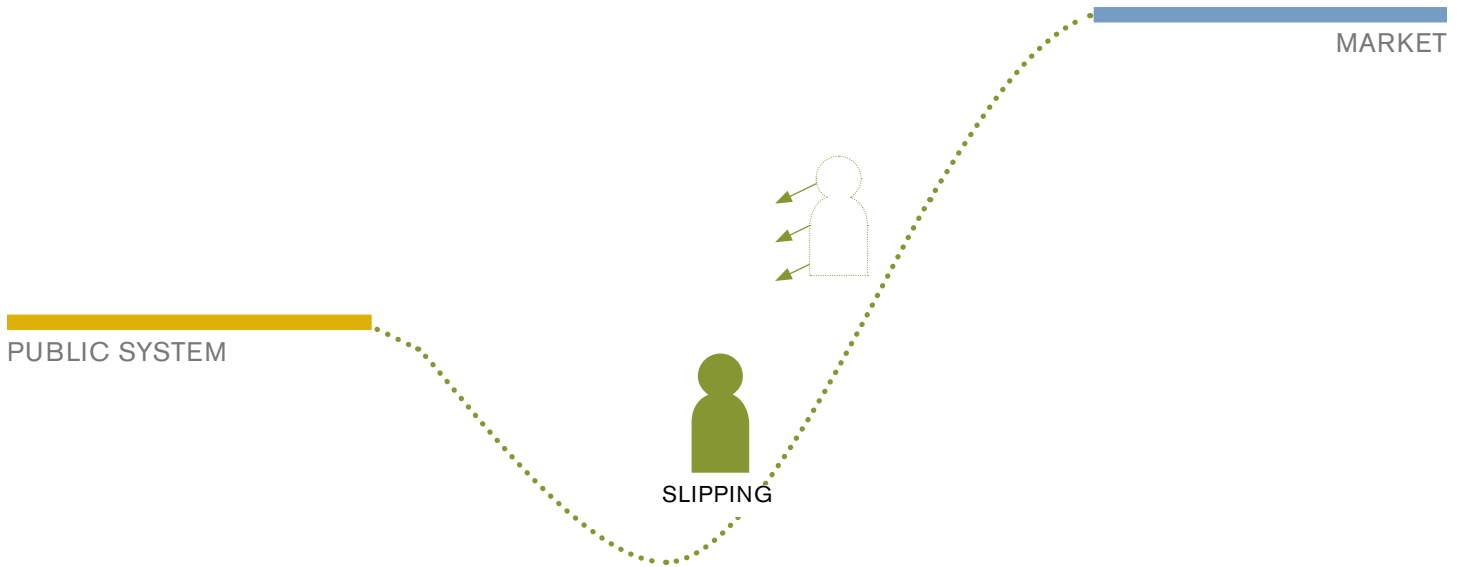
How might we encourage and motivate?

How might we celebrate small steps forward?

How might we develop clear paths and realistic steps?

How might we allow success to happen over time?

How might we help Dreamers become Strivers?



“I knew I’d be paying for my medical coverage – I just didn’t realize how much. It takes over a third of my pension! That’s not counting the prescriptions I need. I’m barely scraping by... can’t my rent go down to make things easier?”

– Carolina, Oakwood Shores



“I’ve been here fifteen years. I’ve gone from paying almost nothing for my apartment to paying full rate. My job is stable. Life’s good, right? Why doesn’t it feel any better? Cut the guy a break why don’t you.”

– Juan, Plumley Village

Slipping

‘I have worked really hard,
I deserve more.’

