

Building Credit, Building Networks:

Lessons Learned from the Boston Builds Credit
Roxbury Place-based Pilot



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April 2019

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the community partners and residents that contributed their time and insights through interviews and focus groups for this evaluation.

Roxbury Community Partners:

1. [Action for Boston Community Development](#)
2. [American Consumer Credit Counseling](#)
3. [Boston Medical Center](#)
4. [Boston Tax Help Coalition](#)
5. [Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative](#)
6. [EMPath](#)
7. [Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción](#)
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12. [Project Hope](#)
13. [OFE's Roxbury Center for Financial Empowerment](#)
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- **Constance Martin**, Office of Financial Empowerment
- **Keri-Nicole Dillman**, BBC

This work was generously funded by Citi Community Development.

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Building Credit, Building Networks: Highlights from Year 1 of the BBC Roxbury Pilot

Boston Builds Credit (BBC) is the nation's first citywide effort to approach credit building as a foundational building block for economic security, mobility, and equity. A joint initiative of the [United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley](#) (United Way), [Mayor Walsh's Office of Financial Empowerment](#) (OFE), and [Local Initiatives Support Corporation Boston](#) (LISC Boston), BBC aims to support 25,000 individuals to attain a prime credit score of 660 by the year 2025. In 2018, BBC piloted a place-based strategy for reaching residents in one of Boston's neighborhoods, Roxbury, with the goal to refine its approach based on lessons learned before scaling up to other neighborhoods.

Building on the strengths of the social service sector in Roxbury, BBC's goal is to integrate credit building strategies into existing points of service, weave and strengthen a network of providers offering credit building services and products, and identify promising strategies that could be scaled up to other organizations and neighborhoods throughout Boston in coming years.

This report highlights key lessons learned from a year-long developmental evaluation conducted by researchers at the Institute on Assets and Social Policy (IASP) at Brandeis University's Heller School for Social Policy and Management. These lessons offer insights into the strengths and challenges of the Roxbury place-based pilot during its first year of implementation and are oriented around the following guiding research questions:

- 1) How has credit building been integrated into existing services in Roxbury?
- 2) How does BBC facilitate knowledge and resource exchange, referrals, and network-building in Roxbury?
- 3) How do participants¹ experience credit building and financial empowerment?

This report is designed to refine and advance the BBC initiative across Boston, bolster existing partnerships and foster new ones, and inform and advance the work of the financial empowerment field at large.

Overview of BBC and the Roxbury Place-based Initiative

As shown Figure 1, Boston Builds Credit is designed around a dual focus on increasing access to the tools Bostonians need to build their credit scores and advocating for consumer-focused system changes such as investments in quality credit building programs, safe financial products, and consumer protections. This complex initiative seeks to implement a wide range of strategies, some of which were incorporated into the first year of the Roxbury pilot.

¹ The term "participants" in this report refers to Bostonians who received services through BBC-supported programs in Roxbury and participated in focus groups held by IASP.

Reaching Bostonians: To strengthen Boston’s credit building ecosystem, BBC works with over twenty-five organizational partners across Boston to integrate credit building services into their ongoing work. These organizations connect residents throughout Boston to credit building workshops, one-on-one financial coaching sessions, and Financial Check-Ups, and direct them to safe products. While some organizations already offered credit building workshops and one-on-one coaching to area residents, BBC’s goal is to help others incorporate credit building opportunities, including Boston Tax Help Coalition’s Financial Check-Up, into existing programming.

In Roxbury:

- OFE’s Roxbury Center for Financial Empowerment and fifteen other longstanding community-embedded organizations (see list on p.1) formed the basis for a growing network of partners integrating credit building into their service delivery, in ways that align with the financial priorities and goals of Roxbury residents. These partners, located in and around Roxbury, offered credit building workshops, Financial Check-Ups, and one-on-one financial coaching to Roxbury residents.
- BBC convened and coordinated a community of practice which brought together all partners to provide a space for sharing acquired knowledge and networking, and provided financial coaching practitioners and organizational leaders with ongoing training.

In the city-wide BBC initiative:

- BBC’s vision is to reach Bostonians through multiple points of contact including: reaching youth and young adults through partnerships with community colleges and other key institutions, working with employers to offer credit building services as an employee benefit, and engaging with Boston’s Emerging Entrepreneurs Network to offer credit building services to people as they start small businesses.

Changing Systems: To improve access to and interaction with financial systems, BBC works with industry partners, funders, and policymakers to ensure continued investment in quality credit building programs, safe financial products, alternative data and financial technology (fintech) strategies, and consumer protections.

