



Bridge Communities

2022-2024

Strategic Plan

2025 Strategic Plan Extension

Welcome to the Bridge Communities 2022-2024 Strategic Plan

Dear Friends of Bridge Communities,

It is a pleasure to share the 2022-2024 Bridge Communities strategic plan with you. The intent is to provide a document that provides information and insight to the work that Bridge Communities has done and will continue to undertake as it continues to serve its clients and the larger community.

We are grateful for the funding that made this planning process possible and the significant contributions of the Strategic Planning Task Force and Executive Leadership Team that guided the process.

The initial pages lay out specific plan information about the 2022-2024 plan with a reminder on our purpose as an organization and an overview of key moments in our history. We believe that the Bridge Communities service model has several characteristics that make it unique in the work that is being done for families facing homelessness. Our support for the children of Bridge clients is a characteristic that is especially important to us, from our very beginning.

One of the distinctive characteristics of the Bridge Communities organization is its focus on what has been done in the past and what has been learned from these experiences. It is in this spirit that the accomplishments from the 2017-2020 planning process are shared. This plan lays out our strategies that will improve client experiences while in the Transitional Housing Program, as well as their outcomes long after matriculation.

The document closes with a review of the environment in which our organization exists and the impact which our data tells us that we have made.

We welcome your thoughts and ongoing dialogue.

Sincerely,

Karen S. Wells
CEO
Bridge Communities



Key Strategic Initiatives – 2022 - 2024

After completion of all phases of the Strategic Planning process (pg. 10), the initiatives below were developed by the several teams and endorsed by the board and Bridge senior management.

Two foundational themes permeate the strategic thinking and tactical implementation of the organization:

- Theme 1. The significance of the ongoing and deepening focus on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
- Theme 2. The impact of technology in upgrading, extending, and evaluating the services offered and the training provided

The 2022-2024 strategic plan contains **five initiatives** driving evolution of our programming, community engagement, finances, data, and human development.

Initiative 1. Evolve the Bridge Transitional Housing Program

- Evolve our housing portfolio and program services to develop and test a pre-program service model to stabilize families in a shorter timeframe and serve as a bridge and/or feeder into our Transitional Housing (TH) Program.
- Develop and implement post-program services including a financial evaluation of impact of offering access units currently designated for Affordable Housing
- Expand our employment service strategies to include job placement and greater educational opportunities focused on long-term career growth
- Affirm the desire of current clients to provide help and support to one another before, during and after the program through more structured and more widespread peer support groups
- Sustain and continue to improve the support and services we provide to the children of Bridge clients.



Initiative 2. Drive and Expand Community Engagement

- Increase our Program Partner and mentor base by unbundling Program Partner financial contributions from volunteer mentoring and seeking support from CSR focused corporations

- Create greater/deeper understanding of how Bridge accomplishes its mission through tailored and targeted messaging and branding methods
- Strengthen our anti-racism and social justice culture and messaging

Initiative 3. Increase Our Financial Sustainability

- Expand Millennial and Gen Z participation in our volunteer and donor base
- Explore a capital campaign to fund current and future needs of our 25 buildings and 154 apartments
- Secure and increase giving through estate planning
- Increase limited government funding to diversify financial support of programming and housing



Initiative 4. Build Data and Evaluation

- Expand and refine how we communicate our data and research findings, both internally and externally
- Become a thought leader on family homelessness, housing insecurity, and affordable housing by seeking out opportunities to “be at the table’ with others who share our point of view

Initiative 5. Sustain and Develop Our People

- Grow recruitment of staff, board members, mentors, program partners and volunteers with diverse experiences and expertise, shared and additive to family life experiences
- Grow engagement of staff and all key stakeholders through routine assessments/surveys resulting in improvement targets and action plans annually
- Standardize and expand the education and development of key stakeholders, including diverse training resources (online, in person, formal and informal, expert and peer led) and annual individual development plans for staff

Why We Are Here

Mission: The mission of Bridge Communities is to transition families experiencing homelessness to self-sufficiency by working with partners to provide mentoring, housing, and supportive services.

