

The Community Development Innovation Forum

To: Community Development Innovation Forum
Fr: Chrystal Kornegay and Bill Traynor on behalf of the Community Building Innovations Working Group
Dt: April 15, 2009
Re: Report from the Community Building Innovations Working Group

The Community Building Innovations Working Group, chaired by Chrystal Kornegay of Urban Edge and Bill Traynor of Lawrence Community, included Pamela Bender; MACDC; Lisa Chice, Asian CDC; Mike Feloney, Southwest Boston CDC; Suzanne Frechette, Coalition for a Better Acre; Juan Gonzalez, JPND; Marissa Guanaja, Chelsea Neighborhood Developers; Chris Harris, Bank New York Mellon; Jennifer Harris, JPND; Sandra Hawes, DHCD; Danny LeBlanc, Somerville Community Corp.; Travis Lee, Madison Park DC; Hilary Marcus, NeighborWorks; Richard Thal, JPND; Marcia Thornhill, Nuestra Comunidad and Bob VanMeter, LISC.

The group agreed that our principal "deliverable" is a coherent and compelling case *for community building as a central and vital a) requirement for changing neighborhoods and among struggling families and individuals in those neighborhoods, and b) role for CDCs who are uniquely positioned to help build community in those places.* With this case, we hope to move public and private actors and institutions to invest in this work and in CDCs' capacity to do this work. Specifically, there are opportunities with LISC and the Patrick Administration for this case to be heard.

We have determined that there are 4 components of the "case" we are making: a mission and approach Statement; lessons from prior initiatives; demographic data and current practices and perspectives. Preliminary aspects of all 4 of these components are detailed here.

1. **A mission and approach statement that captures our definition and vision of "community" and "community building" in the 21st century in Massachusetts.**

We agree that our definition needs to address both economic development and civic engagement impacts. We also agree that we need to resist the tendency to make our community building definition and vision *'everything-therefore-nothing'*. Community building, we feel, needs to evolve to a level of understanding and coherence that makes it actionable as a strategy and that is compelling, specific, tailored to the conditions that exist in Massachusetts in this century and which point to priorities for action. The following is the vision statement we have developed to date:

What is successful community building in Massachusetts today?

*For CDCs and their community partners, community building is a process of **place-based mobilization** to help people connect to information, opportunities and each other, towards the goals of **economic advancement and effective civic engagement and leadership***

*In urban neighborhoods, remote rural communities and all places where there are struggling individuals and families, community building, as we conceive it, is designed to **"optimize the value of place"*** for these families and individuals. This is especially important for those who have fewer choices regarding where to live, such as our poorer families, immigrants and people of color.*

**"Community Building in Place" Bill Traynor 2008*

Optimizing the value of place in Twenty-first Century Massachusetts is a new kind of challenge that requires community building thinking and practice to respond to changing conditions in the world.

- Today, we are all impacted by regional and national factors, as well as by the global economy. Local places of every kind need to compete anew for a role in the global economy.
- Today, people have greater potential mobility than ever before. We need to understand these new patterns of mobility in order to design the place-based organizations and environments that can embrace, rather than struggle against, mobility and change at the local level.
- Today, the very nature of human contact at the local level has changed dramatically. The power of information technology in the home and other factors – most notably the increase in demographic diversity at the street and block level -- are making the process of *people meeting people in-place* more challenging. Nonetheless, the importance of networks of trusting relationships at the local level has not diminished and maybe more critical to family and civic functionality than ever before.

In short, **“place” today plays a different but still critical role in the lives of most people.**

Community building is rooted in a physical place where people need improved schools, healthy and safe streets, better access to transportation, green space, and housing that is affordable in today’s world. In order to be able to enjoy the full range of job opportunities, as well as to truly be mobile and reach one’s potential whether within or outside a given local community, people need help connecting to supportive relationships, information, and opportunities such as skill and asset building. For local places to compete in the global economy, and for all voices to be represented, we need rich, robust and effective civic infrastructure and exceptional leadership. And all this must happen within increasingly diverse communities, and where the common threat of environmental sustainability is at our doorsteps.

In the end, successful community builders are facilitating connections so that all residents have **accessible paths to economic success** and can help create the **quality of life** to which we aspire.

2. Lessons from our collective experience with community building work should inform our “case”.

Successful models of engagement, mobilization, and empowerment that have led to concrete improvements in the community as well as greater levels of leadership can help guide the community development field as it considers the impact of the changing environment. To gather the models and lessons for this report, prior experiences in the NeighborWorks Network, Local Initiative Support Corporation, the Ricanne Hadrian Initiative for Community Organizing, and various parent engagement endeavors were reviewed by consultant Diane Gordon. Highlights include:

***Building Networks:** Adapting a network building approach, many groups are engaging people through social interactions, flexible structures, and a wide variety of opportunities that add value and meet the needs of the members. Building and sustaining relationships between people has been key.*

***Entry Points:** Open community dialogues that bring diverse groups of people together to discuss common concerns, community building events, general outreach, and voter registration are all ways that CDCs initially*

engage new people. Many groups are also now offering a wide variety of services and programs to attract new people and contribute to their quality of life.

Connections Leading to Change: *For longer term results, the initial entry point must lead to further connections, engagement, and action. By forming small neighborhood groups, working in alliances with others, and organizing on single issue, targeted campaigns that bring together various segments of the community, networks have formed and concrete changes have occurred.*

Capacity Building and Systemic Change: *CDCs have led or participated in coalition with others on organizing campaigns focused on systemic change. Comprehensive, multi-year community planning focused on both concrete improvements and community leadership development, have been effective models. Leadership development through one on one mentoring and formal leadership training, with an emphasis on “learning by doing” are critical components in all successful community building models.*

Throughout all of the successful models, community builders recognize the importance of sustainable, multi-year, flexible funding that enables them to invest in staff, who in turn, can build the kinds of lasting relationships with community members that are needed to create networks and strengthen communities. Similarly, ongoing funding and support is needed for CDCs to build their own organizational capacity to meet changing needs.

The full report, Models and Lessons Learned is attached

3. Data on demographics and other trends in community that informs our understanding of the reality community life in Massachusetts.