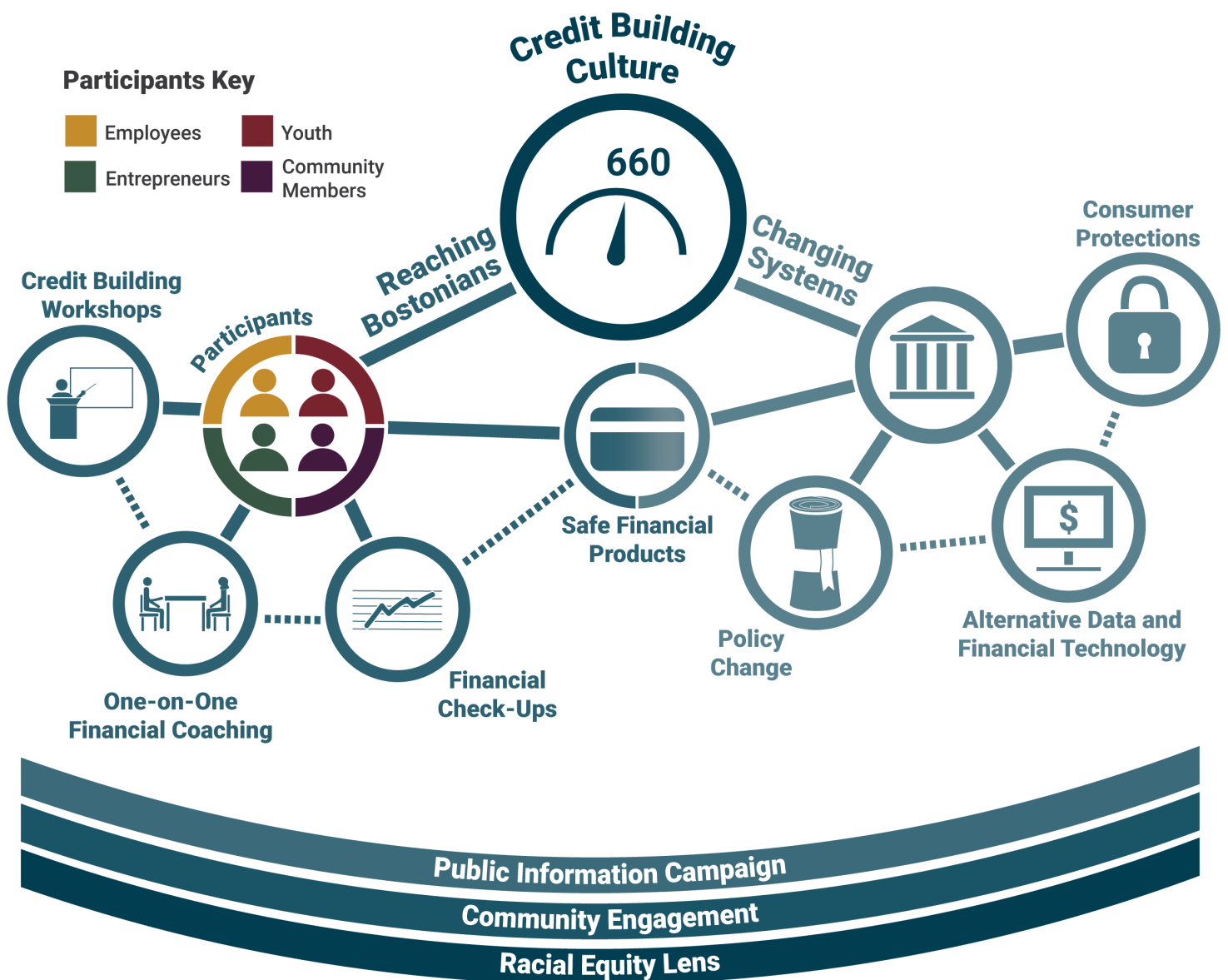
In Roxbury:

- BBC lead organizations partnered with Roxbury service providers to build a strong provider network, share best practices, identify and assess the scalability of safe credit building products and tools, educate each other about credit-reporting data mechanisms, and explore opportunities to influence policies and systems in Boston to advance financial inclusion and equity.

In the city-wide BBC initiative:

- Other citywide strategies focused on systems change include building a public information campaign, continuing to explore opportunities to develop safe products and influence policy, and developing a community engagement strategy that includes a focus on racial equity.

Figure 1. BBC's Year 1 Approach



Credit building workshops:

Throughout the city in a variety of locales, Boston residents had access to a brief one-hour credit building workshop. Core content for the curriculum included why credit is important, rules and tools of credit building, and how credit affects future goals, as developed by Credit Builders Alliance in its Credit as an Asset training. The workshop also clarifies the mixed messages consumers receive about credit and corrects credit myths that mislead them. With the information provided by the workshop, participants can take actions to begin building good credit.



