



COMMUNITY MOUNTAIN

Community Intelligence Series — Research Paper No. 5

The Connected Community

From Collaboration to a Shared Operating Framework

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“Communities don’t necessarily suffer from a shortage of good organizations. They suffer from the absence of connective infrastructure between them.”

Connecting people in need with people who serve.

LOVE • Unity • Hope • Justice

Abstract

Communities often possess strong organizations, committed leaders, capable professionals, generous volunteers, public resources, and extensive programs while still struggling with persistent challenges that cross institutional boundaries. This paper argues that the missing ingredient is often not another organization or program, but connective infrastructure: a shared operating framework that can help independent people and institutions recognize relationships, coordinate action, preserve agency, observe outcomes, and learn together. The argument is grounded in evidence from education, workforce readiness, social determinants of health, social connection, systems thinking, cross-sector collaboration, and network governance. The paper does not claim that the proposed Connected Community model has already been proven at scale. Rather, the evidence establishes the problem; the Connected Community proposes an architecture for addressing it; and implementation must ultimately test the proposition through measurement, learning, and replication.

Research position: The evidence establishes the problem. The Connected Community proposes an architecture for addressing it. Its effectiveness must ultimately be demonstrated through implementation, measurement, learning, and replication.

The Six Movements

- 1. The Paradox of Plenty** — When resources and results do not match.
- 2. Why Collaboration Isn't Enough** — Collaboration is valuable and necessary, but it is not persistent infrastructure.
- 3. The Fragmentation Problem** — People live integrated lives in fragmented systems.
- 4. From Organizations to Relationships** — Community becomes visible when relationships become visible.
- 5. The Shared Operating Framework** — Coordination without control; accountability without domination.
- 6. From Connected Community to Community Intelligence** — A connected community can learn as a community.

Introduction: It Takes a Village

Communities do not necessarily suffer from a shortage of good organizations. They often have many of them: schools, churches, nonprofits, healthcare providers, businesses, colleges and universities, civic organizations, recreation programs, foundations, governments, neighborhood groups, volunteers, and service organizations, all working toward the well-being of many of the same people and families.

Yet profound problems persist. Children struggle academically. Families experience poverty and housing instability. Employers identify gaps in important dimensions of workforce readiness. Transportation separates people from jobs, education, healthcare, and opportunity. Addiction damages individuals and relationships. Domestic violence creates trauma extending far beyond the immediate incident. Crime, trafficking, drugs, exploitation, and violence can destabilize families and neighborhoods.

These conditions rarely exist independently. Healthy People 2030 defines social determinants of health as the conditions in which people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age, and identifies housing, transportation, education, job opportunities, income, food access, violence, language, literacy, and

healthcare among the factors affecting health and quality of life [1]. The CDC likewise describes systems problems as dynamic, multi-factor challenges involving multiple organizations, people, infrastructure, policies, spending decisions, human actions, trust, goodwill, and other interacting influences [2].

In other words, the complexity communities experience every day is not imaginary. The complexity is real.

Meanwhile, communities continue creating programs to address these problems. Many of those programs do excellent work. This creates a paradox: a community may possess substantial institutional capacity, professional expertise, charitable resources, public investment, volunteer energy, and goodwill—and still struggle to translate those assets into sustained improvement in people’s lives.

Perhaps something is missing between the efforts.

Communities don’t necessarily suffer from a shortage of good organizations. They suffer from the absence of connective infrastructure between them.

There is an older and more familiar way of expressing essentially the same insight: It takes a village.

The phrase endures because it recognizes something fundamental. We need one another. Families matter. Individual responsibility matters. Personal freedom matters. Institutions matter. But human beings live within networks of relationships.

Modern society presents a paradox of its own. We possess extraordinary technological connectivity while often experiencing significant relational disconnection. The U.S. Surgeon General’s social-connection initiative describes connection as important to individual, community, and societal health; its materials report that social isolation is associated with a 29 percent higher risk of premature mortality [3].

Connectivity is not community.

What infrastructure does a community need to function as a community rather than merely as a collection of organizations?

Beneath that question lies an even more human one: Can we use the capabilities of the modern world to recover some of the relational strength of the village?

1. The Paradox of Plenty

When Resources and Results Do Not Match

When communities encounter difficult problems, the natural response is often to ask what is missing: another program, another nonprofit, another grant, another committee, another initiative. Sometimes the answer is yes. But another question deserves equal attention: What already exists, and why are all these resources not producing the collective results we hope to see?

