# Transforming Together

## PRACTICES AND POSSIBILITIES FROM THE FIRST BELONGING INNOVATION LAB

**Center for Inclusion and Belonging**

# About the Center for Inclusion and Belonging at the American Immigration Council

The Center for Inclusion and Belonging (CIB) is a "think-and-do-tank" that works to expand understanding of who belongs in the places we all call home. At a time when two-thirds of Americans feel a lack of belonging, the CIB brings people together, conducts actionable research, and supports local leaders in efforts to de-escalate fear, remove barriers to connection, and model an inclusive vision for a more cohesive future. At its best, this work advances the critical thinking and practice of what it takes to cultivate a culture of belonging in communities across the country.

## Writing Team

Ximena Escalante • Sarah Richards • Kimberly Serrano • Ben Whitford

## Acknowledgements

# Table of Contents

# Introduction

Belonging is powerful. People who feel like they belong—those who feel emotionally connected to and welcome in their community, and who enjoy satisfying and inclusive relationships with those around them— are healthier, happier, and more productive. They perform better at work, engage more fully in civic life, show more openness toward their neighbors, and express more confidence in our political and democratic institutions.[1]

In our divided society, belonging has never been more important. But our sense of belonging is also fraught and fragile. Almost two-thirds of Americans report feelings of non-belonging in their workplace; three-quarters say they experience similar feelings in their local communities.[2] The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare tears in our social fabric that have long been unraveling—increasing alienation and isolation, rising levels of distrust and disconnection—and led the U.S. Surgeon General in 2023 to issue a public health advisory declaring an "epidemic of loneliness and isolation."[3]

In 2022, the American Immigration Council's Center for Inclusion and Belonging created the Belonging Innovation Lab Fellowship to support and strengthen groups working to bring people together and build belonging in communities across the United States.

*Source: BeeBridge Project, Global Cleveland, Cleveland, OH*

## About the Belonging Innovation Lab Fellowship

The Belonging Innovation Lab Fellowship was designed to recognize and reinforce the vital work being done by small, local nonprofit organizations—from colleges and literacy centers to mutual aid societies and community agricultural initiatives. Belonging, after all, is intimately experienced as a local phenomenon. It must be built, brick by brick, from the ground up, in the settings that people consider their own—and local organizations have the knowledge, community ties, and social capital needed to accelerate that process and cement lasting change.

To support that process, the Belonging Innovation Lab Fellowship provided two staff members from 12 organizations with an 18-month fellowship between 2022 to early 2024. This unique program offered funding, logistical support, and ongoing collaborative learning opportunities for nonprofit organizations committed to working to bridge-building—an

1   Over Zero and The American Immigration Council. (2024). *The Belonging Barometer: The State of Belonging in America.* (Rev ed). https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/the-belonging-barometer

2   Over Zero and The American Immigration Council. (2024). *The Belonging Barometer: The State of Belonging in America.* (Rev ed). https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/the-belonging-barometer

3   U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2023). *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community.* https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf

approach to building meaningful connections among people from across social, economic, political, and other demographic divides.[4]

The Belonging Innovation Lab Fellowship recipients received a one-time $75,000 grant to support their work. They also became part of a unique collaborative forum where Fellowship recipients could share insights, workshop new solutions to emerging challenges, and support and learn from one another as they worked to build belonging in their communities.

Over the course of the Fellowship, cohort members also received access to a new Center for Inclusion and Belonging curriculum designed to provide local nonprofit leaders with support, expertise, and training. Speakers and educators from many disciplines joined the Fellowship participants to provide training in the latest theoretical research and practical methodologies for building belonging, bridging differences, and driving social change at scale.

More than 160 organizations applied for fellowships, and after a rigorous selection process, 12 community groups were selected to join the Belonging Innovation Lab Fellowship as its inaugural cohort (see map and tables below). Collectively, these Fellows comprised an extraordinary network of diverse yet like-minded organizations and nonprofit leaders —all working to build belonging through grassroots programs and community-led initiatives.

4  Pilgrim Thompson, T. (n.d.). *Bridge-Building and Power-Building: An Ecosystem Approach to Social Change.* The Horizons Project. https://horizonsproject.us/bridge-building-and-power-building-an-ecosystem-approach-to-social-change-url/