Financial Coaching:

Financial coaching is a strengths-based model that uses participant goals and motivations to drive behavioral change and progress. Financial coaches seek to help participants think about their financial goals and to hold them accountable for their own outcomes over time. Participants engaged in financial coaching pursue a variety of goals, both short and long term, such as saving, debt management, budgeting, and credit building. Because it may take time for participants to attain their goals and may require behavior change, financial coaching typically is a long-term process that takes place during multiple meetings.



Boston Tax Help Coalition's Financial Check-Ups:

The Office of Financial Empowerment's Boston Tax Help Coalition (BTHC) offers free tax preparation and filing in 15 neighborhoods at over 40 different locations in Boston. In 2017 they served 12,709 taxpayers and returned \$24 million in tax refunds. The Boston Tax Help Coalition stands out from other Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) programs by including a "Financial Check-Up" (FCU) service with tax preparation services at eight sites. The FCU is a one-on-one meeting between a taxpayer and trained volunteer at the time of tax filing, at which the volunteer reviews the taxpayer's credit report, provides credit advising (e.g., to manage credit card debt or to build a FICO score), and offers service referrals (e.g., for housing assistance programs). These meetings are designed to be both effective and scalable: effective in leveraging tax refunds to enhance financial wellbeing, and scalable in reaching thousands of taxpayers a year, typically for just fifteen to twenty minutes each.

BBC's Approach to Credit Building

Credit building is the opening and successful management of financial products over time. More than credit education or remediation, credit building requires the existence of at least one positive trade line, such as an installment loan or credit card, on an individual's traditional credit report. To build credit, that trade line must be both open and active, meaning the consumer or small business is both using credit regularly AND making all payments on time.

Lenders report both installment (car loans, student loans, mortgages, etc.) and revolving (credit cards or lines of credit) credit to the credit bureaus. In order to build credit, installment loans must carry a balance and require a monthly payment. While paying off debt is viewed positively, once paid in full, a loan is no longer active and will not continue to build credit. Revolving credit, on the other hand, offers an unlimited credit building solution as long as it is actively and judiciously used; at least once every six months and ideally monthly. An outstanding balance on the credit card is not required to build credit.

The number one rule in credit building is to make all payments on any credit account on time, every time. Improving one's credit score once established does require reducing current revolving debt loads (to no more than 30% of the credit limit) and paying off historical accounts in collections as necessary; however, addressing past credit problems alone does not constitute credit building.

While credit building does not happen overnight, it is an empowering process that can be employed by individuals or small businesses to address their financial circumstances relatively quickly. Credit building is the only way someone with no credit history or active trade lines can establish or reestablish a credit score. It is also often an effective and expeditious first step for those with poor credit who wish to boost their credit scores. In just six months, for example, on-time payments reported to the credit bureaus on an installment loan as small as \$100 can help an individual with a low credit score increase his or her score by an average of 35 points—and move an individual with no credit score to a prime credit score.

Partner Roles and Project Structure

The BBC leadership team, consisting of three organizations with longstanding roots Boston, brings valuable organizational assets and resources to fulfill these goals:

- **OFE** works with low-income residents to build their financial health, through free financial and employment coaching at its Roxbury Center for Financial Empowerment. OFE also created and offers Financial Check-Ups through its VITA tax program and the Boston Tax Help Coalition, which provides a network of free tax preparation sites, including two in Roxbury.
- **United Way** funds a network of agencies providing financial coaching, leads data tracking efforts, and provides training and capacity building for financial coaches through the Financial Empowerment Learning Institute and related communities of practice for financial coaches and supervisors.
- **LISC Boston** provides strategic knowledge of the various communities in Boston and has extensive experience working with Roxbury residents and local organizations on housing, small business development, and other asset-building initiatives.