This is data related to a) demographic shifts and projections in Massachusetts that help us understand what is happening and is likely to happen in CDC neighborhoods, and b) findings on social capital, particularly with relation to diversity and place, which will help us understand some of the underlying dynamics of community building in our neighborhoods, and c) trends and shifts in family economics, which will allow us to shape a case around the importance of community building and "optimizing the value of place" to struggling families. Below are some preliminary findings based on the research of our Intern Jennifer Harris of JPND.

Trends in Boston and Massachusetts Impacting the Nature of Community and Place

Mobility: *Natives are moving out; immigrants are moving in*

Every year from 1991 to 2003 Massachusetts suffered a net loss of residents, excluding international immigrants.¹

58 percent of the population (5 years and older) lived in the same house in 2000 that they had in 1995. Of those that moved, 60% remained in the same county. Just over seven percent of the entire population moved out of state between 1995 and 2000.² Almost 30% of the people in Boston in 2000 did not live here in 1995, similar to the percentage from 10 years previous.³

¹ “MASS.migration”. Robert Nakosteen, Michael Goodman, Dana Ansel. December 2003.

www.massbenchmarks.org/publications/studies/pdf/massmigration03.pdf

² U.S. Census Bureau: Profile of Selected Social Characteristics: 2000

³ Trends2000: Boston’s Immigration, Foreign Born Population and Language Spoken 1990-2000. Boston Redevelopment Authority. Policy Development and Research, July, 2002.

Immigration: *Lots of immigrants moving in; Spanish and other languages are on the rise*

Immigration has increased in Massachusetts from 7.9% of the total population to 12.5% in 2006. The countries supplying the highest numbers of immigrants are Brazil, China and Portugal. Almost all immigrants are at least 18 years old; 1/5 are working-age adults.⁴

Fourteen percent of the population speaks English less than “very well”. Across the board there are more people whose first language is not English.⁵

Race: *The cities are getting more diverse; the ‘burbs are staying pale*

The white, non-Latino population in Boston has decreased from 68% in 1980 to 49% in 2000, while Hispanics have increased significantly from 6% to 14%. The black population has remained fairly consistent at just under a quarter of the total, and Asians/Pacific Islanders increased from 3% to 8% between 1980 and 2000.⁶

By 2030, MetroFuture projects that almost a third of the metro Boston region will be non-white, with these populations confined mostly to a dozen urban cities with little racial change in the suburbs.⁷ MetroFuture neither delineates which cities these are nor defines “suburb”.

Age: *We’re getting old*

MetroFuture projects that the over-55 population will increase 75% in the next 20 years until it reaches 1/3 of the population. Other age groups, including children, will shrink. (If high housing costs force seniors to retire elsewhere, the projections will change).⁸

Transportation: *We don’t work where we live and we spend a lot of time getting there.*

In 2000 and 2006, the mean travel time to work was 27 minutes, with 74% of the working population driving alone.⁹ Almost 1/5 of Mass residents spend at least 45 minutes on the road each way. Just over 8% of the population uses public transportation (subway, bus, commuter rail), with over half of those using the subway.

In 2000, almost twice as many people commuted into Boston from other communities as people who lived and worked in Boston.¹⁰

People commute primarily because workers want more affordable and desirable homes.¹¹

Household Makeup: *It’s hard to do much more when you’ve got to work and take care of kids.*

Of the households in Boston, 20% are single-parent families with children under 18 years old. This was fairly consistent from 1990 to 2000.¹² Children in single parent families (as a percentage of all children) rose from 39% to 42% from 1990 to 2000.

⁴ Migration Policy Institute: MRI Data Hub. www.migrationinformation.org/datahub

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau: Profile of Selected Social Characteristics: 1990 and 2000

⁶ Boston by Race 1980-2000. Center for Urban and Regional Policy at Northeastern University.

<http://www.curp.neu.edu/visualdata/BostonbyRace.htm>

⁷ MetroFuture Projections Brief #1: Our Changing Population. www.metrofuture.org.

⁸ See above

⁹ U.S. Census Bureau: Profile of Selected Economic Characteristics: 2000

¹⁰ Community Snapshot Boston. MetroBoston DataCommon. Metropolitan Area Planning Council. Source: US Census Transportation Planning Package 2000. http://www.metrobostondatacommon.org/pdf/boston_snapshot.pdf

¹¹ MassINC. “Mass.Commuting”. 2004.

¹² Trends2000: Boston Household Characteristics: 1990-2000. Boston Redevelopment Authority. Policy Development and Research, June, 2002.

Many sources indicate that Americans are working more hours, having a more difficult time juggling work and life, and do not have enough time for their families. These factors would certainly impact civic engagement and community building, but are not included because the sources were either not credible or unverifiable.

Income/Gentrification: *Where have all the middle-incomers gone?*

In metropolitan areas across the country, middle-income neighborhoods are shrinking. There are more neighborhoods that are either higher-income or lower-income, and it is now more likely that higher and lower-income families will live in these respective neighborhoods.

Suburban areas have a much higher percentage of middle-income neighborhoods. Even there, however, the number has decreased since 1970, with middle-class neighborhoods being replaced by higher and lower-income neighborhoods.¹³

Social Institution disappearance: *There seems to be a trend around here of churches become affordable housing...*

Robert Putnam argues that participation has been fast dwindling in institutions that have long been strongholds of community engagement and social capital, such as social clubs, churches, and charity leagues.¹⁴

Many counter-arguments have arisen in reaction to Putnam's claims. Some doubt the accuracy of his data. Others suggest that while social engagement has declined in the forms that it took fifty years ago, new forms have emerged that have not been considered (e.g. greater informal networks, internet communities, etc.).

Civic Engagement and Neighborhood Trust:

Almost half of Boston survey respondents expressed barriers to community involvement. Those barriers were overwhelmingly job-related, such as long work hours or childcare, and lack of information on how to get involved.

