

Concept Paper for a Community Land Trust “Community of Practice”

Statement of Purpose

The CLT Community of Practice is an affinity group of practitioners and advocates convened under the auspices of the Grounded Solutions Network, the organization resulting from the merger of the Cornerstone Partnership and the National CLT Network. The purpose of this Community of Practice is (1) to promote the CLT “brand” inside and outside of Grounded Solutions Network, advocating for principles and practices that distinguish the CLT from other models of affordable housing and community development, and (2) to inform, support, and supplement the staff of Grounded Solutions Network in connecting and strengthening *existing* CLTs and in seeding and supporting *new* CLTs.

Definition & Corporate Standing of “Communities of Practice”

The Plan of Consolidation proposed by the “integration committee” of the Cornerstone Partnership and the National CLT Network in May 2015 introduced the concept of a “Community of Practice” (CoP). It was later incorporated into Article III (Board of Directors) of the amended Bylaws for the National CLT Network, approved by the Network’s members on June 10, 2015. Neither the Plan of Consolidation nor the amended Bylaws said very much about how a Community of Practice should be structured or what a CoP should do, however, leaving lots of room for practitioners themselves to determine the meaning, membership, and function of the CoPs they choose to join.

What is a “Community of Practice”? The Plan of Consolidation and the amended Bylaws of the Network define a “Community of Practice” as “a group of practitioners with a shared domain of interest and a desire to interact and learn from their peers.”

What corporate powers do CoPs possess? The Network’s amended Bylaws bestow no corporate powers on Communities of Practice. CoPs, whether individually or collectively, do not nominate or elect members of Grounded Solutions Network’s board of directors. Nor do the CoPs play a formal role in determining Grounded Solutions Network’s policies and programs. They serve, instead, as a talent pool of practitioners from which Grounded Solutions Network’s Nominations Committee may (or may not) draw candidates for possible election to Grounded Solutions Network’s board by the entire membership.

What’s the connection between CoPs and the Grounded Solutions Network board?

The amended Bylaws of the Network stipulate that each Community of Practice shall have at least one “representative” on Grounded Solutions Network’s board of directors and, further, that at least 40% of Grounded Solutions Network’s entire board shall be composed of “representatives” from the various CoPs.

How many CoPs may there be? The same three Communities of Practice were named in both the Plan of Consolidation and the Network’s amended Bylaws: Community Land Trusts, Shared Equity Housing Programs, and Inclusionary Housing Programs. This list is mandatory, not exhaustive, meaning that Grounded Solutions Network *must* establish these three CoPs but *may* establish additional CoPs down the road.

How many CoPs may a practitioner join? The Plan of Consolidation and the CLT Network’s amended Bylaws are silent on this question, but there is nothing to suggest that CoPs are mutually exclusive. Practitioners are not forced to choose one CoP over another and could, in fact, participate in multiple CoPs. (This is a realistic reflection of what happens in many cities, where there is often considerable overlap among models and programs. A CLT, for example, may develop shared equity homes or may serve as the steward for housing developed through an IZ program.)

Who decides what each CoP will be and do? The Network’s amended Bylaws declare that the “Board of Directors shall establish policies defining the Communities of Practice, which shall include but not be limited to Community Land Trusts, Shared Equity Housing Programs, and Inclusionary Housing Programs.” Although this language might be read to mean that Grounded Solutions Network’s board will determine every aspect of every CoP, the more likely scenario is that practitioners who join a particular CoP will be encouraged to decide among themselves the policies that should guide their CoP, crafting and refining those guidelines in consultation with the staff and board of Grounded Solutions Network.

Meaning of “CoP” in the Grounded Solutions Network

The first task in establishing any Community of Practice must be to describe the characteristics that differentiate one from another. This definitional task is not about *membership*, setting rigid boundaries for who is “in” and who is “out” of a CoP. It is about *content*, saying what is distinctive about a CoP’s particular approach to affordable housing and community development. It is also about *mutuality*, identifying the principles that motivate those who join a particular CoP and the practices they regard as the best way to advance those principles.

A Community of Practice is both a forum and a platform. Within a CoP, the principles that participants hold dear and the practices they consider to be the “best” provide a common vocabulary and a safe space for interaction and learning among one’s peers. Outside a CoP, these principles and practices provide a platform for a CoP’s participants to preserve and to promote what is *special* about their own approach to affordable housing and community development, while forging links with Grounded Solutions Network’s other CoPs on the basis of what is *shared* among all of them.