Learning from a Developmental Evaluation

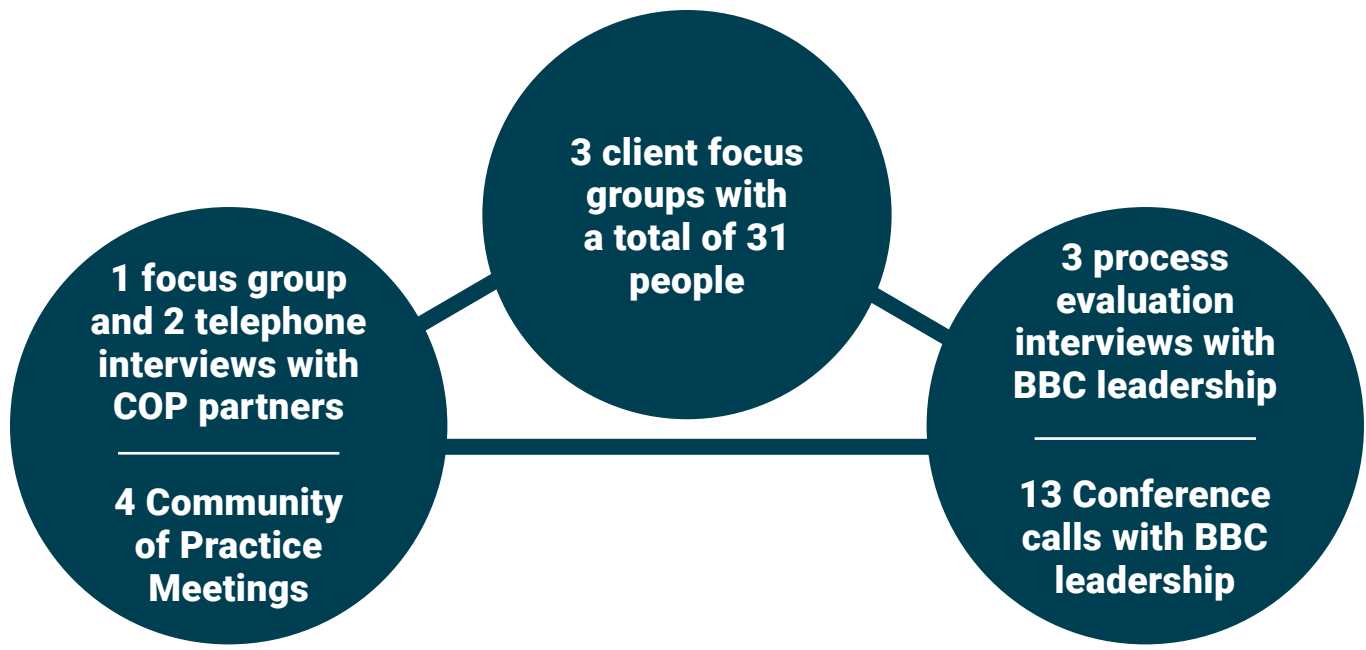
Researchers from the Institute on Assets and Social Policy (IASP) at Brandeis University partnered with the BBC leadership team to conduct a developmental process evaluation of the Roxbury pilot. The primary question guiding this evaluation was to understand “what it takes” to establish a neighborhood-based credit building system with the vision to scale up promising practices to other neighborhoods and, eventually, the entire city. In addition, the research team paid close attention to the adaptive decisions made by the BBC leadership team, particularly when situations arose that encouraged the team to pivot, adjust, or align their original program model to achieve greater impact.

Developmental evaluations are rooted in relationships and a shared commitment—on the part of researchers and program partners—to collect and analyze real-time data in ways that lead to informed decision making as part of the design, development, and implementation process. IASP and BBC established an ongoing relationship through monthly meetings and a series of feedback mechanisms (including producing interim memos and facilitating targeted conversations around emerging themes) to engage with evidence, partner input, and recommendations throughout the evaluation process as lessons emerged. This developmental evaluation process enabled IASP to conduct a rigorous process evaluation while accompanying and shaping the development of the Roxbury pilot. IASP and BBC also engaged in a collaborative feedback process to identify the most relevant project lessons to highlight in this report, drawing from a more extensive set of evaluation findings.

IASP researchers collected data between January 2018 and January 2019 from a variety of sources including: participant observation, focus groups with community partners and participants, document review, process evaluation interviews with leadership team members, and conference calls and reflective discussions with the BBC leadership (Figure 2).

Through thematic content analysis of the data, within historical and evidence-based perspectives, the research team’s analysis reveals BBC’s successes and challenges. In addition, insights from BBC partners inform program improvement, sustainability, and scale. In this report, quotes and other forms of data are provided to illustrate key themes that emerged from this evaluation.

Figure 2. Data Collection



Lessons Learned

Service integration and network building

How has credit building been integrated into existing services in Roxbury?

How does the BBC facilitate knowledge and resource exchange, referrals, and network-building in Roxbury?

Input from the leadership team and community partners and observation at community of practice meetings reveal that BBC is making great strides towards its original goal to bolster and institutionalize credit building within a cohort of Roxbury-based service-providing organizations.