Consider education. The 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress reported that 31 percent of fourth-grade students performed at or above NAEP Proficient in reading [4]. That figure should be interpreted carefully: NAEP Proficient is a demanding national achievement standard and is not synonymous with a state

definition of grade-level proficiency. But the number remains a sobering indicator of the scale of the academic challenge.

The circumstances surrounding educational achievement also extend beyond the classroom. A 2025 systematic review synthesizing 136 studies found socioeconomic status associated with academic achievement, language ability, and executive function, with mechanisms and protective factors involving stress, cognitive stimulation, family support, teacher-student relationships, schools, and neighborhood context [5]. Poverty does not mechanically determine a child’s outcome. The research instead reinforces a systems insight: educational outcomes develop within a web of relationships and conditions.

The pattern becomes tangible locally. Virginia School Quality Profiles report that in 2025-26, 44 percent of economically disadvantaged eighth graders in Lynchburg City Public Schools passed the English reading assessment, compared with 69 percent of students who were not economically disadvantaged—a 25-percentage-point difference within the same school division [6]. These figures do not explain why any individual student succeeded or struggled. They do tell us that a narrow classroom-only interpretation is incomplete.

Educational preparedness continues beyond high school. NCES reports that among first-year undergraduates in 2019-20, 31.4 percent said they had taken remedial coursework at some point, while 15.4 percent took remedial coursework during that academic year [7]. The readiness challenge therefore follows students into postsecondary institutions.

It also follows them toward employment. NACE’s Job Outlook 2025 survey found that employers rated communication and critical thinking as very or extremely important at 96.1 percent each and professionalism at 89.4 percent. Yet only 53.5 percent rated recent graduates very or extremely proficient in communication, 55.9 percent in critical thinking, and 50.3 percent in professionalism [8]. These findings should not be used to condemn a generation. They show a meaningful gap between competencies employers value and those they believe many new graduates demonstrate.

Indicator	Finding	Why it matters
4th-grade reading	31%	U.S. students at or above NAEP Proficient, 2024.
Lynchburg 8th-grade reading	44% vs. 69%	Economically disadvantaged vs. not economically disadvantaged pass rates, 2025-26.
College remediation	31.4%	First-year undergraduates reporting they had ever taken remedial coursework, 2019-20.
Professionalism gap	89.4% / 50.3%	Employer-rated importance vs. recent-graduate proficiency in NACE Job Outlook 2025.

Now consider the trajectory: early literacy; academic achievement; high-school preparation; postsecondary readiness; career readiness; employment; income; housing; family stability. The institutions encountering these stages are different. The life is continuous.

A school encounters one portion. A college encounters another. An employer encounters another. A workforce organization may encounter another. Each may respond appropriately to what it sees. But who sees the trajectory?

The paradox of plenty: A community can possess abundant resources while lacking the infrastructure necessary to connect those resources coherently with people, relationships, needs, opportunities, and outcomes.

2. Why Collaboration Isn't Enough

Necessary, Valuable—and Incomplete

Communities have not ignored fragmentation. Leaders form coalitions, convene stakeholders, coordinate events, create task forces, develop referral networks, share information, enter partnerships, and sign agreements. These activities can strengthen trust, reduce unnecessary duplication, and create opportunities for collective action. They should continue.

But the evidence cautions against assuming that collaboration itself necessarily produces improved population outcomes. A systematic review of 36 reviews examining collaborations between healthcare and non-healthcare organizations found little convincing evidence that collaboration alone improved population health outcomes. Evidence concerning health services was mixed, and evidence concerning spending and resource use was limited and mixed [9].

That finding is not an argument against collaboration. It suggests something more useful: collaboration may be necessary without being sufficient.

A meeting ends. A committee adjourns. A referral is made. A spreadsheet becomes outdated. Leadership changes. A grant ends. Organizations return to their own programs, information systems, reporting requirements, funding sources, measurements, and institutional priorities.

The relationship among organizations may exist socially without existing operationally.

Collaboration is an activity. Connection is infrastructure.

Collaboration asks organizations to work together. Connection provides a persistent means through which they can.

Human relationships remain indispensable. No framework can substitute for trust, empathy, judgment, compassion, friendship, or leadership. The purpose of infrastructure is not to replace those things. It is to help them work.

The challenge is not to replace collaboration. It is to give collaboration somewhere to live.

3. The Fragmentation Problem

People Live Integrated Lives in Fragmented Systems

Human lives are not divided into institutional categories. Institutions necessarily specialize. People do not.

