My Summer at LISC-Chicago

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This summer I was given the opportunity to work with LISC Chicago. LISC stands for Local Initiatives Support Coalition. LISC is a national organization that aims to help communities connect to the resources they need so that they can grow in all aspects as a healthy and strong community. Areas like housing, schooling, safety, and greater economic development, are just a few of the focus areas of LISC. LISC has offices across the United States in places like California, Texas, Michigan, and New York.

LISC functions through the funding of banks, corporations, and government agencies to then provide loans and grants to organizations already active in the neighborhoods LISC is trying to support. LISC is passionate about using community-based partnerships. This means that LISC wants to empower the community and preexisting agencies to dictate what they would like to see change in the neighborhoods and how they envision the change coming about.

LISC Chicago has four core values it hopes to instill within its organization. These values include relationships, stewardship, coordinated action, and commitment. Through my time at LISC Chicago, it was easy to see these values promoted through everything the staff did. By having meetings with community leaders, philanthropic events held in underprivileged neighborhoods, or community forums, LISC always seemed to go above and beyond to ensure they were reaching their goals. It was inspiring to see just how passionate and invested the staff were in
following the mission of, “connecting neighborhoods to resources they need to become stronger and healthier”.

In my position at LISC I was mostly working with the Financial Opportunities team under the Director Jennifer McClain. One of the key functions of the Financial Opportunities team was to help promote and develop Financial Opportunity Centers (FOCs). There are currently ten FOCs located around the city. LISC staff does not run these centers; rather LISC helps with the management and support of the centers. One way that LISC helps with the support of the FOCs is providing a model for how to organize and deliver services. The overall goal of the FOCs are to provide individuals in the community with the opportunity to become more financially stable and gain better habits regarding finances. The centers look to accomplish this goal by providing clients with career and employment coaching, financial coaching, and income supports. These three services are all integrated, meaning that a client will receive all of the resources provided by the center, even if they are just looking for employment coaching. LISC feels that there is a benefit in providing all of the services in order to build stronger long-term relationships with the clients and tackle every issue that they may be facing. LISC makes sure that the FOCs take a coaching approach with clients so that the clients have more personal responsibility and accountability to make changes in their financial lives.

I was tasked with helping LISC gain better insight into the onboarding and training of new staff at the FOCs around Chicago. LISC wanted to better understand how new staff was learning about the FOC model and how the transition was when they began taking on work within the FOC. This meant that I spent a lot of time out
at different centers talking to workers in a variety of Chicago neighborhoods. To be specific, I ended up visiting all ten FOCs and interviewed 31 people about their hiring and onboarding experience. I was able to gain insight into their individual backgrounds and how they ended up in the field, as well as look at the different ways FOCs were being run while still trying to deliver a similar product.

The ability to travel to different FOCs was really eye-opening, not only because I was in neighborhoods like Englewood and North Lawndale, which I never could have imagined going to, but also because I met the most passionate people. It was obvious to see that the workers at varying FOCs cared deeply about their clients as well as trying to improve the state of Chicago’s most dangerous and poverty-ridden areas. Through my time in some of Chicago’s neediest neighborhoods, I saw first hand the gross neglect of the surrounding properties and minimal opportunities for work within those same communities. It was such a meaningful and purposeful opportunity for me to get to see first hand other people’s reality. It made me more eager and passionate to help insure that these neighborhoods get the assistance they need to grow into thriving and valued communities.

When not conducting interviews for LISC, I did a multitude of other projects around the office assisting Jennifer. In addition I was given the opportunity to attend meetings with LISC to talk with alderman, community organizations, FOC peer meetings, etc. It gave me great insight into some of the logistics of LISC’s programs and future programs. At the end of my time, I was able to make some recommendations on how I feel that LISC could better assist the FOCs with bringing in new staff. I was able to make these recommendations based on my interviews. I
I put together a presentation, as well as an example of a possible introduction of LISC that could be given to new FOC staff, as one of the findings was that FOC staff has a hard time understanding how LISC is tied into the FOCs and the exact role that they play.

I believe that a lot of what I experienced this summer at LISC relates to the themes of “Badger Reach”. The first theme that I saw was “interconnectedness”, in the sense that when you are looking at a community, there are so many variables that are interconnected and need to be taken into consideration. For example, things like criminal record and employment are so interconnected when looking at how to raise employment levels in a community. If you know an area has a large population with a criminal background, you need to look into bringing an employer that will hire people with that type of background. If you fail to realize how the two are connected you could bring in a company that will end up not hiring any of your local population, which does not help with the unemployment problem.

The theme of “relationships matter” is so important as well. At LISC, it is vital that relationships are strong and healthy. Not only do you need to have a relationship with the communities you are trying to serve so you can be of greatest assistance, but the staff at the FOCs also reiterated the importance of relationships. At the FOCs, staff and clients are often discussing very sensitive, emotional topics. When staff and clients do not have a good relationship with each other, there is little room for growth.

Finally, the theme of “place matters” is something that LISC stresses constantly. Neighborhoods around Chicago are so different and diverse. When
looking at how to best service communities you cannot come up with a one size fits all Band-Aid. You have to look at each place and community as an individual entity with its own strengths and weaknesses. When you grasp that each neighborhood is going to be different, you will better be able to service them.

As far as the goals of Badger Reach, I strongly believe that I was able to accomplish many of them while at LISC. I was given the great opportunity to directly engage with communities, which is where I feel I took away a greater understanding of Chicago and how it is perceived. There is such negativity around so many of Chicago’s neighborhoods. While there are significant issues, by personally engaging with the communities themselves, I now have a greater understanding and a greater sense of hope that I can help make a difference in those very communities.

Throughout my time at LISC I was personally making short and long term goals, but was also able to see LISC do the same. With their goals for different programs and projects, I was able to see how an organization can go through the goal making and assessing process.

I would recommend pursuing an internship with LISC Chicago. The organization has a welcoming environment and is run extremely well. As a native of the Chicago area, it was great to work in a non-profit that was doing such impactful work in an area I love dearly. Some skills that I would recommend having for this position include: ability to work independently; conduct research, ability to remain organized, and ability to communicate well in person and via email.