Processes that facilitate engagement, service integration, and network building

- When selecting a pilot site, identify a neighborhood with longstanding service-providing organizations to facilitate start-up and implementation
- Plan time to build both inter-organizational and community relationships
- Offer a broad range of financial services to meet participants' unique needs
- Provide flexible engagement options to allow partners to work at their own pace
- Convene partners in a community of practice to aid in uniformity of implementation and provide a forum for ongoing communication and learning
- Draw on community knowledge and engage partners in decision making to strengthen the quality of the initiative and the partner network

Selection of appropriate pilot site: One reason the BBC leadership team chose Roxbury as an appropriate pilot site is because Mayor Martin J. Walsh’s Office of Financial Empowerment operates an office in the neighborhood, where there is a high density of social service providers, community development agencies, and affordable housing providers that offer a wide range of social services to Roxbury residents.

From a place-based perspective, Roxbury offered ample access points and partners to work with to test out strategies for integrating credit building into the community’s social service infrastructure.

“[Our goal is to] bolster and institutionalize credit building within Boston’s social service infrastructure”

- Leadership team member

Building and structuring lasting relationships: Relationship building was enormously important to the success of the Roxbury pilot and required an extraordinary amount of time and resources. Initial planning included a number of individual partnership meetings between the BBC leadership team and partner organizations, a large convening of all potential partners in January of 2017, and an additional round of individualized meetings with the Program Director in 2018. Based on early feedback, BBC designed a tiered model for local partner engagement that would vary depending on organizational capacity, the level of credit building services offered, and the partner’s ability to share data.

Tier 1 refers to partners that participate in the BBC referral network and host credit building workshops. **Tier 2** refers to partners who also host Financial Check-Ups and share data with BBC, in addition to the Tier 1 activities. Finally, **Tier 3** partners do all of the above and offer ongoing, in-house financial coaching to community residents. BBC developed and shared a partnership guide to communicate the goals and expectations of community partners based on this tiered

engagement approach. BBC further provided partners with workshop flyers, recruitment materials, and various data collection tools.

Through the generosity of a funder, BBC provided small grants to three partners that agreed to share data. The objective was to set up a structure in which services would be provided by local partners. This structure was also intended to enable best practices and data to be shared between BBC and partners through a community of practice and reporting mechanisms for monitoring credit growth. Importantly, several of the Roxbury partner organizations were already United Way grantees, which enabled them to share data without generating additional reports.

Providing a range of credit building services: To best meet residents’ needs, Roxbury partner organizations offered workshops, Financial Check-Ups, and financial coaching services to residents through a decentralized implementation model with varying degrees of engagement, as envisioned. However, service integration within each partner organization was driven more by their existing services provided and the needs of their participants than by BBC’s proposed tiered engagement model or expectations for implementation. For example:

- Organization 1 offered credit-building workshops as part of their ongoing financial education and homeownership workshops, without utilizing the tools provided by the BBC or associating their workshops explicitly with BBC.

- Organization 2 offered services in line with BBC’s goals, but were unclear if their work was being “counted” as part of BBC.
- Organization 3 integrated financial coaching into a workforce development and career training program, and participants described the education they received about credit as one step—but not always the highest priority—in their long-term plan for achieving financial stability.

Creating a Community of Practice: BBC provided community partners with resources, training, and networking through the Roxbury Community of Practice (COP). COP meetings facilitated the sharing of relevant information, provided updates on the BBC initiative, and ensured an open forum for conversation and clarification on topics related to credit building. In the first community of practice meeting in January 2018, BBC leadership shared their vision for the initiative, along with the partnership guide and some initial tools. At this early stage, communication at the COP was primarily unidirectional, from BBC leadership to partners.

After this first meeting, 100% of attendees agreed or strongly agreed that they understood how their organization can integrate credit building work into its existing services. From an implementation perspective, the tools and partnerships were in place. However, achieving full implementation in early 2018 was challenging. At times partners held workshops with only a few participants, and leaders found that “getting clients interested and motivated” to come back for longer-term coaching after attending a workshop was harder than anticipated.

Drawing on community knowledge:

Over time, the leadership team made several key adaptations to engage partners more deeply and facilitate the COP as a forum for sharing resources, making referrals, and drawing on community knowledge. The Project Director shifted to a more relational

“Community knowledge includes relationships with community-based organizations, knowledge of the Roxbury community and awareness of community needs and expectations.”

– Leadership team member

leadership approach and held one-on-one meetings with practitioners (as opposed to organization leaders) at most partner organizations with a focus on how BBC could support their goals. COP meetings were restructured to highlight partners’ work, encourage partner input on the agenda, and create space for partner collaboration on key project decisions moving forward. These shifts position community partners at the center of the initiative as experts and allow for multi-directional communication and knowledge exchange. Feedback from community partners at the end of year 1 is positive:

- Overall, partners see BBC as a resource for financial expertise, materials, and as a convener for organizations doing similar work.
- COP partners reported that the BBC initiative adds value to the Boston credit building ecosystem by creating awareness about financial literacy and credit building, providing useful financial services such as pulling credit reports for free, and offering financial coaching during tax season.
- Partners believe BBC can provide useful technical or logistical support to their community-based initiatives. For example, the calendar on the BBC website is seen as very informative and a useful tool to understand what activities are happening with regards to credit in Boston.