Meaning of “CLT” in the CLT Community of Practice

The CLT Community of Practice provides a forum for people who are engaged in staffing, governing, assisting, researching, or starting a community land trust to interact and to learn from their peers. Even more, it provides a platform for championing the CLT cause inside and outside of Grounded Solutions Network, preserving the integrity of the CLT “brand” while helping to ensure that existing CLTs and new CLTs receive the support they need. The constituent elements of that particular “brand” and the meaning of “community land trust” for those participating in this Community of Practice include a **common history**, **guiding principles**, and **best practices**, which together differentiate the community land trust from the other CoPs being sponsored by Grounded Solutions Network.

Common history. Participants in the CLT CoP celebrate the inspirational roots and aspirational features of the “classic” CLT, situating the story of their own organizations within a long lineage of social justice activism in which community-owned land has been used as a vehicle for equitable development and community empowerment.

Guiding principles. Participants in the CLT CoP subscribe to the “guiding principles” of inclusion, stewardship, and empowerment that appear in Article II (Membership) of the amended Bylaws of the National CLT Network (now Grounded Solutions Network). CLT practitioners regularly supplement these principles with a few of their own, however, giving prominence to features characteristic of the CLT and to commitments common to most (but not all) of the model’s adherents, including:

- *Social justice.* CLTs are dedicated to challenging the inequitable distribution of property and power, lifting up people and places that have been left behind by a political economy tilted in favor of a privileged few.
- *Land reform.* CLTs are dedicated to expanding the supply of community-owned land, removing such acreage permanently from the speculative market.
- *Housing reform.* CLTs are dedicated to expanding the supply of price-restricted homes, maintaining the permanent affordability of such renter-occupied and owner-occupied housing.
- *Place-based development.* CLTs are dedicated to placemaking in neighborhoods, villages, cities, and towns, promoting not only the development of affordable housing, but also the provision of other facilities, activities, and services that enhance the quality of life in a place of residence.
- *Community engagement.* CLTs are dedicated to engaging place-based communities in planning and guiding the trajectory of their own development.
- *Democratic governance.* CLTs are dedicated to involving the people who live on and around its lands in guiding and governing the organization itself.

Best practices. Participants in the CLT CoP recognize the necessity and validity of many paths in pursuing the principles to which they are committed. They understand and accept that there is not one “true” way of structuring and operating a CLT, but many different “truths” within a landscape that has grown increasingly diverse as the model has spread across the country and around the world.

There are several “best” practices on which CLT practitioners widely agree, however, even if their own organizations sometimes modify or omit some of them:

1. CLTs are nonprofit, nongovernmental organizations that are started anew or grafted onto a pre-existing nonprofit, nongovernmental organization as an internal program or corporate subsidiary;
2. CLTs establish an organizational priority for using land-based resources, public subsidies, and private donations for the betterment of lower-income people whose needs are such that meeting those needs is deemed a “charitable” activity;
3. CLTs acquire, retain, and manage scattered parcels of land on behalf of a place-based community with the intention of never reselling those lands;
4. CLTs employ long-term ground leasing as their preferred mechanism for ensuring equitable access to land and for enforcing durable controls over the use and affordability of any buildings, facilities, or activities sited on its lands;
5. CLTs perform essential duties of stewardship, working diligently to ensure permanent affordability, regular maintenance, and security of tenure in any residential or non-residential buildings under the organization’s care;
6. CLTs engage residents living on and around its lands in guiding the organization’s decisions about how its lands will be used and developed; and
7. CLTs involve residents living on and around its lands in selecting and serving on a governing board that represents and balances the diverse interests of the place-based community it serves.

Membership in the CLT Community of Practice

Communities of Practice are assigned no corporate powers within Grounded Solutions Network, so the threshold for who may become a member of any given CoP can be set very low. The usual expectations of loyalty and confidentiality that apply to being a member of a typical nonprofit organization, for example, are unnecessary here since a practitioner may join more than one Community of Practice. A CoP isn't an organization anyway; it is an affinity group, acting and interacting on behalf of CLTs.