## BELONGING INNOVATION LAB FELLOWSHIP ORGANIZATIONS
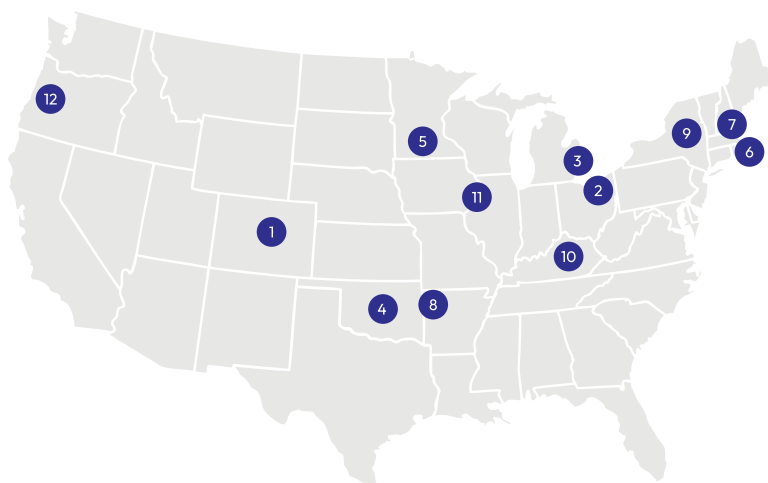


1   Denver Urban Gardens (DUG), Denver, CO

2   Global Cleveland, Cleveland, OH

3   Global Detroit, Detroit, MI

4   Más Fútbol Foundation, Oklahoma City, OK

5   Minnesota Council of Churches (MCC) Refugee Services' Tapestry Project, North Mankato, MN

6   Mutual Aid Brockton, Brockton, MA

7   Needham Resilience Network, Needham, MA

8   Ozark Literacy Council, Fayetteville, AR

9   Sycamore Collaborative, Schenectady, NY

10   Sustainable Berea, Berea, KY

11   Tapestry Farms, Davenport, IA

12   Willamette University's Conversation Project, Salem, OR

| Organization | Project Type | Project Description |
|---|---|---|
| 1 Denver Urban Gardens | | Denver Urban Gardens operates more than 190 community gardens throughout Metro Denver, including programs that bring together Coloradans of different backgrounds, such as the culturally inclusive seed program, and the Therapeutic Garden Initiative for children and adults who have undergone trauma, possess unique emotional needs, or seek sensory enrichment. |
| 2 Global Cleveland | | Global Cleveland's BeeBridge Project aims to build relationships and create connections between newcomer and native neighbors through the art of beekeeping. |
| 3 Global Detroit | | Global Detroit's Social Cohesion Project brings together longtime African American community members and their newer immigrant neighbors in East Davison Village and Banglatown neighborhoods to build trust, solidarity, and relationships by working toward a common goal. |
| 4 Más Fútbol Foundation | | The Más Fútbol Foundation is a conduit for connecting communities in the Oklahoma City Metro area surrounding shared interests in soccer. |
| 5 Minnesota Council of Churches (MCC) Refugee Services' Tapestry Project | | MCC Refugee Services' Tapestry Project began in 2012 as an initiative to bring together the refugee, immigrant, and U.S.-born populations of Mankato, and was built to find common threads of humanity among diverse populations. |
| 6 Mutual Aid Brockton | | Mutual Aid Brockton was designed to meet the immediate needs of community members in Brockton in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and has become a model and community platform to build solidarity, relationship-building and mutual empowerment. |

Farming/ Agriculture

Community Programs

Athletics

Mutual Aid/ Community Resilience

Deliberative Dialogue

*(Organizations continue on the following page)*

| Organization | Project Type | Project Description |
|---|---|---|
| 7 Needham Resilience Network | | The Needham Resilience Network (NRN, or "the Network") aims to work with cross-sector cohorts of community leaders to build relationships across silos, highlight and align around shared local values, and learn about and practice communicating across differences. |
| 8 Ozark Literary Council | | Ozark Literary Council builds relationships via supporting access to local services and navigating Northwest Arkansas, as well as offering free adult English language education classes, tutoring, career opportunities through workforce programs, and shared activities between individuals of different backgrounds. |
| 9 Sycamore Collaborative | | Sycamore Collaborative's Growing Green Schenectady project addresses food insecurity and climate change in the city of Schenectady with community-based local food production, composting/food scraps management, and climate-friendly energy strategies. |
| 10 Sustainable Berea | | The Berea Urban Farm (BUF), a program of Sustainable Berea, works to increase local food security and community health through urban agriculture. By offering free or very low-cost on-farm workshops addressing the practical needs of gardeners with little or no land, the BUF brings together residents of different ages, economic status, and racial and ethnic backgrounds. |
| 11 Tapestry Farms | | Tapestry Farms reclaims underutilized local land to grow culturally specific fresh produce and flowers with refugee and local Iowan volunteers working side by side to supply a network of food pantries and feed the local community. |
| 12 Willamette University's Conversation Project | | The Conversation Project is a three-tiered course offered over three semesters with a common cohort of undergraduate students to teach the practices, skills, and dispositions to participate in and facilitate transformative conversations. |

Farming/ Agriculture

Community Programs

Athletics

Mutual Aid/ Community Resilience

Deliberative Dialogue

# The Principles of Belonging

The Fellowship curriculum was administered over 10 sessions, covering a range of topics: intergroup contact theory, narrative skills and strategic communications, community conditions and partnerships, models of place-based programming, and sustainability and infrastructure, to name a few. The Fellowship provided unique grounding in the key principles of belonging: social connection, psychological safety, and co-creation.[5]

## Fostering Social Connection

Recent research suggests that most Americans value and are interested in connecting across differences —especially when working toward a shared goal— but cite a lack of opportunity and hesitations about cross-group differences as common barriers to taking the first step.[6] The Belonging Innovation Lab Fellows actively worked to break down these barriers between people in their communities, and to create opportunities for new connections and partnerships.

More broadly, the Fellowship program itself was structured to create opportunities for cross-cohort collaboration. At every step of the way, Fellows were encouraged to share their learnings, and also to discuss any concerns or challenges they were facing. Importantly, the Fellowship provided an ongoing and collaborative learning process, creating opportunities for Fellows to develop connections and partnerships that would endure beyond the Fellowship period itself.

Source: The Conversation Project in Northern Ireland

## Ensuring Psychological Safety

To build belonging, people must first be willing to open up to one another. Only when people feel able to share their ideas freely, and bring their whole self to the table in an authentic way, can they begin to feel truly welcome, and fully accepted for who they are. Building belonging, in other words, means prioritizing psychological safety, and helping people to feel secure enough to take risks.

5   Over Zero and The American Immigration Council. (2024). *The Belonging Barometer: The State of Belonging in America.* (Rev ed). https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/the-belonging-barometer

6   More in Common. (2025). *The Connection Opportunity: Insights for Bringing Americans Together Across Difference.* https://moreincommonus.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/The-Connection-Opportunity_More-in-Common_2025.pdf

Many of the Belonging Innovation Lab Fellows made promoting psychological safety a key goal for their Fellowship projects, and actively worked to create safe spaces where community members could freely share their experiences and perspectives. Often, this was a learning experience for both Fellows and local stakeholders. In many cases, mutual trust grew over time as participants felt more able to express their feelings, make themselves vulnerable, and acknowledge the value of one another's perspectives and contributions.