- BBC is valued for facilitating communication among partners. The COP partners are pleased that there are many organizations “invested in financial literacy” and that “BBC has helped to create both a community and tools for the organizations doing this work” to learn from each other.

Recommendations:

The lessons learned summarized above point to the time it takes to build networks and integrate new services into existing organizational priorities. Partners’ capacity to adopt or adapt the tools, resources, and lessons offered by BBC varied widely. Over time, it is likely that this new network will grow in size and strength, if BBC continues to respond and adapt, offering a relational, flexible, and network-based model of service integration with community knowledge at the center. The following recommendations are based on data from leadership team and community partner focus groups and interviews, as well as IASP’s ongoing engagement with the leadership team during the first year of implementation.

- **Devote sufficient time for relationship building:** While time consuming, relationship building develops partners who are committed and bring their own potential to the table. The Roxbury pilot demonstrated the necessity of this investment. Despite an extensive planning period that included partner meetings, BBC found that start-up times varied for each partner and that deeper, individualized relationships with practitioners helped to foster service integration.
- **Staff for successful partnerships:** Ongoing relationship building and collaborative decision making with organizational partners is time intensive but vital for community ownership of the program. As the BBC initiative expands, sufficient staff capacity will be needed to assist the Project Director with management, coordination, and implementation. Adding current or former Roxbury residents as teachers, speakers, or resident experts would expand the contributions of and connection with the community.
- **Provide resources that bolster capacity for engagement:** Most partner organizations in Roxbury are operating at or beyond capacity. For some, adopting or adapting their existing programming to include BBC-supported resources is possible within their existing capacities. For others, participating in the community of practice, adding services to their existing programs, and meeting data-sharing goals may require additional resources going forward to maximize impact. Extending financial grants to non-profit partners may enhance their capacity or commitment to data collection, program implementation, and participation in the broader goals of BBC.
- **Formalize and grow a provider network:** COP partners recognize the value of a provider network. We recommend continuing to convene the Roxbury COP and expanding it as planned to include providers from neighboring communities. Designing and creating a more formalized network of BBC-affiliated organizations across Boston will add additional capacity to the city’s existing financial empowerment and credit building work. The goal of this network is to establish a shared space for these organizations to connect, share tools and resources, make referrals, and problem-solve outside of the quarterly COP. Partners may or may not want this network to be operated, managed, and convened by BBC. To supplement quarterly meetings, BBC and partners could establish a variety of platforms for communication including a database, an app, a listserv, social media, and/or a list of organizations on a website.

Lessons Learned: Aligning services with participant experience and community context

How do participants experience credit building and financial empowerment?

Focus group and interview findings from community partners and participants, as well as observation of COP meetings, highlighted several key lessons for BBC and others seeking to align credit building services with participants' lived experiences with debt, savings, credit, and financial empowerment.

Processes that align credit building with participant experience and community context

- Orient credit building workshops, coaching, and Financial Check-Ups around participants' individualized goals to ensure that content is relevant and specific
- Strike a balance between accountability and flexibility in programs to allow participants to move at their own pace
- Engage with participants from a non-judgmental and supportive perspective to address the emotionally-charged nature of credit building work
- Invite participants to shape the initiative's policy and systems work and draw on participants' experiences to inform this work
- Acknowledge systemic barriers (linked to credit) that perpetuate poverty and racial inequality and demonstrate that leaders are committed to addressing these barriers in addition to improving the lives of individuals through credit building

Participant Experience

At the early implementation stage, the BBC leadership team promoted education and empowerment as a vehicle for “demystifying the credit building space.” Working with residents with low or no credit, the program is designed to repair or strengthen credit scores in a short time span with the appropriate education (workshops, coaching, check-ups, etc.) and tools (credit checks, rent reporting, etc.), in combination with safe financial products. This approach has been proved effective for improving financial capability in low-income communities across the U.S. Mirroring this approach, Roxbury participants reported several important processes that contributed to the quality of the BBC-supported programs.

“[My financial] coach has helped with emotional work around money. Being able to save and improve skills with money, learning to save and feeling good, the coaching has been great.”