Vision: Our vision is a community where all families are healthy, financially stable, and living in affordable housing.

Values: Each of our core values—Partnership, Empowerment, Integrity, Respect, Hope—apply to everyone involved in Bridge Communities – clients, mentors, program partners, volunteers, donors, board members, staff, and community.



Our History

1988: The Apartment Project is founded by Mark Milligan and Bob Wahlgren.

1992: Apartment Project becomes Bridge Communities, a nonprofit organization.

1994: Program Partners concept is created, and churches are signed on.

1995: Children's Services program begins.

1996: Built first Bridge Communities apartment building, entirely by volunteers

2002: Rapid growth results with one apartment building added to inventory every year for next 6 years; Sleep Out Saturday launched, raising \$1.9 million for homeless families by 2021

2008: Pathways Program is launched, designed to provide short-term, post-program housing support to families.

2010: Bridge launches Investing in Homes + Hope campaign, resulting in additional housing for Bridge families and \$2 million endowment.

2011: Employment Services is revamped to expand job readiness and education. CEO John Hayner is appointed.

2015: Bridge expands Children's Program through Break the Cycle of Homelessness campaign. The fourth Bridge Communities Learning Resource Center opens.

2016: Bridge is honored with \$200,000 Neighborhood Builder Award from Bank of America. Fifth Bridge Communities campus opens.

2017: \$600,000 multi-year grant is awarded to build a robust Data and Evaluation function.

2018: Bridge celebrates 30th anniversary. Mark Milligan retires. Nutrition Program is formalized. Founders Fund endowment is established to provide post-secondary support to teens and parents.

2020: COVID-19 pandemic requires all programming and mentoring to pivot to virtual. New CEO Karen Wells is appointed. Bridge now owns 23 apartment buildings in 7 DuPage County communities.

The Bridge Communities Service Model

- Our service model relies on direct, weekly mentoring for every client, provided by dedicated volunteer mentors from our 37 Program Partners.
- Program Partners are primarily churches, faith-based organizations and community organizations, which provide mentor teams, financial support toward client housing and utilities, and furniture needs.
- In-house Bridge programs provide professional case management, employment, and education counseling, children's services, nutrition programs, and donated automobiles.



- We partner with various school districts and a broad array of other human services agencies that provide public benefits, child-care services, food pantries, behavioral and physical health, parenting education, and family law services.
 - Bridge seeks to maximize impact on every family served, dependent on the unique challenges faced by each family, the unique strengths that they bring, the specific goals that each has at the beginning of their time with us, and the goals that that may arise subsequently.
- Two impact goals are always weighed as each family exits the program and in subsequent follow up with them:
 1. Is the family exiting to a stable and permanent housing destination?
 2. Will the family's household income, employment trajectory, savings and debt levels sustain them in their housing destination?
 - Since 2014, Bridge has also monitored family self-sufficiency on a wholistic 15 item core metric assessment including family employment, economics, wellness, and skills.
 - We use this assessment at program entry, annually, and at program exit. We also routinely gather family and mentor feedback following classes and workshops. A comprehensive exit survey with families occurs to explore their perceptions of the Bridge program, family quality of life, and program impacts.



Key Accomplishments from 2017 - 2020

This three-year period was a busy and productive time. Below are the four initiatives set for the 2017-2020 Strategic Plan and the related accomplishments:

Grow Community Investment

- Successfully engaged 1 – 3 businesses each year in volunteerism and charitable giving.
- Successfully engaged angel donors to support Program Partner churches and community groups with limited revenue.
- Maintained relationship with first corporate Program Partner.
- Revamped many of our planned giving events to foster deeper engagement and investments.
- Surpassed fundraising goals through increased foundation and private giving initiatives.