## Enabling Co-Creation

Belonging cannot be externally imposed: instead, it must grow organically from within a community, as stakeholders forge shared understandings and a sense of mutual investment in and ownership of their community. Local organizations are uniquely able to promote and foster this sense of collaborative co-creation—but even then, efforts to promote belonging must be  shaped by local stakeholders, and not simply imposed from the top down.

Many of the Belonging Innovation Lab Fellows quickly realized that to succeed and scale their vision for belonging, they needed to empower local community members to steer the Fellowship projects. A number of Fellows re-oriented their programs to reflect the needs and desires expressed by community members—and in several cases, program participants took full ownership of the programs, enabling them to continue independently well beyond the Fellowship period.

*Source: Denver Urban Gardens, Denver, CO*

# Transformation, Togetherness, and Trust

In the pages that follow, we celebrate the Belonging Innovation Lab Fellows' extraordinary work building community and belonging, and elevate their takeaways to help others learn. Our hope is that their stories and successes will inspire other local leaders and organizations to collaborate, exchange ideas, and mobilize their resources strategically to build belonging in their communities.

Above all, we seek to show that prioritizing togetherness and building trust enables transformation. Belonging matters at the level of individuals and communities—but it also matters at the level of the organizations working to bridge differences and promote social cohesion and inclusion.

And we understand that transformation takes time. We are encouraged by the early signals of impact across cohort organizations and offer key lessons in the following pages for additional leaders to take up and build upon in their communities.

Source: Tapestry Farms, Davenport, IA

# Key Takeaways

The Belonging Innovation Lab Fellowship provided grassroots organizations with a unique opportunity to test and refine initiatives designed to bring people together across differences and cultivate a sense of belonging in their local communities. The lessons learned through this Fellowship not only offer valuable insights for organizations already engaged in bridge-building efforts but also serve as a guide for others looking to incorporate belonging-centered approaches into their work. The following sections outline key lessons from the cohort and practical examples of belonging in action, providing a roadmap for those committed to advancing community connection, trust, and cohesion.

## PRONGS OF THE BELONGING BAROMETER

**SOCIAL CONNECTION**

can encompass the interactions, relationships, roles, and sense of connection individuals, communities, or society may experience.[7]

**PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY**

is a shared belief held by members of a team (or community) that others on the team (or community) will not embarrass, reject, or punish them for speaking up with ideas, questions, and concerns, or for admitting mistakes.

**CO-CREATION**

is the ability to co-create the organizations, systems, and structures that shape one's future, if desired.[8]

7   U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2023). *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community.* https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf

8   powell, j. a. (2020). *Co-creating and leading: Moving forward a society of belonging in a time of othering.* [Keynote address]. Institute for Nonprofit Practice's Leadership Learning Series. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n0VJYwp8LPo

## TAKEAWAY 1:
## A Groundswell of Interest and Momentum for Growth

The overwhelming response to the launch of this program—marked by hundreds of applications for a limited number of cohort spots—demonstrated a deep and widespread appetite for connection and community bridge-building. That momentum only grew once the cohort was underway, as participating organizations encountered enthusiastic interest from community members eager to engage across lines of difference. In a time when national narratives emphasize division, this surge of interest highlights a more grounded truth: people are looking for ways to connect around the shared spaces and experiences that define daily life.

The program didn't just meet a need; it revealed a powerful demand that catalyzed growth. Cohort organizations expanded their reach, secured additional grants, and elevated their visibility with funders. For example, Global Cleveland originally planned to implement their project in five sites but expanded to 11 community gardens in response to such strong interest. Many have identified the need for new roles to sustain and scale their efforts, positioning them to meet the moment and further invest in the connective tissue of their communities.

## TAKEAWAY 2:
## No One Builds a Bridge Alone

Division and disconnection can feel like overwhelming problems—too big for any one organization to tackle alone. While the work of bringing people together across differences is essential to addressing our most pressing challenges, the infrastructure to support community organizations in this space is still emerging. Grassroots organizations often find themselves isolated, navigating challenges and designing programs with little external support. While research related to social cohesion provides valuable insights, applying these principles in real-world contexts can feel like uncharted territory.

"

The most challenging point in our project has been its rapid growth and increase in activities—a good problem to have. We had to figure out how to create frameworks for sustaining the workload. We have been most successful in this as we have delegated work to our student associates, who have risen beautifully to the occasion and taken on increasing responsibility."

—Willamette University

Through a network of committed leaders working together, bridge-building becomes not just possible, but transformational. The cohort formed through the Fellowship became more than just a collection of participating organizations—it became a sounding board to share ideas, receive feedback, and identify potential partners. Learning from the challenges and successes of others not only accelerated individual program development but also strengthened the collective effort to foster belonging.

Leading innovative work in a field that is still taking shape can be a lonely journey. However, cohorts like the Belonging Innovation Lab Fellowship provide a vital sense of community, offering leaders the outside perspectives and shared wisdom needed to sustain their efforts.

## TAKEAWAY 3:
## Trust is the Bridge

Coming together across differences isn't always easy—it can be uncomfortable, complex, and even tense. That's why trust is essential. Even when groups don't fully trust one another at the outset, committing to the process itself can create the container for trust to grow. Many organizations found that using a point of connection—whether through shared experiences, local issues, or common interests—can be a powerful way to cultivate that trust.

For example, members of the Needham Resilience Network broke into small groups to reflect on data points about their community and discuss whether their lived experiences aligned. This simple yet intentional approach helped participants see their community through multiple perspectives, building alignment around shared values and local challenges. Over time, this foundational trust has informed Needham's rapid response efforts to hate incidents and shaped its ongoing problem-solving work.