– BBC Participant

Processes

- **Goal-oriented coaching:** Participants emphasized that they benefitted from personalized coaching focused on what credit means to them based on their financial goals, rather than on universal financial outcomes.
 - **Accountability and flexibility:** Participants felt empowered by their ability to exercise their own agency to improve their credit, thanks to the tangible tools provided by BBC-supported programs. Participants found the programs flexible enough to allow them to “fall off and fall back in.” For example, if they stopped attending workshops or coaching sessions due to life events, they felt they could start up again and be welcomed back by coaches.
 - **Personal touch and emotional support:** BBC unpacked emotional connections to finances with compassionate support from financial coaching staff. The credit building programs, for some participants, were seen as a safe space to work through negative emotions. The coaches were seen as caring and helping participants build their credit with no judgment and great at following up.
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Some Roxbury residents who participated in this study noted that addressing credit was an immediate priority for them, while others described credit as one of many financial issues that they would work on with their coach when the time is right. Not all participants were ready to engage with long-term, individualized coaching. Nevertheless, participants reported the following outcomes based on different levels of engagement:

Outcomes

- **Tangible tools:** Participants learned how to build and rebuild credit and reduce debt in one-on-one coaching sessions and group workshops.
 - One man worked with a coach to clear charges from a criminal record, establish credit, and enter a workforce training program.
 - A young immigrant woman explained that her family had no experience with credit and that she was grateful for the information and guidance she received in a workshop. She now knows how to establish credit here, which she feels gives her more options in the future.
 - After attending a workshop and learning about the importance of credit, one woman decided to start paying back her student loans earlier than her original plan.
 - Several participants had learned as young people that “credit is a trap,” or that credit and debt are bad and to be avoided. This led them to avoid credit cards loans or other types of debt, without understanding how these loans could become the basis for “good credit.” One woman said she discovered through BBC-supported workshops and coaching that “credit is life” and that it is critical for everything—cars, homes, and even for jobs.
 - **Spending habits:** Participants reported improved techniques for controlling spending habits, which led to improved credit scores.
 - **Referrals:** BBC connected participants to other organizations and resources useful to fulfilling their goals beyond just building credit.
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Motivated by the knowledge they gained, some participants passed on what they learned to their children and those in their social networks, referring friends, family, and coworkers to BBC-supported programs. Almost unanimously across all focus groups, respondents felt strongly that credit education should be more widely available and offered at an earlier age: in schools, for teens before they are approached by credit card companies, and to young adults making important decisions about work, school, homes, and families.

Community Context

In addition to its robust social service landscape, Roxbury was chosen as a pilot site because of the high levels of poverty, debt, and financial exclusion that residents experience. More than half of Roxbury residents have a sub-prime credit score, and more than one-third live in poverty. Roxbury is also a highly segregated community: more than 80% of its residents are people of color, and one in three is foreign-born.

Table 1. Roxbury Resident Demographic Profile

	Roxbury	Boston	United States
% White population	11%	42%	62%
% Black/African American population	53%	23%	12%
% Hispanic/Latino population	29%	19%	17%
% Foreign-born*	32%	31%	15%

Table 2. Roxbury Resident Socio-economic Profile

	Roxbury	Boston	United States
Poverty Rate	37%	22%	15%
% Subprime Credit Score	51%	43%	30%
% With Bachelor's degree or higher	21%	45%	30%

Source: [Boston Planning and Development Authority \(2017\). Boston in Context: Neighborhoods](#); [Fico Blog \(2018\) US Average FICO Score Hits 700: A Milestone for Consumers](#); [Federal Reserve Bank of Boston \(2018\). The Concentration of Financial Disadvantage: Debt Conditions and Credit Report Data in Massachusetts Cities and Boston Neighborhoods](#). *Includes U.S. citizens born in Puerto Rico or U.S. Virgin Islands, and to U.S. citizens abroad; U.S. citizens by naturalization, and non-citizens.

Focus group participants underscored that their individual financial struggles cannot be separated from the longstanding economic and racial disparities and patterns of neighborhood-based disadvantage in Roxbury compared to wealthier and whiter Boston neighborhoods. Thus, financial empowerment, as described by Roxbury residents, incorporates a dual approach targeting both systems and services, in line with BBC's vision.