Strengthen Housing Portfolio

- Maintained 154 housing units; 50% occupied by Transitional Housing (TH) families; 50% by families and community partners in need of Affordable Housing (AH). When we have not had the number of Program Partners needed to support more TH families, we have flexed our our portfolio to AH. Revenue for AH, in part, helps fund TH and supportive services.
- Expanded positive relationship with various housing organizations and private landlords to provide post-program housing.

Enhance Programming

- Through logic modeling, empirical literature reviews, and evaluation gap analysis work made possible by the 4th key initiative (summarized below) and targeted taskforces on Mentoring and Intake, Bridge has identified and begun to fill important service and training gaps.
- Trauma Informed Care has emerged as an important framework for our organizational development and has guided the development of training for Program Partners, mentors, and staff.
- Bridge hired two full-time staff to oversee youth development and post-secondary exploration and deepen nutrition programming with families. One hire included a graduate from our TH program, which has deepened peer support.
- All of Program made deep and ongoing pivots as a result of COVID-19 pandemic to provide all supports and services virtually or using appropriate safety and CDC-approved mitigations.

Develop Data & Evaluation Function

- Hired full-time Data and Evaluation Manager.
- Gathered consumer perspectives following rigorous high quality methods (Alumni Survey and Interview – oral history project, Mentor engagement survey) Grew high-quality, multimethod evaluation and data analysis work to guide program refinements and development, including gathering constituent perspectives (program participants, program alumni, mentors).
- Initiated definition, analysis and reporting of Key Performance Indicators.
- Identified need for more centralized data system for family support and family-centered collaboration; initiated the customization of our new program data system (launching this year).

Summary of External Environment

- Nationally, as well as within Illinois and DuPage County, literal homelessness is trending downward; however, the number of families facing housing insecurities is on the rise due to poverty and lack of affordable housing.
- Nearly 50% of renters in DuPage County are cost burdened (spend over 30% of income on rent). A single mom with two children would need to earn \$23.09/hour at a full-time job to make \$4000/month to not be cost burdened (burden $\leq 30\%$).
- Traditional Transitional Housing (TH) is a time intensive and expensive model for families facing homelessness. Currently, there is a decline of the use of TH as the go-to solution for family homelessness, and it is reserved for those with chronic concerns (i.e., physical and mental health concerns, transitioning out of criminal justice institutions and foster care).
- Rapid Rehousing has been found to end homelessness for families in less time compared to TH programs. However, families remain burdened by housing costs, low-income jobs, and have been found to not achieve the self-sufficiency they desire.



- Unbundled, voluntary services fostering resilience, wellness, and self-efficacy are best practices to support self-sufficiency. The Bridge TH model already leans into many of these best practices including care coordination, harm reduction and growth mindset, allies and peer support, trauma informed care, motivational interviewing, executive functioning, supportive problem solving and goal striving.
- There has been a national focus over last 20 years to invest more in prevention and short-term assistance; reserve costly/intensive models for individuals and families experiencing literal/chronic homelessness and special needs populations. COVID has intensified these priorities.