Similarly, the Ozark Literacy Council fosters connection through hobby-based conversation clubs, creating casual spaces for people to engage across differences. During the Fellowship, club members participated in biweekly crafting sessions for 18 months, working together on an

> "Access to a network of peers is equally vital for fostering professional connections and exchanging knowledge gained from experience. Participation in conferences, workshops, and other networking events enabled our team members to connect with like-minded individuals, share best practices, and learn from each other's successes. Such interactions enrich our collective expertise and enhance our ability to serve the community effectively."
>
> —Global Detroit

CO-CREATION

internationally-themed quilt and other knitting projects. These gatherings provided a natural space for conversation and co-learning, proving that trust can be built not just through dialogue, but through the shared rhythms of creation and collaboration.

Whether through data-driven reflection or the steady hands of crafters working side by side, these organizations demonstrate that trust isn't just a prerequisite for bridge-building—it's something that can be woven into the process itself.

## TAKEAWAY 4:
## Beyond the Welcome Mat

Being welcoming is a great starting point, but in a society shaped by historical and systemic exclusion, it isn't enough. Creating spaces where all community members feel a true sense of belonging requires intentionality and actively assessing whether engagement strategies are genuinely inclusive or if they unintentionally reinforce barriers.

The Fellowship gave participants the space to critically examine their outreach efforts, asking: *Are we truly creating access for everyone? Who might still be left out?* This reflection led to meaningful shifts in approach.



Source: Tapestry Farms, Davenport, IA

For instance, Sustainable Berea operates in a county that is 89% white, which meant that simply creating a program and expecting racially diverse participation was not enough—there were no pre-existing relationships with communities of color, the organizations that have historically nurtured relationships with them, or, most importantly, the trust needed to foster engagement. With this recognition, the team at Sustainable Berea took a deliberate approach to outreach, introducing themselves and their programs to Black and Latino community members in spaces where they already gathered, such as supermarkets, Latin American restaurants, Black community groups, the local college's international student groups, and the local Catholic church. However, they soon realized that meeting people where they are, while important, was only part of the equation. To build deeper connections, they also formed partnerships with organizations that had longstanding relationships with

Black, Hispanic, and immigrant communities. For example, the Madison County Schools Migrant Education Program identified specific families who could benefit from free garden materials and educational resources, and provided introductions and translation services. Farristown Community leaders did the same for local Black families, ensuring that Sustainable Berea's efforts were not just inclusive in intention but also impactful in practice.

The concept that *food brings people together* was central to this project. A portion of the urban farm was devoted to the Agri-Culture Garden where crops of cultural significance to local Latino, Appalachian, Native American, Asian, and Black residents were grown and their stories recorded and told. Receptions held at the Agri-Culture Garden brought a highly diverse group of people together to share their stories of food and build relationships.

Similarly, Denver Urban Gardens reimagined their Culturally Inclusive Seed Program to foster deeper representation. By offering seeds from around the world, they ensured that gardeners from diverse cultural backgrounds could grow crops that felt familiar and significant to them. This honored their heritage and sparked cross-cultural curiosity and connection among neighbors eager to learn about new plants, foods, and traditions.

True inclusivity isn't just about keeping the door open—it's about redesigning the environment so that everyone can enter, participate, and feel like they truly belong.



*Source: Tapestry Farms, Davenport, IA*

## TAKEAWAY 5:
## Spaces Speak Inclusion

Physical spaces shape experiences, and when designed with intention, they can foster deeper connections and a true sense of belonging. Many of the spaces facilitated by organizations often serve as some of the few, if not the only, accessible third spaces available to community members. Third spaces—places that are neither home nor work—play a crucial role in fostering connection, providing opportunities for people to engage with one another outside of their daily routines.[9] In a society where modern

9   Oldenburg, R. (1989). *The Great Good Place.* Da Capo Press.

family and work structures often contribute to social isolation, these spaces become vital gathering points where individuals can connect over shared experiences and discover common ground.

Denver Urban Gardens embraced this concept by applying intergroup contact theory to their sensory and community gardens. Intergroup contact refers to situations where people from different social groups interact with each other.[10] By intentionally designing the space to meet the needs of people on the autism spectrum—such as raised beds at varying heights, textured sensory pathways, shaded gathering areas, music walls, and fragrant plantings—they created an environment where these individuals could garden alongside their families and other community members. The result was more than just accessibility—it was a shared space where relationships could naturally form, breaking down barriers and reinforcing a sense of community.

Thoughtful design choices like these demonstrate that when spaces are built with diverse needs in mind, they become more than just meeting points—they represent catalysts for connection.

## TAKEAWAY 6:
## From Service to Solidarity

Direct service organizations often operate in conditions where the needs of the community outpace staff resources, leaving little room for deep relationship-building. As a result, many default to a transactional model —one that provides a service but does not necessarily foster long-term connection. Through the Fellowship, organizations came to recognize that true belonging is rooted in relationships, requiring an intentional shift from one-time or one-way service provision to sustained engagement and two-way mutualistic exchange.

For example, Mutual Aid Brockton reimagined the role of community members by inviting individuals who had previously received mutual aid support—whether for rent, utilities, transportation, or tuition—to participate in food-sharing activities and community distribution efforts. By using a recipe shared by another participant, these individuals engaged in a cycle of reciprocity that deepened their sense of connection. They

**SOCIAL CONNECTION**



Source: MCC Refugee Services, North Mankato, MN

10 Tropp, L., & Derohne, T. (2022). *Cultivating Contact: A Guide to Building Bridges and Meaningful Connections Between Groups.* https:// welcomingamerica.org/resource/ cultivating-contact-a-guide-to-building-bridges-and-meaningful-connections-between-groups/

were also personally invited to festivals and community celebrations, further strengthening their relationships. For other Fellows, this mindset shift from service to solidarity helped them embrace and embody their own belonging as community members.

