July 5, 2024

Kathy Pettit

Leah Hendey

Co-Directors

National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership

Dear Kathy and Leah,  
  
I am writing this letter of intent as the Co-Director of the [Community Innovation and Action Center (CIAC)](https://ciac.umsl.edu/) at the University of Missouri — St. Louis (UMSL) to officially join the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP) as a data intermediary in St. Louis, MO. In many ways, our data services and collaborations in St. Louis were sparked by conversations with Kathy Pettit in 2018 — who suggested that we look into the models of the Alamo Regional Data Alliance in San Antonio and the Western Pennsylvania Regional Data Center in Pittsburgh. This turned into a six-year process of building collaborative data efforts and a variety of data services offered to communities and partners throughout our region.

This growth and orientation of our Center is described in the application and provides the capacity for UMSL’s Community Innovation and Action Center to apply to become a designated NNIP partner in St. Louis.

We are excited to expand our work providing data intermediary services in St. Louis and are deeply committed to upholding NNIP’s mission and values — which substantially overlap with our own — across our data efforts.

Please let me know if you have any additional questions or requests.

Sincerely,

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Description automatically generated

Paul Sorenson

Co-Director

UMSL [Community Innovation and Action Center](https://ciac.umsl.edu/)

[sorensonp@umsl.edu](mailto:sorensonp@umsl.edu)

## Organizational INFORMATION

**Organization name**: Community Innovation and Action Center (CIAC) at the University of Missouri — St. Louis (UMSL)

**Organization website:** [ciac.umsl.edu](http://ciac.umsl.edu/)

**Primary contact person for NNIP (Name, title, contact information):**

* Primary: Paul Sorenson, CIAC Co-Director, [sorensonp@umsl.edu](mailto:sorensonp@umsl.edu)
* Support: Risha Frazier, Data Strategy Lead, [mfrazier@umsl.edu](mailto:mfrazier@umsl.edu)
* Support: Dave Menninger, Community Data & Application Developer, [dmenninger@umsl.edu](mailto:dmenninger@umsl.edu)

**Organizational Structure:** CIAC is a community research center within the University of

Missouri – St. Louis (UMSL), housed within its Office of Research and Economic &

Community Development.

**Geographic Area of Focus:** CIAC focuses on the St. Louis Region as a whole (16 counties in its most expansive definition, though with a deeper focus on 5 to 8 counties that contain the vast majority of its population), though increasingly tackles statewide projects with other campus partners and contributes to national efforts around data infrastructure for health and social service connectivity, and funding for youth services.

**Current Staffing:** In 2023, CIAC more than doubled its full-time staff to a total of 16, with 4 dedicated to data intermediary activities full-time and an additional 6 dedicating at least half of their time to such work. These people include:

* Paul Sorenson, CIAC Co-Director and Director of the St. Louis Regional Data Alliance — focused on data strategy across the center and data project development/design
* Risha Frazier, Data Strategy Lead – focused on data visualization and community data responsiveness across projects
* Dave Menninger, Community Data & Application Developer — focused on public data analysis and application development around vacancy and community development
* Leah Moser, Planning and Operations Lead — helps lead qualitative data infrastructure development and regional public health data partnerships
* Sara Mohamed, Engagement and Equity Lead — helps lead the Data for Social Impact [STL] Community of Practice and qualitative methods
* Emily Laurent, Evaluation and Applied Research Lead – leads evaluation for regional community health workers and quantitative methods
* Kiley Bednar, CIAC Co-Director — leads the national fiscal mapping work with the Children’s Funding Project
* Lacey Robinson, Community Data Analyst – supports qualitative evaluation efforts and infrastructure
* Kalekidan Yeshiwas, Community Data Analyst – supporting a variety of data visualization and infrastructure efforts, currently with early childhood providers
* Hanna Katz-Wilking, Communications and Outreach Specialist — develops and manages public database system for community outreach and data access

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Leadership** | **Other staff** | **Administrative or operational staff** | **Total** |
| Racial or Ethnic Identity |  |  |  |  |
| Asian | REDAC  T  ED |  |  |  |
| Black |  |  |  |  |
| Hispanic/ Latinx |  |  |  |  |
| Native American |  |  |  |  |
| Pacific Islander |  |  |  |  |
| White |  |  |  |  |
| Other |  |  |  |  |
| Multi-racial |  |  |  |  |
| Not identified |  |  |  |  |
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| US Born |  |  |  |  |
| Immigrant |  |  |  |  |
| Not identified |  |  |  |  |
| Gender Identity |  |  |  |  |
| Female |  |  |  |  |
| Male |  |  |  |  |
| Non-binary |  |  |  |  |
| Age |  |  |  |  |
| 18-29 |  |  |  |  |
| 30-44 |  |  |  |  |
| 45-59 |  |  |  |  |
| 60+ |  |  |  |  |
| Not identified |  |  |  |  |

