

# GEO Member Story



**LIVING CITIES**  
INNOVATE • INVEST • LEAD

*Living Cities, a collaborative of 22 foundations and financial institutions working to improve the lives of low-income people and the cities in which they live, is open sourcing social change by sharing what they are learning through grants, investments, research, and convenings in real time and connecting leaders working to solve similar problems.*

For the past seven years, under the leadership of President & CEO Ben Hecht, Living Cities has been on a learning journey to explore what it takes to create an environment for experimentation and knowledge sharing.

Working to solve complex problems, such as urban poverty, often requires experimentation — and with any experiment, some will succeed and some will fail.

“If we created a culture where we were completely open with one another about what was working and what was not working — we could accelerate the pace at which social change happens and find solutions which have meaningful impact much more quickly,” said Alison Gold, Living Cities’ assistant director of knowledge & impact.

Thus began a three year long culture shift to make what Living Cities staff and members were learning open and accessible to others and in as close to real time as possible. At the time, their traditional communications model was unable to fully facilitate this.

“The people who are doing the work, are the people who must be sharing the reflections,” said Nadia Owusu, Living Cities’ senior associate of knowledge & organizational development.

In 2011, Living Cities launched a blog, providing a space for every staff member to take an active role in sharing firsthand what they were learning, what assumptions were being challenged and what questions were emerging for them that they didn’t know the answers to — all in real time.

“The belief was that if you’re hitting those types of questions, others are too and together you can get closer to good solutions for them,” Gold said.

Initially, uptake was slow as sharing ideas and insights before they are fully evaluated and proven goes against most professional training. However, as Living Cities’ internal culture began to support trust and empowered staff to embed reflection into every day work, the number of annual posts increased tenfold in just one year. Staff began to see the value behind open knowledge sharing and how it can be incredibly helpful in crowd sourcing ideas and connecting leaders working on similar problems.

In 2010, Living Cities launched The Integration Initiative. Through The Integration Initiative, Living Cities and its members are providing a package of \$85 million in grants, commercial loans and debt from their Catalyst Fund to five American cities that are challenging traditional ways of doing business to improve access to education, housing, health care, transit and jobs for low-income residents. Earlier this month, Living Cities announced the expansion of The Integration Initiative to include planning grants for five additional cities.

In developing the capital strategy for The Integration Initiative, Living Cities relied on conventional wisdom in the field. As the Living Cities team moved from plan to implementation, it quickly became clear that the conventional wisdom was built on incorrect assumptions about the capacity in places. Faced with the realization that one of their flagship programs had been built upon an incorrect assumption, Living Cities iterated on its requirements and design of the capital strategy, and shared the critique publicly.

“The power of sharing emergent learning was incredibly helpful here,” Gold said. This paved way for a new conversation in the field on what Living Cities calls the capital absorption capacity of places.

Today, Living Cities is engaging their members and local leaders as they develop a research agenda and tools to address capital absorption capacity. As defined by Living Cities, capital absorption capacity is the ability of communities to make effective use of different forms of capital to provide needed goods and services to underserved communities.

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To find out more about Living Cities, including The Integration Initiative and collaborative efforts around improving the lives of low-income people and the cities where they live, visit [www.livingcities.org](http://www.livingcities.org)

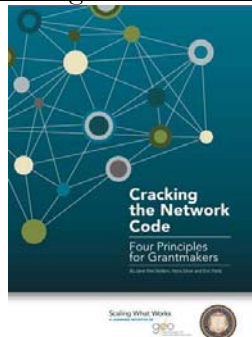
[Read firsthand what Living Cities staff are learning through their blog The Catalyst: Ideas and Insights from Living Cities.](#)

## **GEO resources that relate to the topics covered in this member story**

### *[Many Hands, More Impact](#)*



### *[Cracking the Network Code](#)*



### *[Learn and Let Learn](#)*