Most people responded that they trusted people in their community "a lot or somewhat". Black and Hispanic respondents had lower levels of trust, though the data was unavailable for specific categories. This is true both for the Boston sample and the national sample.¹⁵

4. Current perspectives from CDCs on the state of community and community engagement in their neighborhoods.

Anecdotal – 'but real time' information on very recent changes/shifts is needed to inform our thinking, looking at how local populations are sorting and what, if any, new forms of social infrastructure are emerging. Harry Smith, former director of community organizing at JPNDC is conducting a series of interview with staff, board and community members in a cross section of communities in Massachusetts. With several extensive interviews completed, the following are some preliminary themes that are emerging:

¹³ "Where Did They Go? The Decline of Middle-Income Neighborhoods in Metropolitan America". Galster, George, Jackie Cutsinger and Jason C. Booza. The Brookings Institution, June 2006.

http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2006/06poverty_booza.aspx

¹⁴ Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community. Robert D. Putnam.

¹⁵ Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey: Boston. Sponsored by The Boston Foundation. From the 2000 Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey, produced by The Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. <http://www.cfsv.org/communitysurvey/ma2.html>

- CDCs are playing role of convener to bring together groups that don't usually talk with each other
- CDCs are tackling quality of life issues such as graffiti, crime, and garbage because neighbors feel these are important issues.
- Too often CDCs are seen as having affordable housing agenda and approaching community leaders when they need support. Working on quality of life issues not only helps improve the neighborhood but helps CDCs build credibility and relationships among community members.
- CDCs are stretching well beyond traditional community development programming to areas like adult education because they are responding to 21st Century conditions. When one member was asked why this was important, she said. "Education is more important than a house. If you have education you can get a better job, save money, and eventually buy a home."
- CDCs initiate community planning processes as a vehicle for getting residents involved in the organization and on concrete projects to improve their neighborhood
- CDC that put resources into community organizing and community building efforts can increase their stature and credibility in their neighborhood. When residents see that CDC is committed to tackling quality of life issues it increases their trust in the organization.
- CDCs are looked to by many residents as institutions that have expertise and clout to negotiate agreements with private developers that will benefit community (e.g., IKEA example in Somerville)

The full report, Voices from the Field is attached

Moving forward, the Community Building Innovations Working Group will convene a practice group to engage practitioners in learning and to actively support community building in CDCs. We will work with the curriculum committee of the Mel King Institute for Community Building to identify appropriate community building curriculum.

It is the feeling of the working group that community building can no longer be regarded as a marginal or collateral 'line of business' for any organization that is interested in optimizing the value of place for struggling families and for struggling communities. Fractious civic environments will not be made whole and functional through real estate development or economic development projects. These kinds of relatively rare and priceless public/private investments must be secured by investments in a rich, functional and energized civic environment that has, at its core, equity, opportunity and diversity of people and voices.

Community Development Innovation Forum

Comprehensive Community Building Models and Lessons Learned Report by Diane Gordon, September 2008

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Community Development Innovation Forum seeks to identify innovations in community building that can support the work of Massachusetts community development organizations. Successful models of engagement, mobilization, and empowerment that have led to concrete improvements in the community as well as greater levels of leadership can help guide the community development field as it considers the impact of the changing environment.

To gather the models and lessons for this report, prior experiences in the NeighborWorks Network, Local Initiative Support Corporation, the Ricanne Hadrian Initiative for Community Organizing, and various parent engagement endeavors were reviewed. Highlights include:

Building Networks: Adapting a network building approach, many groups are engaging people through social interactions, flexible structures, and a wide variety of opportunities that add value and meet the needs of the members. Building and sustaining relationships between people has been key.

Entry Points: Open community dialogues that bring diverse groups of people together to discuss common concerns, community building events, general outreach, and voter registration are all ways that CDCs initially engage new people. Many groups are also now offering a wide variety of services and programs to attract new people and contribute to their quality of life.

Connections Leading to Change: For longer term results, the initial entry point must lead to further connections, engagement, and action. By forming small neighborhood groups, working in alliances with others, and organizing on single issue, targeted campaigns that bring together various segments of the community, networks have formed and concrete changes have occurred.

Capacity Building and Systemic Change: CDCs have led or participated in coalition with others on organizing campaigns focused on systemic change. Comprehensive, multi-year community planning focused on both concrete improvements and community leadership development, have been effective models. Leadership development through one on one mentoring and formal leadership training, with an emphasis on “learning by doing” are critical components in all successful community building models.

Throughout all of the successful models, community builders recognize the importance of sustainable, multi-year, flexible funding that enables them to invest in staff, who in turn, can build the kinds of lasting relationships with community members that are needed to create networks and strengthen communities. Similarly, ongoing funding and support is needed for CDCs to build their own organizational capacity to meet changing needs.

BACKGROUND

The Community Development Innovation Forum seeks to identify innovations in community building strategies that can support the work of Massachusetts community development organizations. In its definition of successful community building, the Community Building Team has highlighted certain key concepts:

- Community building is a process of place-based mobilization
- Community building recognizes the impact of regional, national, and global factors, and that people have greater mobility
- In order to be successful, people need supportive relationships, social networks, skill building, political power, and greater connections to each other, information, and opportunities
- The ultimate goals are:
 - Economic improvement, and creating accessible paths to economic success
 - Effective civic engagement
 - Optimizing the value of place
 - Improved quality of life

To further understand what it takes to achieve these goals, the Community Building Team sought to identify models from the community development field that have been used to facilitate connections, mobilize community, and increase civic engagement that led to both concrete improvements in the community (affordable housing, safer streets, improved schools, green space, access to transportation, diverse job opportunities) and greater levels of leadership (stronger boards of directors, increased social networks, increased political power).

Models of engagement, mobilization, and empowerment are grouped into the following:

- **Network building** – an overarching theory that informs how some CDCs are working towards systemic change
- **Initial engagement or entry points** – methods used to attract community residents to begin activity
- **Connections leading to action and change** – methods that build initial networks, further the connection between people, and have contributed to concrete actions for change
- **Building longer term capacities and systemic change** – methods that have resulted in sustained engagement among residents and have led to greater, systemic changes

A brief overview to effective strategies used in the parent engagement field is also offered.