The CLT Community of Practice has no reason to adopt and to enforce rigid rules, therefore, saying who may participate – and who may not. Individuals should be welcomed into the deliberations and activities of this particular CoP who *self-identify* as being a “CLT practitioner.” Generally, the CLT Community of Practice should welcome anyone who is interested in preserving the “brand,” raising the profile, improving the practice, or increasing the scale of CLTs. Specific recruitment should be done by the staff of Grounded Solutions Network and by CLTs themselves to ensure wide participation in this CoP by individuals who are personally or professionally involved with an existing CLT or who are actively engaged in forming a new CLT.

Domain of Interest for the CLT Community of Practice

The CLT Community of Practice is a forum and platform for practitioners to advance the cause of community land trusts, doing so through advocacy, peer-to-peer communication, the promulgation of best practices, the incubation of new CLTs, the cultivation of innovation, and the education of practitioners and policymakers. These six functions represent the “domain of interest” around which CLT practitioners will coalesce, interact, and learn from one another under the auspices of Grounded Solutions Network.

Listed below are the *kinds* of activities that practitioners participating in this CoP would hope for Grounded Solutions Network to pursue on behalf of CLTs. In some cases, the CoP itself may play the lead role in doing the work; in most cases, the CoP's participants will monitor the activity being done on their behalf, offering advice, encouragement, and support to Grounded Solutions Network's staff.

Advocacy: preserving and promoting the CLT “brand”

- Advocate for community land trusts *inside* of Grounded Solutions Network, ensuring that CLTs receive their fair share of organizational resources and staff support.
- Advocate for community land trusts *outside* of Grounded Solutions Network, raising the profile of CLTs and mobilizing local, regional, and national support for CLT projects and programs.
- Promote a wider and deeper understanding of the historical “roots” of the CLT, inside and outside of the CLT Community of Practice.
- Encourage CLT practitioners to attend the national conference convened by Grounded Solutions Network.
- Encourage CLT practitioners to “throw their hat in the ring” whenever the Nominations Committee is looking for candidates to stand for election to Grounded Solutions Network's board.
- Encourage CLT practitioners to serve on the Community & Capacity Building Committee¹ and Grounded Solutions Network's other committees, whenever representation is sought from Communities of Practice.
- Encourage CLTs that are dues-paying members of Grounded Solutions Network to participate in the annual meeting and to vote for candidates to Grounded Solutions Network's board who have a deep understanding of CLTs and a demonstrated commitment to the guiding principles and best

practices that differentiate CLTs from other models and mechanisms supported by Grounded Solutions Network.

- Develop and disseminate a consistent message about the distinctive history, guiding principles, best practices, benefits, and successes of CLTs, developing OpEd pieces, PPT presentations, documentaries, and other educational materials to promote greater understanding of the CLT “brand” among public officials and members of the general public.

Communication: facilitating two-way flows of information

- Facilitate two-way communication between CLTs and the staff and leadership of Grounded Solutions Network.
- Facilitate peer-to-peer communication among CLTs.
- Facilitate communication between the CLT CoP and other CoPs within Grounded Solutions Network, fostering information sharing and mutual learning.
- Facilitate communication among members of the CLT Research Collaborative.
- Facilitate communication between the CLT CoP and government officials in advancing policies and increasing funds that support equitable development and permanently affordable housing.
- Facilitate communication between the CLT Community of Practice in the United States and CLT networks and practitioners in other countries.
- Cultivate partnerships between Grounded Solutions Network and other national networks like Habitat for Humanity and NeighborWorks America for the purpose of expanding the use of CLT principles and practices.
- Support the formation and functioning of regional and sub-regional CLT networks.

Best Practices: setting a high standard for practitioner competence

- Identify, evaluate, and disseminate “best practices” in the organization and operation of CLTs, especially with regard to the stewardship of resale-restricted, owner-occupied housing.
- Develop and disseminate practical tools and resources that support program improvement, expanded scale, and enhanced organizational sustainability among community land trusts.
- Preserve, expand, and regularly update the CLT resources on Grounded Solutions Network’s website.

Incubation: seeding and supporting the formation of new CLTs

- Conduct outreach and disseminate information to communities of color and to other underserved populations and places that might benefit from starting a CLT.
- Provide support for start-up CLTs, which may include training the organizers, facilitating peer-to-peer interaction with existing CLTs, and assisting with business planning.
- Cultivate a network of CLT “experts” who can be called upon in assisting start-up CLTs.