Summary of Organization and Impact

- Bridge served just over 100 families/year: 90% single moms, 100% traumatized by historical and structural inequity, 50% by domestic violence; 85% are BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) families.
- Bridge serves very low to extremely low-income families entering our program with high debt, low savings, educational gaps, and other barriers to gaining living wage jobs.
- Bridge TH families experience important growth in stability, especially if they stay engaged in our program for the full two years and have strong trusting mentor relationships.
- Five-year growth averages: 30% increase in income; 43% reduction in debt; 24% increase in savings.
- 82% of families exit to permanent housing but all (100%) exit into rent burden (burden \geq 30%); 60% are considered greater rent burden (burden \geq 40%). 72% of alumni are still reporting similar rent burden and challenges maintaining savings and debt routines following the program, due in large part to income constraints and the high cost of living. Albeit 76% of alumni report they maintain rent/mortgage costs without falling behind.
- Alumni express gratitude for the opportunity to be in the program. Over 80% of respondents on a recent alumni survey reported that they had a trusting relationship with at least one mentor; but over the past three years we have heard growing concerns about inconsistencies in client experiences, feeling judged, and desiring peer support from others who have walked in their shoes.
- The Bridge TH model has increased in cost by 45% since 2015 to \$41,000 per family due to the expansion of all programs to better serve the needs of families and support mentors.
- Church populations are aging, and participation is on the decline. The number of Program Partners and mentors has also declined.
- On a recent survey, 82% of mentors shared that understanding people from different backgrounds and helping others were benefits of mentoring. However, mentors also raised concerns about the lack of diversity among Bridge mentors. Clients, as well, have echoed this concern.
- Contributed revenue continues to grow; however, \$5,000+ donors are primarily age 65+ and the next generation of donors will not have the same amount of disposable wealth.



Background: Strategic Planning Process

Bridge Communities has a long-standing tradition of regularly allocating time and resources for the development of a strategic planning document that will guide its actions for the next three-year period. However, as happened in other parts of our world, COVID 19 delayed the work effort. With the coming of a new CEO, Karen Wells, in June 2020, the decision was made to put off the preparation for the planning process until early 2021 and set the time frame for the plan for 2022 to 2024.

Supported by a grant from Community Memorial Foundation, Bridge Communities hired Joe McLennan, McLennan Partners, to help facilitate the process. Given the effectiveness of the planning process undertaken in 2017, that approach was closely shadowed in this planning effort. Similar to what was done in the last planning process, a Strategic Planning Task Force comprised of two board members and eight staff members was formed. Staff members on the Task Force represented all programmatic areas and various levels within the organization.



The Task Force met online on a weekly basis throughout the late winter and early spring. Adhering to one of Bridge's core values, Partnership, the Task Force moved quickly to identify stakeholders whose input would provide useful insight and data for the development of the plan. As part of its own due diligence, this group reviewed the results of the 2017-2020 plan with an eye to what was still left to be accomplished and what initiatives could be refined.

With the assistance of Rick Lochner, a consultant with a long and productive history of working with Bridge on several critical projects, the Task Force, joined by the Executive Leadership Team participated in an intense SWOT analysis. Out of this work, four strategic initiatives emerged. These became the basis for a Stakeholder Study Guide that was distributed to each Stakeholder prior to their individual interview or Listening Group with the intention that critical background information was available before the interaction occurred.

Interviews and Listening Groups were conducted with Clients, Program Partners, Mentors and Community Partners throughout May 2021. A synthesis of those comments was shared with the Executive Leadership Team and the Task Force early in June designed to detect if anything had been missed. In fact, the consensus was that an additional initiative needed to be added to reflect Bridge's concern and focus on staff and mentor education and development.

What is presented here are the finalized efforts of the Strategic Planning Task Force and Extended Leadership Team, along with input from staff and dozens of external stakeholders. These five initiatives serve as a guide for our 2022-2024 Strategic Plan and our future development with specific thought given to experiences and outcomes of the families we are privileged to serve. Detailed action plans and timetables are included in a comprehensive bound volume available upon request.

2022- 2024 Strategic Plan 1-Year Extension (2025)

Strategic Plan Extension Planning Process

In May 2024 the Bridge Communities Board of Directors, in collaboration with the CEO, determined that it would be best to extend the current 2022- 2024 Strategic Plan by one year (January – December 2025). This decision was made for many reasons, including the status of growth in the Transitional Housing Program, the close of the Stability Housing pilot and transition to a permanent Program, the absence of the Director of Data and Evaluation, and finally, the uncertainty of the impact of the federal political elections.