MODELS

I. BUILDING NETWORKS

Changing dynamics have impacted neighborhoods served by CDCs and therefore must be taken into consideration when evaluating successful models for community building. Whether it's because people are working longer hours and often multiple jobs to make ends meet, or there are language barriers, or fears of violence, the result has been a greater sense of isolation among neighbors. Instead of congregating on the front stoop after dinner, many families are scattered, attending to work, school, children, on their own and often lacking the natural connections between neighbors that was an indicator of a healthy community in the past. Compounding this problem is that people face tremendous time pressures and for many cannot make the kind of commitment that community groups seek.

With an understanding of these challenges, some groups have focused on building networks among community members as a way to create an infrastructure instead of prior attempts that focused on recruiting members solely for an existing organization.

These groups have pointed out that network theory is well aligned with the realities of life in many communities today. The network form - low level affiliation, value and choice driven, flexibility, informality, responsiveness – offer a more accessible path for joining than more traditional hierarchal structures. Successful network building has recognized the importance of building connections/ relationships first through enjoyable activity and efforts to get to know each other, not necessarily meeting to organize against something. Adding value, creating numerous and diverse opportunities for connecting to others, working hard to keep the group accessible to new people have been hallmarks of successful networks.

Ingredients of successful network building have included:

- Numerous opportunities for peer to peer interactions
- Social interactions – around food, fun – help to build relationships
- Ability for people to participate to their own level of interest without guilt
- Offering a range of opportunities to help sustain engagement
- Flexible structures, responsive to the needs of the group
- Group works to always be accessible to new people
- Sufficient communication and information technology to ensure that people have access to each other and information
- Staff and members who are in the community meeting with people, listening to them, and then helping to shape responses that add value to the community

II. INITIAL ENGAGEMENT/ ENTRY POINTS

Whether approaching community building through a network model or other, CDCs utilize a variety of techniques to open opportunities for residents to become engaged in the community and with the organization. While not true in every case, these models tend towards activities that

are either short-term or single events that can but don't necessarily lead to further interaction. Examples include:

1. Open Community Dialogues

Open dialogues across diverse topics and populations that do not start with an agenda per se, but are meant to build connections and bring people together in a supportive environment where they can build greater understanding of each other have been successful as an initial entry point for community building. As neighborhoods have changed, CDCs are challenged with how to build community across even more diverse lines than in past – racial, ethnic, language, class, age, immigration status, etc. Creating forums for open discussions about the issues in the community and how ultimately people can work together are occurring in many CDC neighborhoods. Two examples are:

Public Conversations Project (PCP) brings together community leaders in dialogues about topics of interest to people throughout the area, conversations then lead to taking action on issues. This process encourages conversation across enduring political differences to promote constructive conversations in classrooms, workplaces, civic organizations, faith communities and the broader 'public square.' PCP has facilitated conversations among diverse religious groups, worked with local governments struggling with race issues, cultural institutions trying to engage diverse audiences, and religious organizations divided over same-sex marriage.

Community Conversations in Utica NY have been held through the Citizens Police Academy supported by Weed and Seed funding. These have led to cross cultural conversations and community dialogues with the police and local newspapers about race and the media.

2. Community Building Events

Single events or focused projects have been used to build pride and generate initial interest among community members for working together. These activities can be creative -- art, sports, food, festivals, etc., and/or are focused on immediate neighborhood projects such as a clean up, gardening, parks, anti-graffiti, or other beautification projects. Many occur on a single day, or efforts might extend to a multiple day activity.

As an initial entry point into the community and organization, one time events can be an effective draw. However, these events, meetings, or forums are generally not a good indicator of an engaged membership because what comes after a big mobilization effort is key. Organizations are successful when there is thought given to how to engage people beyond one time events – they need both structures where residents can express themselves in meaningful roles, sustain involvement in an activity or part take of a service/ program that keeps them involved, and a staff person dedicated to identifying potential roles and matching people with those inside/ outside the organization.

3. *General Community Outreach*

CDCs and other community based organizations often rely on general community outreach to identify individuals who may be interested in working together to address community concerns and may be potential sources of leadership for the organization and/or the community. When such activities are strategically organized, they can be highly effective at making personal contact with likely or potential supporters.

- Doorknocking campaigns – led by staff and volunteers to identify people interested in getting to know their neighbors, working together, meeting with other members
- One on one meetings with people who have expressed interest – open ended conversations to build a relationship that can help lead to greater involvement
- House meetings – informal get togethers of neighbors to build relationships, start to talk about neighborhood issues, and plan to work on projects together

4. *Voter Registration*

Voter registration efforts can be successful ways to outreach to new people and at the same time focus on increasing civic engagement. If taken a step farther, groups can provide voter education workshops and provide exposure to the public process, and public officials by meeting with elected officials to press for changes at the local and/or statewide level.

5. *Provision of Programs/ Services through the CDC*

Many CDCs have expanded their work to include the provision of services to constituents. The results are two-fold: residents participate in programs that meet their needs, and the CDC has a vehicle for opening its door to more people, and thereby expanding the relationships between individuals in the community.

Adding service delivery and programs to the options for a CDC has expanded in recent years to include such diversity as:

- Homeownership counseling and programs
- Individual Development Accounts
- Adult learning – ESL, technology, GED, computer, financial literacy and planning, and other classes that build skills and assets
- Job training, business incubator services, other economic development
- Youth learning – academic support, college prep, physical development
- Art, music, dance for youth and adults
- Sports leagues

By offering diverse programs and services that meet the needs of the community, people join because they get value for themselves or their community. This reinforces the notion that building relationships first while also providing a needed service can be successful in keeping people engaged. They get goods and services, but also connections to others that can transcend the issue of the moment to future work together.

Expanding into the service/ program arena is not without its challenges, however. While many CDCs are incorporating the philosophy of adaptive capacity by responding to changing community needs, they also must be careful to not go too far afield into an area that is not in their core mission and is better handled by another community player. Continually looking out and keeping in touch with the community's needs, while at the same time reflecting on their own capacities is an ongoing endeavor for CDCs.