Yet, a systemic challenge remains: how can organizations nurture authentic relationships within the dominant nonprofit model that often limits engagement to the duration of service delivery? This question led participating organizations to rethink their internal structures and redefine the relationship between service providers and community members. For instance, Global Detroit recognized the need to move beyond simply soliciting feedback from community residents. Instead, they embraced a more collaborative approach: elevating community members as decision-makers. Rather than operating from a framework of doing things to or for the community, they committed to doing things with them—ensuring that belonging is built not just through services, but through shared ownership and collective action.

> "
>
> We do this work because we also belong in the communities we are in."
>
> —Más Fútbol Foundation

**CO-CREATION**

## TAKEAWAY 7:
## Stories are the Secret Ingredient

Stories have long been a powerful tool for fostering human connection. They are memorable, help cut through stereotypes, challenge assumptions, and motivate people to engage with one another. Many organizations in the Fellowship used stories as a tool to build bridges, but through their experiences, they uncovered a key distinction: storytelling and story sharing are not the same.

Storytelling is a crafted act, often presented in a structured format to convey a message or shift public narratives. For example, various organizations partnered with museums and historical sites to amplify and preserve the stories of their cohorts. Global Detroit collaborated with the Detroit Historical Society to document the lived experiences of marginalized residents through recorded interviews. Willamette University partnered with The Immigrant Story, a Portland-based community organization, to host The Immigrant Story Live—an event featuring musicians and storytellers who shared their difficult and dangerous journeys to the United States. Similarly, Ozark Literacy Council worked

with the Rogers Historical Museum to showcase an exhibit featuring the international quilts created by their club members, using art as a medium for storytelling and cultural exchange.

Story sharing, on the other hand, is personal and conversational, rooted in the reciprocal exchange of lived experiences. This realization led organizations to reflect on the different approaches needed to ensure that stories are shared ethically and with care. When stories are told in public spaces—especially those involving personal hardships or trauma—it is essential to incorporate psychological safety measures, such as anonymizing testimonials to protect individuals.
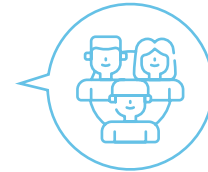
In contrast, story sharing within community settings thrives on trust, active listening, mutual exchange, and ensuring that those who share their experiences feel heard, valued, and supported. For instance, Mutual Aid Brockton hosted a brunch featuring a "speed knowing" activity, a variation of speed dating designed to foster connection. Held at a local art space, the event invited participants to share stories of their favorite family dishes, creating an intimate and interactive way for people to connect over personal memories and cultural traditions.

By distinguishing between these approaches, organizations can create spaces where stories create opportunities for connection.

**PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY**

## TAKEAWAY 8:
## The Process is the Product

In Western, and particularly U.S. culture, value is often placed on results, outcomes, and achievements, while the process itself is overlooked. This mindset can make relationship-building seem slow or even counterproductive to broader goals. However, the Fellowship gave cohort participants space to consider not just what they were doing but how they did it, recognizing that change happens at the speed of relationships.

Building trust and fostering belonging takes time, but it also requires intentionality. Organizations reflected on how navigating the complexities of community engagement—especially within diverse populations—demands a multifaceted approach that prioritizes inclusivity,

> "The Fellowship highlighted the significance of recognizing and celebrating small milestones throughout the project lifecycle. This practice not only maintained project momentum but also served as a reminder that change is often an incremental process. Recognizing progress reinforced our commitment to the project's goal and motivated us to continue striving for meaningful change."
>
> —Global Detroit

empowerment, and a commitment to continuous learning. Rather than viewing the process as a hurdle, they came to see it as the very foundation of meaningful, lasting change. By honoring the time and care needed to cultivate relationships, organizations embraced the idea that in many cases the process is the product.

## TAKEAWAY 9:
## Partnerships that Sustain Change

Building a sense of belonging in a community requires collaboration across sectors—from schools and local governments to businesses, philanthropy, and grassroots organizations. These partnerships strengthen initiatives and ensure their long-term sustainability.

Sycamore Collaborative's Community Composting Project exemplifies how intersectoral collaboration can lay the groundwork for lasting impact. By forging partnerships with schools, soil and water conservation districts, city parks, and philanthropic institutions, they created a program with deep community buy-in and long-term viability. Future efforts may expand these partnerships further, integrating local food relief organizations, health and social wellness groups, faith organizations, and both public and private supporters into their mission.

Similarly, Willamette University has embraced cross-sector collaboration as a way to break free from the traditionally siloed academic model. By prioritizing belonging and bridge-building, the university's liberal arts program has cultivated strong relationships with community partners—not just as a component of their program's infrastructure, but also as a driving force for student engagement and leadership development.

These examples underscore a key lesson: sustainable change isn't just about launching new initiatives, it's about building the networks that will sustain them for years to come.

**CO-CREATION**

"Our participation in the Belonging Innovation Lab Fellowship has emphasized how strong relationships have been central to successes the Minnesota Council of Churches (MCC) has had in these projects and helped us focus on building on these relationships and creating new ones, to identify where we have common mission and can build on one another's efforts for broader success."

—MCC Refugee Services

# Profiles and Case Studies: Belonging in Action

## SYCAMORE COLLABORATIVE:
## The Simple Magic of Coffee and Conversation

Four mornings a week just before 9 a.m., the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet brew a large urn of coffee, refill the sugar and creamer containers, arrange the teas and hot cocoa packets and set out plates of cookies. Then they unlock the door and welcome the 30 to 40 people who come for treats and socializing for the next three hours.

"People come just to hang out. They might want a coffee and a warmup," says Rev. Amaury Tañón-Santos, Executive Director and CEO of the Sycamore Collaborative, the nonprofit organization that oversees the center that's helping to heal the country's loneliness epidemic. "The elder who lives across the street will stay for three hours. Others who are new to the neighborhood will stop by just to say 'Hi.'"