Education connects with family stability. Health connects with housing, nutrition, income, transportation, environment, relationships, and opportunity. Employment connects with education, health, childcare, transportation, skills, maturity, and personal stability. Housing connects with income, employment, health, transportation, family circumstances, neighborhoods, and public policy. Addiction can affect health, employment, housing, relationships, education, public safety, and criminal justice. Domestic violence can affect physical safety, mental health, children, housing, employment, education, finances, and relationships.

These relationships are not simple equations. A cause in one circumstance may be a consequence in another. Several conditions can reinforce one another. Protective relationships can interrupt destructive patterns. A relatively small intervention at the right moment can alter a trajectory.

The complexity is the point.

The Seven Towers of Community

One way to begin comprehending this complexity is to view community life through seven broad domains:

Fellowship	relationships, belonging, faith and social support
Education	learning, preparation and lifelong development
Workforce & Economic Development	employment, skills, mobility and opportunity
Healthcare	physical, behavioral and population well-being
Arts & Culture	expression, identity, creativity and shared meaning
Sports & Recreation	activity, mentorship, teamwork and belonging
Governance & Civic Engagement	public systems, civic life, policy and shared stewardship

The Towers do not eliminate complexity. They organize it.

A young person may attend school within Education, play basketball within Sports & Recreation, participate in a church within Fellowship, receive care within Healthcare, discover a gift for music within Arts & Culture, live in a household shaped by Workforce & Economic Development, and be affected by decisions within Governance & Civic Engagement. That is not seven different lives. It is one life.

The Ripple Effect

Consider something as ordinary as transportation. A parent's car breaks down. At first this appears to be a transportation problem. But perhaps the parent cannot reliably get to work. Income falls. Rent becomes harder to pay. Healthcare appointments are postponed. Getting children to school becomes difficult. After-school participation stops. Household stress increases. Employment becomes endangered. Housing becomes less secure.

This example is hypothetical, but the underlying relationships are not. Healthy People 2030 explicitly identifies safe housing, transportation, education, job opportunities, income, food access, violence, language, literacy, and healthcare access as interacting conditions affecting well-being [1].

Which Tower owns the problem? None of them. Yet several may be affected by it.

Now consider a child struggling to read. The measurement appears in Education, but surrounding circumstances might involve attendance, housing stability, nutrition, vision, family stress, transportation, enrichment opportunities, or relationships with trusted adults. The assessment may appear on the school's report. But educating and preparing a child for life has never been the work of a school alone. It takes a village.

When the Village Cannot See Itself

One organization provides tutoring. Another provides mentoring. Another addresses food insecurity. Another provides recreation. Another works with the parent on employment. A church provides support. A volunteer provides transportation. Each may accurately report that it delivered a service.

But different questions remain. Did these efforts reinforce one another? Was an important need missed? Did transportation prevent participation? Did the relationship with a coach become unexpectedly important? Did employment improve household stability? Did academic performance improve? Did progress continue after a particular program ended?

Who can see the relationships among what happened?

The village may be active. The village may be generous. Individual organizations may be highly effective. But the village may still be unable to see itself. That is a problem of connective infrastructure.

4. From Organizations to Relationships

Recovering Community Through Connection

Traditional service systems often begin with institutions and programs. A connected community begins with people and relationships.

A person belongs to a household. The household exists within a neighborhood. A child attends a school. A parent works for an employer. A family may participate in a church. A young person joins a team. A nonprofit provides tutoring. A physician provides care. A volunteer becomes a mentor. A workforce organization helps someone obtain employment. A university creates an opportunity. A neighbor gives someone a ride.

Individually these may appear to be separate encounters. Together they form a network of relationships.

The organization is not always the most important unit of community understanding. The relationship may be.

Relationships connect people to people, people to organizations, organizations to organizations, needs to services, volunteers to opportunities, resources to needs, interventions to outcomes, and present circumstances to future possibilities.

Once relationships become visible, communities can ask better questions: Who is connected? Who is isolated? Where are relationships strong? Where are they missing? What resources remain disconnected from needs? What opportunities remain disconnected from people? Where are organizations unknowingly working toward the same outcome? Where does responsibility disappear between institutions? Which relationships appear to strengthen lives?

This relational perspective provides the conceptual foundation for a Community Relationship Framework (CRF). Its purpose is not to reduce human beings to records. Quite the opposite. It recognizes that the record alone is insufficient because the relationships matter.

Need and Serve

Traditional service systems can unintentionally divide communities into two categories: those who need help and those who provide it. Real community is more complicated. Sometimes we need. Sometimes we serve. Often we do both.

A person needing transportation today may mentor a young person tomorrow. A retired executive may need companionship while possessing decades of experience valuable to an entrepreneur. A teenager receiving tutoring may be wonderful at helping younger children. A family receiving assistance may possess skills, relationships, knowledge, and generosity that strengthen its neighborhood.