III. MODELS THAT LEAD TO GREATER CONNECTIONS, ACTION, CHANGE

The models described above can be viewed as either short term, entry points into the organization or as a stepping stone for further engagement. With an understanding that the entry point is just that, groups that are striving for longer term results have given thought to how they are going to facilitate those initial connections into a more sustainable network that in turn can lead to action and change for the community.

Intentionally focused on building connections between members who come to events or participate in a service, CDCs are making ties between individuals and fostering conversations/ relationships between members and not just from the staff to the member.

1. Forming small neighborhood based groups

Traditional permanent structures at the neighborhood level such as block clubs have been harder to sustain and also be continually opening up opportunities for new leadership development. A newer organizational model called NeighborCircles was designed by Lawrence Community Works and now is also used by other CDCs.

NeighborCircles

Under the leadership of a resident "host" and trained facilitator, 8-10 families come together three times over the course of a month for dinner and conversation. They get to know each other, talk about the neighborhood or the city, and decide as group if there is something that they can do together to help build community.

NeighborCircles can continue to meet regularly after the third meeting to address neighborhood issues or organize activities to bring neighbors together. NeighborCircles have led to projects and collective action on specific issues. Some Circles have worked together on playground cleanups, improving street lighting, safety and parking, and organizing block parties.

These groups are small, flexible, goal-oriented community building structures which can become self generating as resident facilitators train other participants to conduct meetings on their own. Leaders can also become active with other projects organized by the CDC or others to improve the community.

2. Connecting to others through networks and alliances

Creating formal alliances with other organizations that share common interests to jointly address challenges is a way CDCs are expanding their reach, while recognizing that their organization doesn't do/ have all of the answers for people in the community. This is especially effective when reaching beyond the immediate demographics of the CDC by building alliances with groups of different ethnic, racial, or language backgrounds.

In some cities, CDCs partner directly with grassroots community organizing groups instead of attempting to incorporate organizing within their own structure. [Note: this has been effective in Chicago and is now being explored in Hartford.]

3. Targeted, single issue campaigns leading to concrete change

Workgroups formed based on a single issue or population have shown to be an effective way of getting people from an initial contact (entry point) to a greater level of commitment and potentially involved in an action for change. Groups have been formed around a particular concern, i.e., bed bugs, graffiti, trash; or in an individual tenant building. Projects and/or actions emerge. Follow up to determine how to further engage the individuals and what is next is key, otherwise, people can easily go back into the woodwork.

Organizing that is connected to something concrete and takes a proactive approach with an alternative viewpoint of what is possible generally has better results in terms of engaging people and getting something done than what some felt was "fighting just for the sake of it."

IV. BUILDING TOWARDS LONGER TERM SKILL/ CAPACITY BUILDING, AND SYSTEMIC CHANGE

1. Organizing campaigns focused on larger public policy issues

Moving beyond the targeted single issue campaign work, many CDCs have been successful at organizing the community, forming alliances, and creating a movement that has achieved more significant impact. These campaigns tend to be concerned with broader issues and be longer in duration. Examples are:

Job Creation – Washington DC

ONE DC led a campaign in the Shaw neighborhood in Washington DC in which \$2 million for training and hiring neighborhood residents for jobs created by the development and operation of a hotel resulted from a campaign around a convention center hotel that had no clear community benefit. Some of the people who got involved to organize around funding and job training and then found a job became involved in the organization afterwards.

Code Enforcement Ordinance – Sacramento CA

Sacramento MHA – the problem was a complaint driven code enforcement and housing inspection system. As a result of organizing, a new rental housing ordinance was passed that requires regular inspection of all rental housing.

The CDC can be challenged with creating a balance between being true to the demands for change that might be coming from their constituents, and working cooperatively with a public entity or other partners on a community development project. When to push, and how much to push for change is an ongoing dilemma for CDCs that are both building housing and organizing communities.

In response to this issue, some CDCs have formed alliances with groups that are solely focused on community organizing and may have fewer restraints on their activities. Building diverse coalitions to work on issues, such as through Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, can also assist a CDC to advocate forcefully for an issue while retaining relationships within their community.

2. *Comprehensive Community Planning*

Comprehensive community planning initiatives accomplish two goals – they build on initial attempts to get people engaged, resulting in stronger community leadership, and at the same time can be goal oriented, resulting in concrete plans for longer-term impact on community conditions.

New Communities Program/ Quality of Life Planning

NCP is a five year initiative to support the comprehensive development of 16 Chicago neighborhoods and is sponsored by LISC with funding from MacArthur Foundation.

The theory behind NCP is that sustainable neighborhood improvement requires long-term investment in many issues – schools, housing, health, jobs, etc. – all of which must improve together in a virtuous cycle, and secondly that the people and organizations of a neighborhood, if provided additional resources and networking help, can produce measurable improvements to their community’s well-being. Key elements are:

- On-going investment in a lead agency
- Quality of Life Plans developed under the sponsorship of a local agency selected by LISC; intended to be powerful blueprints for change; funding provided to implement the plan to produce sustainable neighborhood improvements
- Program gives each lead agency staffing positions, technical support for planning and documentation, access to a pool of loan and grant funds, and flexible venture capital to implement strategies and projects developed in the plans; learning from peers and subject area expert; linkages to renewable public and private resources
- Emphasis is on “doing while planning”
- Lead agencies are encouraged to forge partnerships with other nonprofit groups, businesses, government and residents to address issues such as affordable housing, prisoner re-entry, cultural programming, education reform, community marketing and open space

- A central NCP strategy is to create active communication among participating communities, lead agencies and support organizations. By documenting the activities and sharing strategies and methods through a newsletter, meetings, training sessions, web site and other methods, NCP hopes to multiply the impact of each neighborhood's work while advancing knowledge of community development practice.
- In doing comprehensive and longer term planning/ development, CDCs benefit from learning how to listen and learn from residents rather than simply recruiting people to their existing agendas.
- NCP borrowed heavily from the experiences of the Comprehensive Community Revitalization Program in South Bronx.

4. Leadership Development

A historic problem with leadership within CDCs or other community organizations has been the tendency to latch onto a couple of leaders, and entrust power to them under the mistaken idea that as long as they are from the community they must be real leaders. Entrenchment of leaders and stagnate leadership growth can result.

