

Is your community a Bridges community?

Use the following thinking tool to evaluate the developmental stage of the Bridges initiative in your community.

Bridges communities thinking tool: Criteria for Bridges community designation

by Philip DeVol and Treasure McKenzie

How do you know when your Bridges initiative is a Bridges community?
Good question!

Bridges communities come in all shapes and sizes; the catalysts, backbone organizations, and sectors involved are never exactly the same. A Bridges community can be in a rural town or county, a small city, a midsize city, or a metropolitan area. The development pattern suggests that Bridges communities grow most easily in small and midsize cities. And they can be in different stages of development.

And yet, there comes a time when you wonder whether the term “Bridges community” fits your situation. You need to ask yourself whether you have critical mass, whether you have success stories, and whether you are acknowledged by the community at large. Has your initiative formed a learning community by sharing its own best practices with others? If the answer to most of these questions is yes, you could make a good argument for claiming the title of Bridges community.

For a deeper look into the “designation” of a Bridges community, we examined 20+ years of experience for patterns in established Bridges communities.

We have found that most communities progress through three stages of development on their journey. We created the following checklist to give you an idea of where your initiative stands. We want this to be celebratory of how far you have come and aspirational in terms of what your future story might be.

In the following survey, check the items that have been achieved.

Bridges Out of Poverty

Level 1

Critical mass

Certified Bridges trainers are authorized to train the staff of their own organization and the staff of partnering organizations.

Does your community have enough certified Bridges trainers to deliver workshops to most organizations with an interest in poverty issues? Check one:
Yes **No**

Have most of your partnering organizations been trained? Check one:
Yes **No**

Certified Getting Ahead facilitators are available to conduct workshops for people in poverty referred by partnering organizations.

Are there are enough certified Getting Ahead facilitators to cover Getting Ahead classes several times a year? Check one:
Yes **No**

Getting Ahead graduates must be supported post-Getting Ahead as they work their SMART goals.

Is there continued support for the Getting Ahead graduates and assistance with breaking down barriers at the institutional and community levels? Check one:
Yes **No**

Does your community support Getting Ahead graduates for at least two years after graduation? Check one:
Yes **No**

The partners who have been trained in Bridges and Getting Ahead form a collaborative, often called a Bridges steering committee (BSC).

Have you established a backbone organization or BSC to manage administrative tasks? Check one:
Yes **No**

Does the BSC meet regularly to expand the work in the community? Check one:
Yes **No**

Do you maintain a database of all who have been trained and show an interest in Bridges and Getting Ahead? Check one:
Yes **No**

Do you collect data on Getting Ahead graduates using CharityTracker and other outcome indicators needed locally? Check one:
Yes **No**

Level 2

Engagement

A per capita representation of all classes, races, and political persuasions needs to be at the planning and decision-making tables.

Are all classes at the planning and decision-making tables?

Check one:

Yes No

Are all races at the planning and decision-making tables?

Check one:

Yes No

Are all political persuasions at the planning and decision-making tables?

Check one:

Yes No

Institutional applications in the BSC

Institutions that are part of a Bridges collaborative encourage staff members to apply the concepts at two levels: (1) individual staff interactions with people/clients in poverty and (2) making changes in environment, procedures, policies, and program design that better serve clients.

Are all staff, volunteers, and board members of each organization of the BSC trained in Bridges?

Check one:

Yes No

Of the organizations in the BSC, have most conducted a customer life cycle and made appropriate changes in environment, procedures, program design, and policies to better serve people experiencing poverty?

Check one:

Yes No

Of the organizations in the BSC, have most documented their outcomes?

Check one:

Yes No

Sector engagement

The more sectors involved in a Bridges initiative, the greater the impact on the community and the more sustainable the initiative.

Check the sectors in your community that have been introduced to Bridges concepts:

- | | | |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Early childhood | <input type="checkbox"/> Education
(K-12 and postsecondary) | <input type="checkbox"/> Employers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Faith | <input type="checkbox"/> Family | <input type="checkbox"/> Food |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Government | <input type="checkbox"/> Health | <input type="checkbox"/> Housing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Legal | <input type="checkbox"/> Mental health | <input type="checkbox"/> Social services |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Substance abuse | <input type="checkbox"/> Transportation | <input type="checkbox"/> Workforce |

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Bridges Out of Poverty

Level 2 (continued)

Bridges steering committee (BSC) activities

Bridges initiatives need a well-connected, powerful board that is forward-thinking.

Is the BSC made up of all classes, races, sectors, and political persuasions? Check one:
Yes **No**

Does the BSC conduct learning-community activities such as sharing changes made at the institutional level that reduced barriers and smoothed pathways for people experiencing poverty, expanding skills of Bridges trainers and Getting Ahead facilitators, making improvements in support systems for Getting Ahead graduates, and facilitating book studies? Check one:
Yes **No**

Does the BSC obtain regular publicity about the initiative? Check one:
Yes **No**

Does the BSC work with a university or another entity to conduct research on Getting Ahead? Check one:
Yes **No**

Level 3

Policy and advocacy

A Bridges community aims to make policy changes that benefit people who are building stability and resources and yet are running into barriers beyond their individual power to overcome.

Has the BSC been responsible for policy changes at the community level? Check one:
Yes **No**

Has the BSC been responsible for policy changes at the state level? Check one:
Yes **No**

Community impact

A Bridges community should be well-known as an important element necessary to building a community where everyone can live well.

Do the media, civic organizations, political organizations, community organizations, philanthropists, and funders recognize the BSC as a necessary element in building a sustainable community? Check one:
Yes **No**

The Joy of Working Across Class Lines and Some Finer Points to Consider

We began with the question, “How do you know when your initiative is a Bridges community?”

Our answer? When in Level 1 you created a Bridges steering committee.

These collaboratives go by many names, such as Marion Matters, Impact Coalition, Getting Ahead OKC Collaborative, and Omaha Bridges. You will note that a lot of work has to be done to reach that goal. Congratulations! But, looking forward, we encourage you to build a Level 3 initiative. You will find that many barriers Getting Ahead graduates face come from the policy level. Our work is not done until we can be effective at all levels.

We suggest you begin with the end in mind. This thinking tool will help you visualize the future of your initiative. It follows a common sequence in the development of existing Bridges communities. You are on the same journey, and we hope this can help you build your future story. Use this thinking tool frequently and celebrate your successes!

The national Bridges community is supported by aha! Process through its books, workshops, and consultants. Some Bridges communities have formed statewide learning communities with the aim of exchanging best practices and influencing policies at the state level.