Innovation: exploring new programs, practices, applications, and hybrids for CLTs, “keeping the edges hot”

- Identify and evaluate innovative strategies and opportunities that might help CLTs to expand and to diversify their land-based holdings and their program offerings.
- Identify and evaluate new applications for the CLT model that go beyond homeownership and “beyond housing.”

- Identify and evaluate new ways of combining the CLT model with other models of tenure and with other mechanisms for financing, developing, and operating affordable housing.
- Identify and evaluate new ways of engaging residents who live on or around a CLT's holdings.

Education: sponsoring comprehensive trainings on theories and practices unique to CLTs, taught by highly skilled and experienced instructors

- Identify training needs, research priorities, and public policies that may help to strengthen and sustain CLTs, new and old.
- Design curriculum and offer trainings that lead to skill development, new ideas, and networking opportunities for community land trusts.
- Develop a diverse cadre of highly skilled and experienced instructors who are capable of teaching courses and doing training on theories and practices unique to community land trusts.
- Ensure that national or regional conferences or trainings that are held under the auspices of Grounded Solutions Network contain a high percentage of sessions that will be of interest and relevance to CLTs.

Coordination of the CLT Community of Practice

Support from Grounded Solutions Network's staff and leadership from a CoP's participants are essential ingredients for any Community of Practice to thrive. A third ingredient is needed as well. There must be agreement between Grounded Solutions Network and the CoP as to how and when they will interact in order to further a CoP's interests.

Staffing. Multiple members of Grounded Solutions Network's staff will undoubtedly be involved in carrying out the many activities of interest to CLTs, but a single staffer should be designated as the initial point of contact for CLT practitioners and the convener, reporter, and record-keeper for the CLT Community of Practice.

Leadership. Once a year, a call should go out to CLT practitioners, asking for volunteers to serve on a coordinating committee for the CLT Community of Practice. Just as people may self-select to participate in the CoP, they may self-select to serve on the coordinating committee. On its first convening in any given year, however, the members of this committee should look around the virtual room and ask themselves "who's missing?" If the coordinating committee is not representative of the diversity of populations and places served by CLTs or does not have adequate representation from CLTs that are older and CLTs that are younger, the committee's members should take personal responsibility for aggressively recruiting people from these missing groups.

Interaction. The coordinating committee for the CLT CoP would neither supervise Grounded Solutions Network's staff nor manage any part of Grounded Solutions Network's budget. It would serve, instead, as a voice for CLTs, making sure that all six functions within the CoP's "domain of interest" are given adequate attention. The committee would convene in person once a year during Grounded Solutions Network's annual conference and convene by conference call as often as needed to carry out six primary duties:

- Review and critique the **Annual CLT Workplan** prepared by Grounded Solutions Network's staff before the start of each fiscal year, a plan specifying what Grounded Solutions Network plans to do in furthering the six functions within the CoP's "domain of interest."

- Review and critique the **Annual CLT Report Card** prepared by Grounded Solutions Network’s staff at the end of each fiscal year, a report describing what was accomplished under each of the six functions within the CoP’s “domain of interest.”
- Review and critique the **Strategic Plan** prepared by Grounded Solutions Network’s staff and board every three years, ensuring that CLTs retain a prominent place in the priorities, programming, and resource allocation of Grounded Solutions Network.
- Assist in disseminating and discussing the Workplan, Report Card, and Strategic Plan among CLT practitioners, soliciting feedback and recommendations for improvement.
- Serve as a sounding board for Grounded Solutions Network’s staff when new tools, services, policies, or trainings are being considered that have relevance for CLTs.
- Serve as a conduit for the flow of information from CLT practitioners to Grounded Solutions Network’s staff and board, allowing the latter to keep abreast of the changing needs and circumstances of the country’s CLTs and to stay attuned to the evolving concerns of CLT practitioners in the post-merger world of the Grounded Solutions Network.

ⁱ The Community & Capacity Building Committee provides support and guidance to Grounded Solution Network’s Capacity Building Department which serves to: (1) strengthen our Member organizations and individuals through technical assistance, curriculum development and training delivery (including the annual conference); and (2) reach out to and educate communities about inclusive communities, permanently affordable housing, community land trusts and shared-equity homeownership.