**Governance:** CIAC is a university research center and does not have a formal governing board, though its work is primarily community-facing through contracts that specify accountability to organizations (largely nonprofit and governmental) that have such community accountability. As part of its five-year review process this year, CIAC is exploring what a center-specific advisory board may look like that can provide real oversight and insight into its community-facing work.

**Funding:** CIAC currently manages over $3 million in project funds over 22 active projects. Most projects involve some form of data infrastructure, collection, and/or analysis even if their primary focus is on evaluation or training/learning. CIAC’s funding is raised externally (“soft dollars”) and not dependent upon regular university funding allocations, through UMSL provides critical infrastructure for supporting CIAC’s projects (research infrastructure, HR, compliance, accounting, etc.). For data intermediary activities, CIAC is supported by the Missouri Foundation for Health (currently closing a $242,000 award and starting and additional $500,000 project to build qualitative data infrastructure), Rise Community Development ($105,000 to date), the City of St. Louis/Vacancy Collaborative ($104,500), the Children’s Funding Project ($400,000), Washington University ($90,000), the St. Louis Regional Health Commission ($54,000), the United Way of Greater St. Louis ($66,000), and the CDC via St. Louis County ($200,000). These projects alone total $1.3m in active data-focused projects.

## ORGANIZATIONAL Mission AND ACTIVITIES

### Organizational Mission Statement: UMSL’s Community Innovation and Action Center (CIAC) engages with community partners to co-create knowledge, connections, and tools that move us towards just, equitable, and democratic systems in the St. Louis region and beyond.

CIAC has been working to refresh its mission statement, focus areas, and branding over the past year, which will continue into early 2025. Because CIAC is not embedded within a single school or department, it can partner with academics and disciplines across campus (and the statewide University of Missouri System) to be responsive to community priorities and projects.

Our staff members work directly with partners across community-based organizations and within the university to tackle complex data, policy, and practice problems. Over the past year, CIAC has been working to shift to an intentionally horizontal organizational structure — albeit within a very top-down university system — that works to integrate decision-making within and across project teams so those who are most impacted by a project decision have a significant ability to guide its direction. Though still a work-in-progress, this shift has led to a higher degree of trust and collaboration across the growing CIAC team — which also we know is essential for the community-responsive work we do throughout the region.

CIAC recently refined its focus areas to more clearly communicate the type of community-based projects we work on:

* Strategy: Co-designing actionable plans that align with community goals and advance equity.
* Community Engagement: Centering the perspectives and priorities of those most impacted to understand context and more pursue equitable outcomes.
* Data: Developing infrastructure and conducting analysis that makes information transparent and action-oriented.
* Evaluation and Research: Answering questions that matter through participatory methods that center community expertise & lived experience.
* Learning: Strengthening collective capacity to address complex issues through collaborative training and skill-building.

More details about each of these focus areas, including examples of past projects, can be found on CIAC’s website under “Our Work”: ciac.umsl.edu

Many of CIAC’s data-related efforts are an outgrowth of the St. Louis Regional Data Alliance, an initiative founded by Paul Sorenson soon after he was hired at CIAC. The RDA’s mission is “to build strong data infrastructure and support strong data actors who use quality data to improve people’s lives.” This required an emphasis both on building a cross-sector data collaborative (mission/values creation, capacity building, networking, etc.) and standing up formal data intermediary efforts (open data portal/cultivation and partner projects focused on data visualization, data strategy, and data integration). The RDA was directly inspired by the Alamo Regional Data Alliance, which we were connected to by NNIP staff in 2017. From 2018 to 2023, the RDA hosted a Steering Committee comprised of key data actors across government, nonprofits, academia, philanthropy, and technology. Over that five-year period, however, the work and scope of the RDA grew to include a number of data-related projects/contracts in addition to its convening/capacity building work. This growth ended up confusing which projects were “RDA” and which were “CIAC” (beyond the participation of Paul Sorenson). In addition, a new effort had been launched at Washington University in St. Louis called *Data for Social Impact* that clearly focused on capacity building efforts with multi-year support from Mastercard.