A renewed focus on the importance of continual leadership development and expansion of the membership base is apparent throughout many CDCs. Leaders learn in training sessions but then follow up is needed to put those skills to practice. An emphasis is put on “learning by doing”, coupled with the opportunity for observation, reflection and support, and encouragement to stretch to new activities and roles.

Equally important has been a focus on helping leaders actually be leaders. In other words, helping them to understand who they represent, who they are accountable to, and creating mechanisms for open two-way conversations. Boards of Directors that are truly representative of the community pay attention to structures that reinforce accountability, and are at the same time breeding grounds for new leadership through concerted efforts to identify, train, cultivate, and engage new people throughout their organization and in the community.

Leadership development planning/ mentoring

This entails thinking about people in the community who are either already identified as leaders or who appear to have potential, and assigning a staff member or community member to meet with them, identify ways they want to become engaged, and supporting their progress. Mentoring between veteran and inexperienced leaders which requires the development of a relationship after successful outreach is done is an effective way of helping new people feel comfortable and build their skills. This is an ongoing process, for as people progress, new avenues for growth must become available, with someone within the organization and/or the community focused on this process.

Local leadership training institutes

There are several examples of local CDCs developing their own leadership training institutes, and coupling that with participation in national forums such as NeighborWorks Community Leadership Institutes.

Sacramento MHA

- 6 session leadership academies in 4 languages
- Training 75 leaders to organize within and across racial, cultural, and ethnic lines
- Leaders launched eight community organizing action teams to work on issues identified during their advanced leadership trainings, such as School Safety team hosted a workshop for over 70 parents on identifying and preventing gang activity. The result was an active partnership with school leadership, parks and recreation staff, police, and local Boys and Girls Club. Leaders have also led the testimony and visits to individual council members that resulted in the passage of Sacramento's first rental housing inspection ordinance.

LCW – PODER Institute:

The Institute provides an intensive semester of training for emerging leaders who want to become more effective in the effort to revitalize the City. Throughout the course, members develop their skills as facilitative, participatory and transformational leaders by:

- Deepening their analysis of economics and power
- Studying community organizing and social change movements
- Understanding the social, political and economic history, myth and reality of Lawrence
- Reflecting on their own leadership experiences, strengths and challenges
- Challenging themselves to take on greater leadership challenges
- Applying tools, strategies and tactics for making collective change
- Building the network of skilled leaders in Lawrence

As a result of PODER, leaders have a greater ability to guide and participate in efforts that advance a positive vision for our City. Graduates have gone on to become lead facilitators of NeighborCircles, take on leadership roles in Lawrence CommunityWorks committees, join other community organizations, join for the Lawrence Human Rights Commission, and run for City Council.

V. PARENT ENGAGEMENT MODELS

Outside of the community development field are other examples of effective community building models. In a report by Chris Brown entitled, "*A Scan of Parent Engagement Organizations*" prepared for The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the following are some elements of successful engagement strategies that can be applied to the community development field.

Start where parents are: Successful engagement strategies started with an appreciation and respect for what parents already know and then worked with them through a process to build their understanding of education issues. This was in contrast to traditional school reform models that "believe they have a solution to a problem and just want to get parents to endorse this solution without engaging parents in a process that develops what parents think may or may not work for their children."

Leadership development is key: Through formal and informal training, mentoring, and support, successful parent engagement strategies all included a component of leadership development and a recognition that the purpose of their work is fundamentally to advance parent leadership to enable them to act on their own behalf and with others to improve educational opportunities for all children. The formal and informal processes of building knowledge and skills are tied to concrete opportunities for parents to use new skills in real settings which reinforces the concept that people “learn by doing.” They also recognized the importance of working with people over time and that training and action cannot be “one shot deals” if parents are going to build and sustain skills to be able to act.

Peer to peer interaction: Developing connections through opportunities for peer to peer interactions has been an important component of successful parent engagement work, as well as learning from experts in the field. By meeting with others, parents expanded their knowledge about educational issues, shared success/ failure stories to learn from others’ experiences, and created networks that could support all of their work going forward.

Partnerships: Building partners with educators, administrators, principals, and others in the community has been key to their success. Some have pointed out regardless of whether the organization chose an “inside” or “outside” strategy, the purpose has been to work with parents on their issues. “The work is not about antagonizing the schools or only supporting the schools.” Recognizing the importance of striking a balance between organizing for change and working in partnership with the school system, one leader said, “We need to hold them [the public schools] accountable, but you do not want to increase cynicism in society by constantly tearing them down.”

Continuum of strategies: Organizations that are working on parent engagement see a continuum of strategies that at first help parents connect with their own child’s education, connect to classrooms in schools, build skills/ knowledge/ and capacity, and then support parents as they advocate for change at their school and with others at the district or statewide level.

OVERALL LESSONS LEARNED

1. **Money:** Sustained funding for staff to focus on community building and organizing, especially multi year, flexible funding is critical to sustaining efforts, building leadership which takes time, over a period of time. Multi-year initiatives like the NCP provide an added benefit of the time and money flexibility to doing longer term projects which encourages an open process, trial and error approach, reflection/ learning and therefore greater change is possible. On the contrary, short term, project based funding inhibits a CDC from investing and retaining organizing staff, a critical component to their ability to build relationships with community members and invest in leadership development.
2. **Holistic/ Integration:** Taking a holistic approach to community building where there is buy in to the goals of community building throughout the organization is essential. The Executive Director and board leadership must be committed to community building and resident leadership in order to sustain these activities as a priority and to provide the necessary integration into all aspects of the organization. Some indicators of integration are:
 - Organizers and housing development staff develop shared vision and work together on projects
 - Staff has sufficient understanding of what each other does and can therefore spot opportunities for a holistic approach to community building
 - Open, regular communication
 - Structural mechanisms such as project teams, regular meetings to discuss opportunities; sharing project tasks that encourages cooperative work
 - Flexibility in structures to meet the goals of integration changed to match the evolving relationships

Without this level of integration, community organizers at best can be isolated and at worst can be marginalized from the overall work of community development, and therefore the work of community building can be an after-thought.