In a connected community, people are not defined by what they need. They are also recognized for what they have to give.

This is reciprocity. Reciprocity helps transform service into community. Community Mountain expresses the idea simply: Connecting people in need with people who serve. The framework does not command the service. It enables the connection. People choose what happens next.

5. The Shared Operating Framework

Coordination Without Control

Understanding relationships is not enough. The village must also be capable of connecting and acting. That requires a shared operating framework.

The word shared must be understood carefully. Shared does not mean centralized. It does not mean one organization controls the others. It does not mean government, a nonprofit, foundation, technology company, or any other institution becomes the authority over community life. It does not require organizations to surrender their missions, identities, governance, expertise, or independence. And it does not require individuals or families to surrender agency.

Research on organizational network governance supports caution about one-size-fits-all governance. A 2023 systematic review found that no single network-governance mode is best in all circumstances; effective design depends on problem structure and environmental, structural, and relational conditions. The literature also identifies tensions such as efficiency versus inclusiveness, accountability versus autonomy, flexibility versus stability, and centralization versus decentralization [10].

Coordination without control. Accountability without domination.

- Participation over compulsion — people and organizations participate because connection helps them accomplish purposes they value.
- Agency and dignity — people are participants in community life, not objects being processed through a system.
- Freedom to serve — community capacity grows when people freely offer time, talents, knowledge, relationships, experience, and resources.
- Specialization with connection — organizations continue doing what they do well while gaining better ways to connect with others.
- Relationships before bureaucracy — infrastructure should make meaningful human connection easier, not bury it beneath additional administrative burden.

Need → Relationship → Service → Responsibility → Outcome → Learning

The framework must also work in the other direction. A volunteer has something to give. An employer has an opportunity. A church has people ready to serve. A business has expertise. A university has knowledge. A coach has influence. An artist has talent. A donor has resources. A neighbor has a truck. Someone, somewhere, needs what someone else is willing to give. Connective infrastructure makes the relationship possible.

CORE: It's About Love

This brings us to the foundation beneath the framework. Why connect people at all? Why care whether a child succeeds? Why help someone find employment? Why respond when a family experiences crisis? Why mentor, volunteer, share expertise, or care about a neighbor we may never have met?

No database can answer those questions. No algorithm can manufacture compassion. No operating framework can compel genuine community. There must be something beneath the machinery.

The CORE Foundation—Crucial Organs for Regional Empowerment—expresses that foundation through four principles: LOVE, Unity, Hope, Justice.

It is about love—not love as sentimentality, but love expressed through action: love that notices, listens, recognizes dignity, gives, receives, introduces one person to another, and refuses to reduce a human being to a case, statistic, client, consumer, employee, patient, student, or problem.

Unity recognizes that we are connected. Hope recognizes that present circumstances need not determine destiny. Justice calls us to recognize when people are denied dignity, safety, opportunity, or a fair chance to flourish. Love gives us a reason to act.

A connected community does not compel people to care for one another. It makes it easier for people who care to act.

The objective is not machinery for managing people. It is connective infrastructure that helps people care for one another.

From Proposition to Implementation

The Community Mountain Impact Framework (CMIF) represents one emerging implementation of this Connected Community proposition. Its purpose is not simply to collect information. It provides a structure through which needs, service, relationships, organizations, volunteers, resources, responsibilities, and outcomes can become connected.

The Seven Towers help organize complexity. CORE establishes the human foundation. The Community Relationship Framework makes relationships understandable. CMIF provides an operating structure through which relationships can become actionable.

The research reviewed here establishes substantial evidence for interconnected community conditions, the importance of relationships, the limitations of institutional fragmentation, and the challenges inherent in cross-sector collaboration and network governance. It does not establish that CMIF has already solved those problems. That claim must be earned through implementation and evidence.

The evidence establishes the problem. The Connected Community proposes an architecture for addressing it. Its effectiveness must ultimately be demonstrated through implementation, measurement, learning, and replication.

CMIF provides a structure through which that proposition can be tested. What worked? What did not? For whom? Under what circumstances? Which relationships mattered? What unintended consequences appeared? What should change? That is not a weakness in the proposition. It is how the proposition becomes researchable.

6. From Connected Community to Community Intelligence

Helping the Village Learn

Once meaningful connections persist, something new becomes possible. Relationships can be understood over time. Activity can be viewed in context. Outcomes can be connected with interventions. Patterns can emerge. Gaps can become visible. Community assets can be discovered. The village can begin learning from its own experience.