Over the last decade, St. Joseph's Place has become a fixture in Hamilton Hill, the poorest and most diverse neighborhood in Schenectady, a city of 67,000 people outside Albany in upstate New York. Originally conceived as a "drop in" center to keep a Catholic presence in the area, St. Joseph's Place has grown into a hospitality hub that's part of the Sycamore Collaborative's food relief and community engagement efforts. The collaborative runs several food pantries and two urban farms that grow food with Schenectady families.

"I loved the concept," says Rev. Tañón-Santos, a Presbyterian minister who joined the Collaborative after serving as a pastor for congregations in White Plains, New York and Plainfield, New Jersey. "Instead of being a drop-in center that's masquerading as social intervention, it's truly just hospitality. It's a place to have a coffee and a cookie and just talk."

Yet these simple two rooms comprising 700 square feet (cookies and occasional sandwiches are in the front, and drinks are in the back) have filled a deep need in the neighborhood—whether it's feeling part of a community or having an opportunity to get connected to critical social services. The Sycamore Collaborative was a recent Fellow of the Belonging Innovation Lab.

### 'I NEED A LITTLE PRAYER'

"For the sisters who are doing this work, it's a ministry for them," says Rev. Tañón-Santos. "They're mostly retired nuns who are teachers or social workers. They have regulars and greet them by name and notice when someone is not showing up."

They're on the lookout for clues during one-on-one chats and are skilled at leading group conversations. "If they sense someone needs help, they might say, 'You know we know someone at Housing or Public Health'," Rev. Tañón-Santos says. "Or sometimes a regular might ask 'I need a little prayer'."

Often the need is more immediate, such as when a visitor spends too much time in the bathroom. "Drug addiction is a big problem and so maybe the sisters will knock on the door. If they suspect someone is using, they might ask 'Can we call Safe Point, a drug intervention program by Catholic Charities?'"

The beauty of the approach, says Rev. Tañón-Santos, is that if someone declines help, they still might show up the next morning for coffee. "We know if someone uses, but if we don't accept them and make them feel welcome, who will?" he says. "St. Joseph's Place is in the neighborhood, for the neighborhood and by the neighborhood."

## THE MEANING OF COMMUNITY

The sisters take the inter-faith mission seriously: Although there are Christian religious relics that still remain from the center's days as a Catholic center, they acknowledge other traditions, such as hanging a "Blessed Ramadan" sign during the Muslim holy month and carefully marking which donated sandwiches are suitable for Muslims and Hindus. "The whole place feels homey and warm," he says. "It has old-school vinyl chairs, carpet, plants and music playing."

At first, Rev. Tañón-Santos thought people might stop for a quick snack during a visit to the nearby food pantry, but he's been impressed by how many people stay for the full three hours. "Why do they come? They want company. They feel welcome and safe," he says. "The sisters deserve credit for their consistency," he says. "They found a purpose and show up every single time. Even during the pandemic they never closed."

As a result, people have formed deep connections. When Sister Ann, one of the founding sisters, started coming less frequently as her health declined, people asked about her. When she passed last year, more than 300 people came to her funeral, including many regulars from St. Joseph's Place. They also grieved when news spread that a regular visitor had died of a drug overdose.

The success of St. Joseph's Place has delivered a powerful lesson on what it means to belong to a community. "Our goal was to cultivate community resilience and togetherness," says Rev. Tañón-Santos. "We are here for people to know they are a part of a broader something."

What's surprised everyone is how simple the formula turned out to be. "Open a space. Serve coffee and some cookies. Have people hang out. It's as easy as that," he says.

## GLOBAL DETROIT:
## Bringing Disconnected Communities Together—On Shared Terms

Nestled together on the north side of Detroit, three historically African-American neighborhoods—East Davison Village, Banglatown, and Hamtramck—have long faced challenges including population loss and housing abandonment. An influx of immigrants, mostly from Yemen and Bangladesh, reversed that decline. Today, almost half the population is foreign-born, and research shows the new arrivals have helped lower crime rates, lift property values, and improve quality of life for all residents—without displacing long-time community members.

Below the surface, however, there was a socio-cultural divide. Research conducted in 2021 by Global Detroit revealed that the neighborhood's African-American residents and more recently arrived immigrants often viewed one another with suspicion and mistrust, each having generally adopted anti-Black or anti-immigrant biases, respectively.[11] "These are lively, vibrant neighborhoods full of people and activity; but we found a high presence of anti-Black bias among immigrant residents, and anti-immigrant bias among Black residents," says Dr. Alaina Jackson, Managing Director of Global Detroit.

To change that dynamic, Global Detroit used its Belonging Innovation Lab Fellowship to support the Social Cohesion Project—an innovative effort to unite diverse communities around shared goals. Traditional community engagement focuses on building trust with specific segments of a community, but can struggle to bridge structural and social divisions between different groups. The Social Cohesion Project was inspired by contact theory, a framework that seeks to erode prejudice and foster tolerance by bringing different parts of a community together around shared goals.

To that end, Global Detroit invited immigrant and African-American residents to work together on community development projects, hoping that through targeted collaboration, the groups would forge more lasting connections. "We hoped contact theory would produce quick results in bridging the social divide between these communities," Dr. Jackson explains. "Instead of working to cultivate empathy and grow relationships over time, we just brought folks together and said: 'Hey, there's work to do.'"

Source: Global Detroit, Detroit, MI

11  Global Detroit. (2025). *Contact theory as a tool for cultivating social cohesion.* https://globaldetroitmi.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/25-05-Social-Cohesion-Pilot-Report_Final.pdf

## LETTING RESIDENTS TAKE THE LEAD

Drawing on Global Detroit's existing community ties—ranging from small business programs to a women's sewing group—organizers invited local residents to join the Social Cohesion Program. In the following months, the project convened over 40 meetings, each attended by an average of 14 local residents, to define the community's priorities and concerns, and home in on the specific challenges they hoped to overcome together.

"The work came first. It was the central thing that brought people together," Dr. Jackson says. "People were highly motivated by their shared goals, and it brought them to the table, even when it meant working with folks they might not initially have wanted to engage."