3. **Residents' roles:** Community resident leadership needs to be well integrated within the governance structure, providing for clear meaningful roles, not token ones. Effort should be put into building relationships among residents and professionals on the boards and committees. The organization is best served by assisting residents to understand how and to whom they are accountable so that they are not only representing themselves but retain effective communication and ties with their community.
4. **Partnerships:** CDCs have been effective at building stronger relationships with non-CDC partners to impact larger scale changes/ issues, such as literacy, after-school, adult education, tenant organizations, churches. When CDCs partner with other groups whose sole focus is tenant or other organizing it can be an effective method of pushing the issues forward. This is especially true when CDCs have partnered with tenant's rights organizations when trying to avoid conflict between the CDC and the owner of the property they might be trying to acquire, or when organizing in buildings owned by the CDC. Effective parent engagement

organizations built partnerships while still holding schools and the school system accountable. Building coalitions with groups that are solely focused on community organizing in other arenas can also help CDCs balance their various roles and at the same time ensure that a forceful, effective voice for the community is organized. Similarly, building partnership with groups that represent other populations – racial, ethnic, language, age, or other – can support open dialogue and stronger relationships that can lead to a more unified, and organized community working on common issues together.

5. **Relationships:** Throughout all models of community building, building relationships first instead of initially trying to get someone to join an organization or enter into a fight for a cause has been a key to building stronger ties that can be sustained. Inherent in successful models is the understanding that relationship building takes time over a period of time. Once trust is established, joint action is possible.
6. **Peer to peer:** Peer learning is a powerful tool for supporting organizing and sharing real-life experiences for both the paid staff and leaders, within the community, within the state among like minded groups, and nationwide via NWA or other conferences. This has helped people to get a broader perspective, build knowledge and skills, and strengthen connections outside of their area.
7. **Leadership:** Leadership development takes the time and focus of someone who is plugging people in to activities or roles where they can learn and grow and then helping them take the next steps whether its inside the organization or beyond in the community such as joining the PTO, or going to city council hearings, and other things outside of the purview of the CDC. All successful endeavors recognize the importance of combining classroom training with action, reinforcing the concept that people “learn by doing.”
8. **New people:** Engaging new people and bringing new people into the sphere of the organization on an ongoing basis is key to sustain a critical base and to have new ideas coming in. Because organizations are dynamic, people leave and disengage for a variety of reasons on a regular basis. Groups that recognize this know how to make room for new people in a meaningful way, and are always looking out for new people and thinking about how to support their growth.
9. **Added value:** Community building and organizing that is rooted in what people want, adds value to their lives, is practical and action oriented, will attract the involvement of a wider variety people, and have the ability to continually build. CDCs seeking to be responsive to the needs of the community and adapting to changing times still need to be mindful to avoid “mission drift.”
10. **Organizational capacity:** Building the organizational capacity of the CDC is a critical component to overall success. As groups bring in new leaders, develop programs to meet changing needs, join coalitions, take on public policy campaigns, and expand other efforts, they must also recognize that the overall capacity of the organization to manage these endeavors must grow and shift. There is an ongoing need to analyze needs and build capacity in their internal infrastructure and systems, management, governance structures, and staffing.

Community Development Innovation Forum Comprehensive Community Building Team

Voices from the Field: Current perspectives from CDCs on the state of community and community engagement in their neighborhoods

Report by Harry Smith, September 29, 2008

Background

As part of the work of the Comprehensive Community Building Team I was contracted to conduct a series of interviews with leaders and staff of Community Development Corporations (CDC) in different communities in Massachusetts.

The Team was most interested in getting a report from a cross-section of CDCs to identify current challenges facing these communities and what CDCs are doing to deal with these challenges. The Team was especially focused on analyzing the role of CDCs as “place-making institutions” in their neighborhoods and understanding how a changing environment has altered the organizing and community-building strategies of these organizations. Finally, the Team wanted to understand the different ways in which new leaders are getting involved in CDCs and the strategies CDCs are using to cultivate and support this new leadership.

The interviews are not intended to provide a comprehensive analysis of the above-mentioned issues but rather to provide concrete examples that illustrate how CDCs are adapting and changing based on their local conditions.

Methodology

Working with a subcommittee consisting of Bill Traynor (Lawrence Community Works), Juan Gonzalez (Jamaica Plain NDC), and Marissa Guananja (Chelsea Neighborhood Developers), I identified leaders and organizing staff from seven CDCs. We decided on the main areas we wanted to focus on in the interviews and from there I developed a series of questions to use in the interviews.

The subcommittee wanted to make sure to interview CDCs in a number of communities and cities and to interview leaders who were at different stages of involvement with the CDC. For staff interviews, the group wanted to focus on community organizing staff to get their perspective on the role CDCs play in their communities.

Between September 4 and September 25, I conducted interviews with seven leaders and four organizers from seven CDCs. Some interviews were conducted individually and others were conducted in pairs, depending on the schedule limitations of the interviewees.

Interviewees were told that the interviews would be made public as part of the Comprehensive Community Building Teams final report and all gave their permission to use their quotes in that report.

The interview write-ups are attached to this report.

Participating CDCs

The CDCs who were represented in the interviews are:

- Chelsea Neighborhood Developers
- Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation
- Lawrence CommunityWorks
- Madison Park Development Corporation (Roxbury)
- Oak Hill CDC (Worcester)
- Somerville Community Corporation
- Urban Edge (Roxbury/Jamaica Plain)

Interview Questions

The questions used in the interviews were designed to spark a conversation and elicit expansive answers from the interviewees. They were not meant to be a survey but rather as a vehicle to get qualitative information from leaders and staff. Some basic questions were asked of every interviewee but not every question was asked at every session. I tried to meet the goals set out by the subcommittee while also allowing the interviewees to talk about issues that were important to them.

Examples of questions include:

- How and why did you get involved in the CDC?
- What has your involvement in the CDC meant to you personally?
- How has your community been changing over the past few years? How is the CDC responding to these changes?
- Tell me about a recent campaign or organizing effort that your CDC has been involved in?
- What are the biggest challenges or problems facing your neighborhood?
- Why is it important that your CDC spend time and resources on community organizing and community-building initiatives?
- What strategies haven't worked? What are your biggest frustrations?
- Why is it important that your CDC organizes around quality of life issues in your community?
- How are residents able to get involved in the decisions of the CDC?
- Has your community seen population changes in the past few years through immigration or loss of major employers? How has this affected the community?