This is the beginning of Community Intelligence.

Community Intelligence is not simply more data. It is not surveillance. It is not merely analytics. And it is not a central authority deciding what is best for everyone else. It is the developing capacity of a community to create shared understanding from relationships, activity, experience, assets, needs, and outcomes—and use that understanding to improve future decisions.

Organizations → Collaboration → Connection → Coordination → Shared Understanding → Community Intelligence

Indicator	Finding	Why it matters
Organizations	Capacity	People and institutions possess specialized strengths.
Collaboration	Cooperation	Partners work together around shared concerns.
Connection	Continuity	Relationships persist beyond individual meetings and referrals.
Coordination	Aligned action	Needs, capacity, responsibilities, and activity can reinforce one another.
Shared understanding	Insight	The community sees more of the whole.
Community Intelligence	Learning	Experience informs better future action.

A connected community can therefore ask better questions. Not only: How many people did we serve? But: What changed? Not only: Did our program succeed? But: What happened beyond the boundaries of the program? Not only: Which organization deserves credit? But: Which relationships contributed to the outcome? Not only: Where is the need? But: Who has something to give? Not only: What happened? But: What can we learn together?

This last question is especially important because the research warns us against assuming that connection itself guarantees success. Collaboration can fail. Networks can become bureaucratic. Strong relationships can become exclusive. Centralization can diminish autonomy. Decentralization without accountability can diffuse responsibility. Data can be misunderstood. Good intentions can produce unintended consequences.

The Connected Community must therefore be capable not merely of acting, but of learning, questioning, correcting, and adapting.

A collection of organizations can generate information. A connected community can learn as a community.

Conclusion: Bringing the Village Forward

The evidence examined in this paper does not point toward a simple solution. It points toward complexity.

Education interacts with socioeconomic circumstances. Employment interacts with education and health. Transportation affects access to healthcare and opportunity. Housing affects health and stability. Relationships affect well-being. Organizations operate within networks. Collaboration can help but does not guarantee improved outcomes. Governance matters. Agency matters. Context matters. Relationships matter.

This should make us cautious about grand solutions. It should not make us passive.

Communities remain filled with people doing good work: teachers teach; parents nurture; pastors serve; doctors heal; coaches mentor; artists inspire; employers create opportunity; public servants protect and respond; volunteers give; nonprofits serve; universities educate and discover; neighbors help neighbors; families persevere.

The argument of The Connected Community is not that these people and institutions have failed. Nor is it that another institution should take control of them. The argument is that modern community life has become too interconnected for even excellent institutions to understand or address its challenges entirely within their own boundaries.

The needs ripple. Relationships cross boundaries. Consequences accumulate over time. Resources exist alongside unmet needs. People willing to serve exist alongside people needing help. And too often they remain disconnected.

For generations, people have understood a simple truth: It takes a village.

The village once possessed much of its connective infrastructure naturally. People knew one another. They knew who needed help. They knew who had something to give. They made introductions. They shared meals. They taught skills. They watched children. They gave rides. They cared for neighbors.

The past should not be romanticized. Earlier communities had exclusions, injustices, limitations, and failures of their own. But something valuable remains within the idea of the village: relationship, belonging, reciprocity, responsibility, and voluntary service.

The challenge is bringing those qualities forward into a society characterized by greater scale, mobility, specialization, complexity, and technological capability. Modern connective infrastructure may allow an ancient human idea to operate in a new environment.

The Seven Towers help us see the complexity. CORE reminds us why it matters. The Community Relationship Framework helps us understand relationships. CMIF provides an emerging mechanism through which those relationships can become actionable. Community Intelligence allows the village to learn.

But none of these is the destination. Community is.

The Connected Community is not an attempt to replace the village with technology. It is an effort to recover what made the village powerful and give those human qualities connective infrastructure capable of functioning effectively and efficiently in modern life.

The technology should remain in the background. Organizations should remain free. Individuals and families should retain agency. Participation should be voluntary. Accountability should remain meaningful. Learning should be continuous. And service should remain something profoundly human: one person freely choosing to help another.

Perhaps the future of community is not something entirely new. Perhaps it is an ancient idea made possible again in a new way.

**Someone has a need. Someone else has something to give.
Help them find one another.**

It's about love.

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About the Community Intelligence Series

The Community Intelligence Series explores how communities can better perceive needs, understand relationships, coordinate resources, mobilize people, measure outcomes, learn from experience, and adapt while preserving human agency and organizational independence. Earlier papers introduced Community Intelligence, its foundational principles, and the Community Relationship Framework.

Community Mountain — Connecting people in need with people who serve.