Supported by a grant from Community Memorial Foundation, Bridge Communities hired David Schreier, David Schreier and Associates, to facilitate a board of directors and senior leadership staff retreat and subsequently teamed with the leadership staff to finalize 2025 Initiative priorities and suggested actions.

In August 2024, the Bridge staff and board members were sent a survey that asked to prioritize the current Strategic Plan Initiatives and rank suggested ideas to extend those Initiatives. This was done in recognition of the limited time frame of a one-year extension and to force a hierarchy of ideas and objectives. David then met with Bridge Communities' CEO and Board of Director Chairperson to review the survey outcomes; using this information, the retreat agenda was developed with the goal to explore, in-depth, one Strategic Question for each Strategic Plan Initiative. The board of directors and leadership staff retreat was held in September 2024. A limited external environmental scan was presented so to ground retreat participants in the environment in which we work to achieve our program and agency goals.

David met multiple times in October and November with Bridge Leadership Team to expand upon the learnings from the retreat so to finalize reshaping the current Strategic Initiatives so that they represent the continued organizational evolution. It should be noted that this work is aligned with our deepened equity and belonging principles and practices. Finally, in November and December leadership staff met with their teams to align the extended Strategic Initiatives with the drafted 2025 Departmental Goals.

External Environmental Scan

- More than 55% of DuPage County renters pay more than 30% of their gross income to housing costs; that has increased by 6% in just three years.
- DuPage County's rental costs are the second highest of all counties in Illinois with the median cost for a 2-bedroom apartment at \$1,714. This is 79% higher than Illinois average rental cost of \$958.
- DuPage County Health Department has identified mental health care as a top priority for County residents.
- The number of persons that report to volunteer their time has dropped from 30% to just 23% (2021) causing many agencies to compete for a limited number of volunteers.
- The cost of living is 16% higher in DuPage County than the U.S. average, however the average wages are also higher at annual wage of \$75,510.
- DuPage County poverty rates are rising with more than 61,000 persons living in poverty in our County. Specific populations are disproportionately represented including single women with children, women of color, and persons with a disability. More than 30% of DuPage County households headed by single women with children live poverty.

Key Strategic Initiatives - 2025

The 2025 Strategic Plan extension maintains the **five initiatives** that drive the evolution of our programming, community engagement, finances, data, and human development. The following are identified priorities within those Strategic Initiatives to be implemented in 2025.

Initiative 1. Evolve the Bridge Transitional Housing Program

- Evolve the Stability Program to refine outcome measurements and pilot partnerships with community-based agencies to expand access to housing services
- Formalize Direct Mentor Model with the dedicated staffing and the development of mentor best practices, mentor recruitment practices, and mentor supports
- Determine what needs of current clients could be met by their alumni peers, and develop programming to meet said needs

Initiative 2. Drive and Expand Community Engagement

- Evolve the agency mission, vision, and value statements to incorporate adopted equity and belonging principles and practices, as well as draft an equity statement that demonstrates our commitment to creating a just organization
- Increase our Program Partner and mentor base to include more who identify as BIPOC and are bi-lingual

Initiative 3. Increase Our Financial Sustainability

- Formalize the Associates Board with the adoption of a governing charter, leadership team, and outreach and fundraising goals
- Complete the silent phase of the Opening New Doors Investment Campaign by securing \$3.5 million in pledged commitments
- Leverage cash reserves to strengthen the organization's financial, housing, and staffing future

Initiative 4. Build Data and Evaluation

- Build internal capacity and improve user experience of data systems for increased accessibility and accuracy of data review and reporting
- Establish organizational strategy for thought leadership and sharing of key learnings

Initiative 5. Sustain and Develop Our People

- Embed a comprehensive organizational Learning and Development Strategy into all mentor trainings to enhance mentors' knowledge, attitudes, and skills of equity concepts, relationship building, and overall improved client outcomes
- Expand existing engagement opportunities and feedback loops, as well as explore new mediums to cultivate & reward a culture that demonstrates the agency's values & professional core competencies