To help strengthen and clarify the local data landscape, the RDA’s Steering Committee voted to dissolve in June of 2023 and shift into three aligned focus areas moving forward:

* The first, oriented around capacity building for local data actors, merged the RDA’s efforts in this space into the Data for Social Impact (DSI) initiative at Washington University. Paul Sorenson and Sara Mohamed continue to help organize local DSI efforts, including a new local community of practice and a local DSI Steering Committee.
* The second, oriented around data intermediary projects, clarified that fee-for-service data projects were managed by CIAC as part of its holistic approach to community-responsive work. This helped unify the CIAC data team and has led to more clarity around its skillsets and offerings, which still aim to be as open/transparent as possible and advance the collective data ecosystem in St. Louis across/beyond projects.
* The third aims to carry forward the legacy of the St. Louis Regional Data Exchange (RDX, rdx.stldata.org), which was inspired by the work of other NNIP partners like the Western Pennsylvania Regional Data Center (WPRDC). The RDX is an open data portal built upon the DKAN platform that catalogues over 420 datasets across 8 local governments/quasi-governmental entities. We are currently in the process of re-orienting the RDX to a different platform (likely Airtable with a custom front-end) that allows for easier data management across users as well as expanding the type of data contained within it. This will allow a broader set of users to search by topic and geography (i.e. vacancy in St. Louis City) and find more inclusive information about it — including datasets (like those published by the City), qualitative data and storytelling (like Humans of St. Louis), data tools (like the Vacancy Portal), key reports (like those developed by the Vacancy Collaborative), and relevant research.

This transition has also raised a question about what happens to the “Regional Data Alliance” as a local umbrella/effort. Though the clarity of these different lines of work across DSI, CIAC, and the RDX has been very helpful internally, there is still some confusion in the community about how the pieces fit together. After the launch of the new RDX effort this year — which will also aim to form an advisory board to guide this work — CIAC will clarify how the RDA will (or won’t) continue to exist as a way to connect data capacity-building efforts to data intermediary supports and a local data portal.

**Focus on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion:** Most of CIAC’s partners are community-based organizations — at least half of which are led by people of color with strong accountability to communities of color. Internally, CIAC is focused on hiring and supporting a diverse team of practitioners across its efforts that intentionally reflect and are responsive to the communities that CIAC serves. In 2023, it also started a transition to a collaborative leadership structure that empowers all staff to substantially design and guide their collective work and practices (while still meeting contract deadlines). Though this is an ongoing process, the shift in organizational structure works to transition a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion into reinforcing practices that help CIAC and its staff become as authentically community-based as possible within a large university infrastructure. These commitments are also embedded in CIAC’s core values:

* Community priorities drive everything that we do.
* The best solutions emerge through substantial participation, intentional collaboration, and high-quality information.
* A just society requires a distinct and detailed focus on equity and anti-racism.

## SELECTED PROJECTS

**St. Louis City Vacancy Strategy / City Data Tools**

CIAC is partnering with the St. Louis Vacancy Collaborative (a local community-based initiative, [stlvacancy.com](http://stlvacancy.com/)) on a two-year initiative to develop a vacancy strategy with/for the City of St. Louis. As part of this work, the CIAC team works across multiple data sources to identify, understand, and prioritize vacant parcels in the City of St. Louis with a focus on equitable investment and community responsiveness. This also includes a substantial focus on neighborhood engagement and understanding how vacancy impacts different City neighborhoods. Dave Menninger, CIAC’s Community Data and Application Developer, began working on this project in May 2024, building on his long history as a volunteer developer for the Vacancy Collaborative, including the creation of the public-facing Vacant Property Explorer ([stlvacancytools.com](http://stlvacancytools.com/)) which the RDA/CIAC also helped develop. Building upon this work and the efforts of previous staff, a set of data tools is being developed for City stakeholders and community members so that City agencies can work with community partners to find solutions to vacancy, prioritize which buildings to remediate, which to eliminate, and where vacancy prevention initiatives would have the most impact.