The group originally began developing an oral history project, but over time their priorities evolved to focus on promoting better access to community services, and running resource fairs and community festivals. Creating a space for the group to chart its own course and define their own priorities over time was vital because the collaborative process allowed participants to feel a sense of shared ownership over the program. "Curating a space that promotes community members in taking the lead gets the highest degree of buy-in," Dr. Jackson explains. "That's especially important when you're trying to reduce bias or break down barriers between groups."

It wasn't all plain sailing. At one early meeting, some of the African American attendees used exclusionary language—referring to "these people"—that offended the immigrant participants and exacerbated the community's social divisions. "Mistakes were regularly made by all, but these were learning opportunities that showed the practical challenges with leveraging contact theory as part of real-world community work," Dr. Jackson says. "In that moment, you can't just say, 'Well, let's focus on who's picking up the food for the resource fair,'" she says. "When someone feels disrespected, you've got to address that disrespect, and acknowledge their fear and hurt and pain."

However, by incorporating traditional community engagement processes, however, the Global Detroit team was able to gradually grow trust and create a safe environment for the group members to re-engage. That involved having some tough conversations, acknowledges Destine Brown, the Social Cohesion Project program manager. It also meant taking small, practical steps—like making sure that cultural holidays were included on the group's shared calendar, or that everyone could eat the communal snacks—to make everyone feel seen and included.

Brown also made a point of using simple icebreakers to get people talking about things other than their heritage or racial identities. "We aren't just our cultures or our race," she says. "Everyone's different. I might like tattoos, and you might like classical music, or soccer. By talking about those things, people find ways to connect with each other."

Over time, the group emerged with a deeper respect for each other's norms and cultural practices. In one remarkable moment, some of the same African American participants who had previously used exclusionary language proposed moving the group's meetings online during Ramadan to make life easier for Islamic immigrant members. "They said, 'Now we know how Ramadan works, we can't have these folks sitting here for a three-hour meeting. They've got to get home and break their fast with their families,'" Dr. Jackson recalls.

On another occasion, another group of African American residents worked with immigrant residents to have fliers for a community event translated into Bengali and Arabic. "They planned all that on their own, without anyone prompting them or prodding them to do it," Dr. Jackson says. "They were beginning to see each other as neighbors, and being very intentional about including them."

**DRIVING LASTING CHANGE**

As the two groups began to cohere, they became more energetic and ambitious in their efforts to address the needs of their community. In the program's first year, the group created a series of community resource fairs. The following year, they created a larger Community Learning Festival drawing together service providers, neighborhood businesses, and other stakeholders. Over 450 local residents attended the event, which included henna design and embroidery workshops, lessons in carpentry and agricultural skills, and mindfulness and well-being sessions. More than seven out of 10 of the festival's attendees said they had met new neighbors from different cultural backgrounds. "We're still gathering data, but anecdotally we've seen that residents' perceptions of people from different cultural, ethnic, or racial backgrounds has definitely improved," Dr. Jackson says. "We've also seen more interactions across those lines, unprompted by us and well beyond the core project."

While the Belonging Innovation Fellowship period is now over, the group continues to meet, and is currently working to turn an unused lot into a community garden where residents can gather and meet safely with their neighbors. Group members have also assumed leadership roles in their communities, advocating for the neighborhood at City Council meetings, and helping to run community surveys and tours to promote cultural awareness among local residents. "They say they'll continue meeting and doing community events collectively, and working together to maintain the new space they're designing," Brown says. "The hope is that this ripples out, and has a broader impact moving forward."

*Source: Global Detroit, Detroit, MI*

The Fellowship is having a lasting impact at Global Detroit, too. Brown says the curriculum offered to Fellows inspired her to let local stakeholders take more responsibility for how community programs operate. When a winter storm swept through Detroit, for instance, Brown initially planned to cancel that night's Social Cohesion Program meeting—but instead, she called the members and asked what they preferred. "They decided to move forward, and despite the snow we had a huge turnout," Brown says. "It's really changed the way I think about bringing other folks to the table. I would say that was one of my biggest takeaways from the fellowship."

In coming months, the Global Detroit team hopes to expand the intergroup contact model pioneered through the Social Cohesion Project model into additional Detroit neighborhoods, while continuing to support residents of East Davison Village, Banglatown, and Hamtramck as they strengthen the ties they've developed. "This is already changing the way we do community engagement," Dr. Jackson says. "We're building contact theory into our work as we engage with residents and business owners, and looking for ways to integrate what we've learned into our ongoing work in other communities."

Source: Global Detroit, Detroit, MI

# NEEDHAM RESILIENCE NETWORK:
## Healing a Fractured Community

Between 2016 and 2020, the quiet Boston suburb of Needham was rattled by a series of hate incidents, including an arson attack against the Chabad Jewish Center and graffiti targeting the Black, Jewish and LGBTQ communities. The number of reported incidents had increased 350 percent, compared to the previous five years. When the 2020 arrest and misuse of force against Marvin Henry—a Black man who was wrongfully accused of shoplifting—set off a string of protests, it became clear the community was in crisis.

The town of Needham partnered with a local nonprofit to ask resident Dr. Nichole Argo, a social psychologist known for her work on conflict transformation and resilience networks, to lead a workshop on countering hate and fostering social cohesion. "We brought 50 diverse local leaders together and realized the problem was much deeper because these groups didn't trust one another," says Dr. Argo.

There were bigger demographic forces at work in Needham, which also have been playing out in communities across the country. For most of its history, Needham—a small town of about 32,000 people outside of Boston—has been a mostly white community. Yet over the past 15 years, the city has been undergoing rapid diversification.

