Many social capital programs we studied explicitly aim to center individuals or families by viewing participants as the experts, inviting them to drive the goals and services, and using staff as facilitators and supporters instead of directors. These programs also try to understand how trauma may affect participant engagement and rapport development. When participants are listened to and given the autonomy to help drive the process, they may be more likely to feel cared for, respected, and able to develop trusting, reciprocal relationships with each other and with program staff and volunteers.

Staff and participants as partners
Some of the programs we reviewed give participants agency to use the program’s structure and scope in ways that work for them. One way to do this is to put participants and staff or volunteers on equal footing, attempting to minimize any sense of an uneven power dynamic. In such an environment, participants feel empowered to set their own goals and to take the lead in developing a plan to achieve them.

Cultural competence
Programs that embody cultural competence promote positive and effective interactions with diverse cultures through attitudes, perspectives, behaviors, and policies. Implementing cultural competence can be quite challenging for human services agencies, as staff and volunteers may have lived experiences and cultural backgrounds very different from those of program participants. Nonetheless, cultural competence is a vital principle of any program that significantly values social relationships.

Emotional intelligence
Some organizations we examined screen for emotional intelligence in their hiring processes or provide ongoing emotional intelligence training for staff or volunteers. Emotional intelligence is the capacity to effectively navigate emotions and use them to improve, rather than hinder, decision-making. It can lead to stronger bonds and trust (for example, by naming our emotions or accurately recognizing others’ feelings). Emotional intelligence helps us navigate sensitive interactions, so it can be a particularly important quality for staff and volunteers.
Peer Groups
Peer-group or cohort approaches can help program participants share experiences, build stronger networks, and develop more personal relationships. Group members may tend to provide more encouragement, feel more accountable to each other, and, in at least some cases, sense increased progress toward their goals.

Meaningful Engagement
The programs we examined generally use longer-term, meaningful engagement to build trust and stronger communities of support. Through such engagement, participants build positive, reciprocal relationships that improve individual and community outcomes. The quality and intensity of relationships seem to be more important than the duration of those relationships.

Leveraging Organizational Relationships
Service providers’ relationships with other community organizations may open doors for program participants, allowing them to more easily build their own one-on-one bridging or linking connections. Organizational relationships may also reinforce organizational accountability, as administrators seek to protect their personal or organizational connections by ensuring that program participants are well prepared.

Technology
Some programs use technology as a tool to help build community among the people they serve, such as youth, or as a means to easily communicate with and support peer participants by, for instance, facilitating parents’ coordination of child care or rides to school. Other programs use technology to work with participants, or they enable participants to use technology directly. For example, an online journal about how participants have helped others and what they have received in return reflects how they build and use social capital through trusting and reciprocal relationships.

Using Data to Inform Decisions
Most programs we examined are attempting to employ stronger data practices to inform social-capital-building activities, regardless of their current capacity for doing so. Organizations are also using data on social capital to communicate results to funders and community members, and some use data to determine the most effective aspects of their social capital programs.

Fostering Opportunities for Organic Connections
Organizations purposefully use tools such as physical space, events, and program structure to facilitate the development of organic personal connections. Whether in the form of structured group interactions or more casual mingling or introductory opportunities, this type of engagement can include everyone from peers to board members, from volunteers to meal delivery drivers.

Qualified Individuals or Alumni in Programming and Staffing
Intentionally hiring former participants and others with similar life experiences as participants can enhance the authenticity of social capital programs. This shared history allows participants to more easily develop trust and rapport with program staff. It can also reinforce participants’ confidence in their ability to build social capital by providing them a safe environment in which to start doing so.

Emphasis on Accountability
Explicit written or verbal agreements or commitments about the nature of a programmatic relationship may offer greater clarity and accountability regarding expectations for each person and for interactions. These agreements do not mandate but clarify the relationship. Accountability is mutual and requires program buy-in. Because some participants have experienced repeated broken commitments in their lives, it is especially important for organizations to fulfill their side of any agreement.