**St. Louis Home Repair Study and Toolkit**

From 2020-2022, CIAC led a team of researchers at UMSL worked alongside St. Louis City departments and the region’s largest home repair providers to shed light on a problem that, until now, has largely been hidden from public view: the enormous unmet need for home repairs in St. Louis.Home repairs, when adequately funded, improve people’s physical and mental health as well as the overall quality of life. In addition, home repairs help to preserve affordable housing and our city’s historic architecture, stabilize neighborhoods, and prevent property abandonment while protecting hard-earned generational wealth through homeownership. In order to assess the full scale of the problem, CIAC adapted a national methodology to measure home repair needs that had yet to be expanded to mid-sized cities. The final study and toolkit details our methodology and provides information for other cities who may want to replicate a similar assessment. This effort also led to the creation of a Home Repair Network in St. Louis to carry the work forward. The full report and toolkit can be found at: <https://www.umsl.edu/ciac/homerepair.html>

**St. Louis Regional Health Commission / Qualitative Data Infrastructure**

CIAC is expanding its partnership with the St. Louis Regional Health Commission (RHC) on a variety of community health-oriented projects. The RHC aims to achieve zero health disparities through community and health system partnerships across Missouri. They approached CIAC in early 2023 to help evolve its Access to Care data efforts, which had previously required manual data extraction and packaging work across major local health systems and federally qualified health centers (FQHCs). CIAC is in the process of brokering local relationships with state intermediaries — in particular the Missouri Hospital Association and the Missouri Primary Care Association — to ensure that local data is easy to use for an analysis of healthcare access (emergency, primary, and specialty care) across local providers, which we are beginning to organize as a “St. Louis Community Health Data Hub.” Creating stronger pipelines to healthcare data intermediaries will also help dive deeper into geographic health disparities across the regions in collaboration with healthcare providers, public health departments, and intermediaries like the RHC.

Alongside this work, which primarily deals with the descriptive analysis of quantitative data, CIAC is also working closely with the RHC as a primary partner in developing qualitative data infrastructure for the St. Louis region. This three-year effort began on July 1st, 2024, and is funded by the Missouri Foundation for Health; three major partners, including the RHC, will work with CIAC on co-developing community governing structures and pilot projects that will test how qualitative data can be organized and elevated as an equally-powerful type of data for community decision making. These two threads — quantitative health provider data sourced through state intermediaries and qualitative patient/community data collected by RHC staff — are actively being tied together through RHC’s focus on access to maternal health care in St. Louis and throughout Missouri.

**St. Louis Community Information Exchange / Health and Social Service Data Connectivity**

CIAC has served as the “Data Backbone” for the St. Louis Community Information Exchange (CIE) since its official launch in August 2020. The CIE, led by the United Way 211 in St. Louis, is a network of regional partners focused on improving the health and well-being of residents and neighbors in the metro St. Louis region. It has been utilizing the Unite Us closed-loop referral platform, though is currently exploring adjacent technologies and data connections that would allow the CIE to be more responsive to community-based service providers and the many data tools their funders require them to use.

CIAC recently began receiving data directly from Unite Us about client-level referral activity across 100+ participating community organizations; it is working to align these data with 211 call center records to produce a more complete picture of community needs/requests, available services, and successful connections to resources. This work will likely produce both an internal CIE dashboard and a public-facing dashboard to better understand service trends and needs, with an initial focus on how social determinants of health and safety net resources vary by need and geography (both at the zip code and county levels).

In addition to this analytical work, CIAC has become a national leader in pushing for greater standardization of social service data in a way that promotes interoperability and community-responsive governance of these networks. Through funding from Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Data Across Sectors for Health, Paul Sorenson co-authored a white paper with Open Referral’s Greg Bloom in 2021 that outlined how the CIE data ecology should be oriented ([bit.ly/socialcaredatapdf](https://stldata.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Social-Care-Data-Whitepaper-October-2021.pdf)). CIAC also led the Missouri Aging Services Data Collaborative team, a Grand Prize Winner of the Social Care Referrals Challenge funded by the Administration for Community Living. This year, CIAC is working to revise its 2021 data paper in partnership with the San Diego CIE as a formal outgrowth of their 2018 CIE Toolkit as well as working closely with community health workers in St. Louis City and County on developing CHW data standards that align with healthcare (via FHIR) and allow for CHW-control over community-based care activities.

## Future PLANS AND SUSTAINABILITY

CIAC’s significant growth over the past two years — including the expansion of its data portfolio — has been funded through a combination of large, Federal/stimulus-funded projects and renewable contracts with largely local organizations. Its major challenge in 2024 is building upon its past projects/tools to replace Federal funds with more local (and sustainable) funding sources. This hurdle has largely been surmounted, with no anticipated staff layoffs as major projects end in mid-2024 and with several new multi-year data/evaluation projects pending.