While valuing education, participants also spoke about systemic barriers to economic inclusion that perpetuated poverty for themselves or other members of their community. For them, credit building alone might be a positive tool but it is not the end goal. Participants shared their experiences with periods of homelessness, unemployment, work in low-wage jobs, struggles to pay bills month to month despite working full-time for decades, and watching their rents go up without seeing a corresponding increase in income. Most respondents described being targeted by predatory lenders at different times in their lives. By far, one of the biggest structural themes was gentrification and displacement. Several respondents had grown up in Roxbury and, despite wanting to stay there, were afraid of being priced out. Participants suggested that BBC and the City invest in the Roxbury community by engaging in broader policy and systems change work such as:

- **Need for affordable housing:** Focus group discussions focused on promoting the need for affordable housing in the community so residents can stay in their neighborhoods and not be displaced from Boston when buying a home. Respondents suggested that BBC could fight to ensure they can stay in their neighborhoods and address the realities of gentrification in their homebuyer classes, in addition to offering credit building services.
- **Action against unfair financial practices:** Participants highlighted the need to move beyond individual solutions and take collective action against unfair practices by banks and other financial institutions. One resident emphasized how much more effective such an approach would be compared to each individual trying to learn ways to scrimp and save and “play the system” on their own.
- **Acknowledge discriminatory practices:** Participants talked about the need to acknowledge the well-documented historical disenfranchisement of Black residents, from housing segregation to job discrimination to inequities in the quality of schools in Boston, as a root cause of financial instability. One respondent felt that if BBC could incorporate this analysis into the program, then newcomers would know that “we’re not here [in poor neighborhoods] just because we’re lazy or stupid.”

As described above, BBC’s vision is larger than the place-based pilot in Roxbury, and the leadership team is considering how to balance the priorities of service provision with efforts to create broader systems change. In order for Roxbury residents to benefit most from BBC’s service integration strategy in their community, they should be included in these strategic conversations. COP partners echo these priorities and see policy work as one area where BBC leaders could contribute unique skills, such as working with the State and policymakers to change laws around student loans. BBC lead partners are seen as potentially “very powerful” in helping to “push laws that help push folks ahead.”

Recommendations for BBC:

The lessons learned summarized above highlight the processes that BBC participants value in the services that they have received. In addition, these lessons suggest that participants and community partners envision a key role for BBC in leading or contributing to policy and systems change work that they believe will improve Roxbury in the future. The following recommendations draw from community partner and participant focus groups and interviews, as well as IASP’s ongoing engagement with the field of financial empowerment.

- 1) **Identify opportunities to develop empowering content and processes**— BBC’s goal is to improve Bostonians’ financial security and wellbeing by addressing credit invisibility and low credit scores. These are important outcome goals. Equally important are the processes that empower participants on their path to better financial outcomes. Options for next steps include:
 - Hire an expert to “audit” the content of workshops and coaching resources to identify messages and activities that are the most/least empowering.
 - Develop and test messages and content that help participants move from seeing credit as a “trap” to credit as foundational, while simultaneously offering tools that help participants identify and avoid predatory lending practices.

- Co-develop best practices and content with community experts to ensure the initiative is linguistically and culturally relevant for a wide range of participants including Bostonians of color and immigrants.
- Track small steps that residents make towards their goals through credit building services to demonstrate the impact of BBC strategies in ways that align with the individualized goals of participants.

2) Learn from and adapt to community context—BBC’s impact in Roxbury will increase as the community continues to engage. The leadership team’s commitment to integrating credit building services into the existing work of community partners will be critical as the initiative continues to increase in scale. We recommend that BBC continue to explore options for a truly community-based model in which BBC works with partners to see how the initiative can be of maximum value to their organizations and residents.

- Build off existing relationships with Roxbury organizational leaders and practitioners and seek their input in the ongoing design, implementation, and growth of the initiative.
- Before replicating the Roxbury strategy in another neighborhood of Boston or through additional service-providing organizations, identify ways to ensure credit building services meet a minimum quality standard.
- Align services offered through Roxbury organizations and BBC policy and systems work by taking into consideration the policy priorities of Roxbury residents.
- Incorporate a racial equity lens into all BBC strategies and activities by acknowledging the historical and contemporary forms of discrimination that communities of color have faced within the financial system.

Conclusions

BBC provides a comprehensive, evidence-based approach to credit building and financial empowerment. BBC leadership entered this pilot year with an openness to learn as they went, and in the spirit of a pilot, to adapt as needed during implementation to maximize impact.

This report focused on lessons learned in two primary areas: 1) service integration and network building, and 2) aligning services with participant experience and community context. Within the first year, BBC established the basis for a Roxbury-based network of service providers that have begun to integrate credit building into their existing services. Partners integrated credit building services by building off of their existing programs and strengths, and in turn, participants engaged with credit building services within their broader set of financial stresses and systemic struggles. BBC is just starting to tap into the wealth of knowledge embedded in their partner network and in the community. By continuing to shift in the direction of a collaborative network and by drawing on community knowledge, BBC has great potential to make an impact on the financial stability and wellbeing of Bostonians through their focus on both services and systems change.