Dr. Argo knew from experience it would take more than a handful of weekend workshops to begin to cultivate a better relationship among different partisan and racial groups, and between residents and the town. "It was going to take time to build relationships and teach people skills to communicate across differences," she says. Her vision was to cultivate long-term relationships through a two-year program that brought together 30 leaders from all sectors of the community—including the Town Manager, Police Chief, Superintendent, regional business chamber, local hospital liaison and representatives from religious, political, civic, ethnic and educational groups —for monthly meetings. "Before they began to tackle hate, they were going to immerse in a curriculum that covered belonging and skills in communicating across differences. These leaders weren't asked to do anything except share, listen, and try to understand each other's perspectives," says Dr. Argo.

To help with implementation, she reached out to Fellow resident Dr. Beth Pinals, a clinical psychologist and equity consultant who had helped to build a community coalition to address a surge in teen suicides, and asked her to serve as co-director for the initiative.

*Source: Needham Resilience Network, Needham, MA*

To help with implementation, she reached out to Fellow resident Dr. Beth Pinals, a clinical psychologist and equity consultant who had helped to build a community coalition to address a surge in teen suicides, and asked her to serve as co-director for the initiative.

In 2020, with grants from the Center for Inclusion and Belonging, Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital – Needham and the Crimson Lion / Lavine Family Foundation, the women launched the Needham Resilience Network.

## LEARNING TO LISTEN TO EACH OTHER

During the first year, the cohort focused on relationship-building and developed skills like deep listening and dialogue. For example, in a popular small group exercise known as SAVE (Stories, Actions, Values, Emotions), participants took turns sharing stories about having overcome a difficult challenge.

The others in the group were asked to listen and comment on different elements of the story, such as the values or emotions expressed. The goal was to help participants tune into all the wavelengths people use to communicate in order to build empathy. "It's the power of deeply knowing someone and allowing them to know you," says Dr. Pinals, "that allows for biases to be washed away and bridges to be built."

The meetings also used data as a prompt for storytelling and forging bonds. While discussing local issues—such as public health and safety, housing, food insecurity and schools—the leaders asked participants to share their own personal stories with these topics. "That process was profoundly transformative. There were tears and hugs and huge growth for everyone in understanding the different lived experiences in Needham," says Dr. Argo.

One of the program's biggest achievements was the creation of a Community Response Council that drafted a protocol for how residents, local schools, and police can work together in the aftermath of a hate incident. The Council is currently planning an event where civic leaders and public officials will sign a "Needham Pledge to Connect" as a shared commitment to come together across differences in 2025 and beyond.

## KNOWING WHO TO CALL

At the end of the program, participants offered feedback praising the opportunity to "have conversations with people that you would not otherwise have the opportunity to do so." Others said they enjoyed learning new skills, appreciated realizing that people have good intentions and valued having a safe space to be vulnerable and share ideas. One resident said, "For me it was a wonderful way to learn about so many different aspects of Needham, build that network and know who I can go to."

"Our meetings were scheduled for an hour and a half, but they often spilled over with stories, ideas, and connecting," says Dr. Pinals. "Once people were engaging and sharing, it was hard to not feel inspired and more unified around a common purpose." At the end of each meeting, we always asked people to share a 'closing pulse', or a word about how they were feeling. We often heard 'intrigued,' 'awakened,' 'excited,' 'motivated,' 'transformed,' and 'reassured'."

This past fall, the Needham Resilience Network launched a second cohort. The program has focused on the same core curriculum, but this cohort will co-create a solution to a different challenge: raising awareness around and addressing local mental health challenges. Each community leader has received training in First Aid Mental Health, which qualifies them to be a gatekeeper in monitoring, assessing, and connecting to resources. They have also held 16 community focus groups to hear what mental health hopes and challenges resonate most across communities.

Cohort two is also an experiment with a yearlong schedule, an attempt at making it easier to reproduce the model in other communities. "We want people to know that anyone can create a resilience network, and it can produce spectacularly effective, cohesive responses to any issue in their community," says Dr. Argo.

Perhaps the moment that underscored how much progress the Needham Resilience Network had made in cultivating trust came following the October 7th attack in Israel in 2023. The outrage was felt deeply in Needham among many groups, and the Town Manager was concerned people were going to try to post political flyers on city property, which violated local laws. Worried she would inflame the situation by saying the police required her to remove them, she found a diplomatic solution: She called the town's Jewish and Muslim leaders and received assurances that they would convey the town rules to their congregations, who would in turn respect them, and she could tell residents they were supportive of the rules.

The calls were small gestures, but they spoke volumes about how the community was working together to avoid conflict. "We saw that as true bridge-building success," says Dr. Pinals. "The network had built the kind of trust that allowed collaboration and maintained peace during an extremely tense time."

# Future Directions

While the inaugural Belonging Innovation Lab Fellowship officially concluded in early 2024, its impacts are still being felt and in some cases are just beginning. Many of the Fellows were able to build self-sustaining initiatives that have continued to deliver benefits beyond the life of the Fellowship itself. For example:

- Students at Willamette University are facilitating local storytelling programming in their communities and running deliberative dialogue programs in Northern Ireland, helping local students to overcome differences and find common ground.

- Denver Urban Gardens is expanding its Therapeutic Gardening Initiative to promote gardening as a form of therapy for people with special needs. Four new pilot gardens with sensory pathways and other accessibility features have already touched the lives of over 1,000 local residents.

- Tapestry Farms has significantly grown its operations, with a 10x increase in volunteers since 2022, a 3x increase in operating budget, and a 50 percent increase in food production for local pantries. The group is now partnering with local schools, cultural institutions, and corporations including Amazon and Deere to maximize its impact.

Successes like these demonstrate the outsized impact that local organizations can have in their communities given their unique position to help build belonging and create more welcoming and inclusive spaces for everyone. And the stories will continue. From Salem, Oregon to Brockton, Massachusetts—and everywhere in between—togetherness has the power to transform.



Source: Denver Urban Gardens, Denver, CO