CIAC now provides ongoing data services for four local organizations: Rise Community Development, the United Way/Community Information Exchange, the Regional Health Commission, and the Children’s Funding Project. This provides a substantial foundation for ongoing data staffing and infrastructure that can expanded for other ongoing partnerships as well as time-limited data infrastructure, analysis, and visualization projects. CIAC’s work to expand qualitative data infrastructure, build a more inclusive Regional Data Exchange, and assemble local health data into a Community Health Data Hub will also expand opportunities for data partnership across the St. Louis region. CIAC’s current challenge is to transform its large project portfolio into sustained areas of focus that are more than the sum of their parts; we are actively working with local governments and other community anchors (nonprofit, philanthropy, academia) on putting these pieces together.

Like everyone else, CIAC is carefully watching how potential changes to the political landscape in 2024 will impact national, statewide, and local funding environments; while its exact team and project makeup may change, it now has a solid foundation to weather (most) storms and continue its community-responsive work.

## Local ENVIRONMENT FOR COMMUNITY INFORMATION

CIAC — through the Regional Data Alliance and through a variety of other data/evaluation projects — has been heavily involved with the growth of the local data ecosystem over the past five years. This position also helped it understand who is doing what work across the data ecosystem, understanding their unique roles/contributions and connecting the dots where appropriate. It has strong partnerships with St. Louis City and County, including shared projects focused on vacancy and community health worker capacity building, that are continuing to grow. A growing number of local institutions are recognizing that having a strong partner in the local public university (UMSL) is critical for developing better shared data and community capacity.   
  
CIAC has strong relationships with Washington University in St. Louis (particularly its Social Policy Institute) and St. Louis University (particularly through NNIP Affiliate Dr. Sarah Coffin) and will continue to partner with them on various data projects/initiatives. However, CIAC is uniquely positioned as a data intermediary that can be hired by local community-based efforts to respond to defined community needs without a specified research agenda or grant.

Though being part of a public university system has challenges (especially in a state like Missouri), its benefits are also substantial. The University of Missouri System is a unique four-campus network that also hosts the state’s Extension/Engagement offices as a land grant institution. This means that the UM System has an office in every county throughout the state and a substantial history of neighborhood engagement in the St. Louis region, including its longstanding Neighborhood Leadership Academy/Fellows program. UMSL’s campus was built in the 1960s on a former golf course in St. Louis County; unlike other local universities, it has a close relationship with neighboring residents/municipalities (including Ferguson and the Normandy School District) and is currently leading the St. Louis Anchor Action Network to pursue equitable hiring/procurement efforts across major regional institutions.

CIAC also partners closely with Rise Community Development — the other NNIP member in St. Louis — and currently provides data intermediary services on their behalf after the departure of John Cruz in 2021. CIAC anticipates continuing this partnership as the other local NNIP member. Rise’s substantial history in this space with John (and Eleanor Tutt before him) is essential for the local data landscape to continue to thrive; CIAC looks forward to continuing to build local neighborhood and housing-development data capacity with them for years to come. This involves continuing meeting monthly to discuss Rise data needs and projects, exploring new projects to tackle together, and otherwise ensure that we align our efforts in building a stronger neighborhood data ecosystem for St. Louis.

## POTENTIAL RELATIONSHIP TO NNIP

CIAC has been in consistent relationship with NNIP staff and partners since 2018, attending three national meetings and looking to network partners for guidance/inspiration for its own growing set of activities. As CIAC started doing more data work for Rise, clarifying its role within UMSL and with the RDA, and looking into building out more data intermediary services, the time is right to apply to become a formal NNIP member in St. Louis. Our region has much to learn from our peers throughout the country and we are eager to engage in shared learning with them. Being part of NNIP would help CIAC connect to similar centers across the country and align St. Louis’ pursuit of equitable data infrastructure with others.

CIAC’s unique composition — part university research center, part consultant, part mission-oriented collaborative — can also help bridge these categories across the network. Our focus on neighborhood data and geographic disparities (vacancy, affordable housing, funding patterns) is actively being connected to our focus on data about people (health and social services, experiential data/storytelling) to elevate how these different types of data should align for a more holistic understanding of our communities. CIAC’s focus on co-creating knowledge also extends beyond its data-specific efforts and it would be exciting to explore how our work in community engagement, applied research, and community-based experiential learning can also be tied into our participation with NNIP. We are looking forward to (officially, hopefully!) joining the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership this year and continuing this shared work together.

## REFERENCES

* Laura Ginn, St. Louis City, Vacancy Strategist
* Brian Hurd, Rise Community Development, Director of Community Planning
* Riisa Rawlins, St. Louis Regional Health Commission, CEO