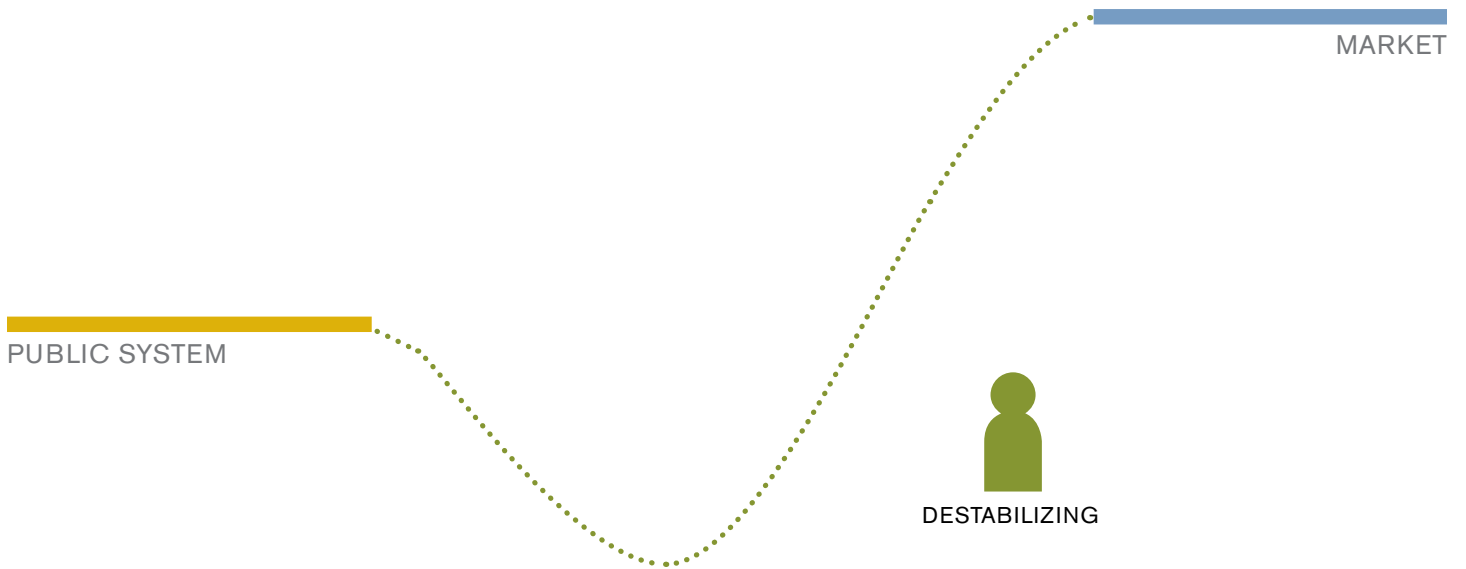
The Slipping have been working for a long while to achieve their goals and have experienced some success. But now, they’re moving backward. This change in direction is likely caused by life circumstances – often by illness, job loss or depression. They feel unrecognized in the community and over-burdened by rent payments. They know others are getting more help than they are. They’re disillusioned and disappointed.

How might we create positive experiences to counterbalance the negativity?

How might we recognize past accomplishments?

How might we help slow down the backwards momentum?

How might we encourage action to prevent further setbacks?



“I don’t like folks all up in my business, poking around trying to figure out what you’re up to.”

– Claudia, Oakwood Shores



“My baby’s momma lives down the street over there, and my other baby’s momma is up around the corner in that direction.”

– Vincent, Park DuValle

Destabilizing

‘I’m not welcome, but I’m not going away.’

Destabilizing is a strong force. People on this trajectory are perceived negatively. They are removed from the normal sociality of the community – whether that is by necessity or by choice. Those who are removed by necessity are ‘unofficial’, connected to the place through family and social ties. Those who are removed by choice are ‘official’, but are living an unapproved lifestyle. Dishonesty and deceit characterize their interactions with neighbors and community management.

How might we focus their energies into more positive interactions?

How might we develop official channels to integrate their presence?

How might we help them stop Destabilizing and get on a path towards success?

How might we make them accountable to the community?

How might we empower the community to decide how to handle the Destabilizing?

At its best, life in a mixed-income community promises all people the opportunity to transition toward the market with their eyes open, informed and confident about their futures. At its worst, it presents an unattainable vision of a life with options to those who will never have the opportunity to live that way themselves.

The Community Builders has built these places.
Now we seek to deliver on the promise.