Themes that emerged from the Voices from the Field interviews

The discussions with leaders and organizers were incredibly rich and wide-ranging. This is an attempt to identify the main themes that emerged from the interviews and include some concrete examples and quotes under each theme. It is important to read the full texts of the interviews to get a better sense of the range of innovative strategies that CDCs are implementing.

- **CDCs are playing the role of convener to bring together groups that may not usually talk with each other**

“We realized that there was no one place where all the key groups and people in Chelsea were talking about quality of life issues. The Community Enhancement team created a new space for groups and individuals to come together and talk about graffiti.” (Elaine Cusick, Chelsea Neighborhood Developers)

There are several examples from the interviews of CDCs serving as vehicles for neighborhood dialogue and planning. CDCs who play this role are able to achieve more in terms of improving quality of life in their neighborhoods than if they had pursued a campaign on their own. CDCs that share credit and focus on building strong relationships with other organizations are able to sustain their work over the long haul.

Examples:

- *Somerville Community Corporation (SCC)*: The East Somerville Initiative organized by SCC involved 350 residents and resulted in an Action Plan that included 27 goals towards equitable growth and progress in East Somerville. SCC is taking the lead on some of these goals and supporting efforts of other groups on the remaining priorities.
- *Chelsea Neighborhood Developers (CND)*: CND's Community Enhancement Team brought Inspectional Services and Police into the same room as Chelsea Collaborative, ROCA, and others to address the impact of graffiti; for various reasons those groups had not been sitting at same table to deal with quality of life issues.
- *Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation (JPNDC)*: JPNDC organized a Neighborhood Summit called "*Building an Equitable Community*" that was sponsored by more than 30 local organizations, some of whom were not necessarily supportive of every JPNDC initiative but who wanted to talk about issues that interested their members.

- **CDCs are creating new strategies and organizational structures to recruit new members and engage current ones**

"In the past two years four members of the Resident Leadership Committee have moved up to the board, including the current board chair and secretary. My goal is to make the residents my boss." (Paul Hernandez, Oak Hill CDC)

"Lawrence CommunityWorks is not really an organization, it's a network of people working together. People can get involved in all different ways and for as much time as they can." (Delmy Rosales)

CDCs have come to understand that resident participation in a CDC does not consist of joining a committee or being elected to the board. In fact, many potential leaders are turned off by the organizational culture of traditional CDCs which often features numerous regular meetings, lack of orientation and support for new leaders, and a general lack of enjoyment and fun. Some CDCs are attempting to change the way they do business to allow a greater voice for residents in the organization's decision-making. In addition CDCs are recognizing that they must go beyond their community boards and engage a wide range of neighborhood leaders if they hope to get buy-in for their initiatives.

Examples:

- Lawrence CommunityWorks places strong emphasis on networking between community residents. a network of community residents. They have developed an elaborate model for integrating leaders into their community outreach efforts. They train leaders to become Guides, Friends, and Scribes, to conduct outreach and document the work of the organization.
- Oak Hill CDC has established a Resident Leadership Committee whose focus is to support new leaders to deepen their involvement in the organization. This committee serves as a training ground for potential board members.
- Chelsea Neighborhood Developers: Rather than functioning as a traditional CDC committee, the Community Enhancement Team focuses on specific actions to get results on

particular issues e.g. graffiti; CND also has established a Community Committee that meets monthly with the Executive Director to help CND set their priorities.

- **CDCs are investing organizing resources to tackle a range of issues including as graffiti, crime, and traffic to improve quality of life and build credibility among community members.**

“If we are not working on issues that the community is interested in then we will be viewed as an outside group, even though we are based in the neighborhood.” (Juan Gonzalez, Jamaica Plain NDC)

“CND needs to focus on creating communities where people want to stay and invest, which makes them better communities to live in. If the neighborhood doesn’t appear to be place where you can raise your kids then people won’t stay.” (Elaine Cusick, Chelsea Neighborhood Developers)

CDC leaders and staff spoke at length about the need for CDCs to tackle quality of life issues such as public safety, graffiti, traffic, and garbage as a way of building credibility with other neighborhood leaders and groups and of demonstrating CDCs’ interest in promoting healthy and vibrant communities. Too often CDCs are seen as having an affordable housing agenda and approaching community leaders only when they need support for a specific project. The fact that CDCs are putting time and resources into neighborhood improvement campaigns builds trust and establishes CDCs as positive change agents within their communities.

Examples:

- *Madison Park Development Corporation (MPDC):* Working with Public Safety Committee of Orchard Gardens on variety of anti-violence initiatives; recognized by Boston Police Department as a model for crime prevention.
- *Chelsea Neighborhood Developers (CND):* Community Enhancement Team that has involved residents in comprehensive anti-graffiti campaign.
- *Urban Edge* is working with leaders of Academy Homes I on public safety initiatives to make the development safer.

- **CDCs are stretching well beyond traditional community development programming to areas like adult education because they are responding to 21st Century conditions.**

“Education is more important than a house. If you have education you can get a better job, save money, and eventually buy a home.” (Maria Betances, Lawrence CommunityWorks)

Several other leaders echoed this sentiment and spoke at length about the need to go beyond building housing and to focus on ways to increase incomes and expand opportunities for residents. Others stressed the importance of CDCs finding new ways to provide services that breaks the traditional Provider-Client relationship and instead integrates program participants into other parts of the CDC.

Example:

- *Lawrence CommunityWorks (LCW):* LCW’s Our House community center and campus serves as center of community life for hundreds of Lawrence families, offering a wide range of services and classes designed to help families build knowledge and assets.

- **CDCs are actively organizing to prevent displacement of existing residents in the face of gentrification pressures**

“Jamaica Plain is a wonderful, diverse community and we have to fight every day to keep it that way. We need our CDC to be there with us in that fight.” (Betsaida Gutierrez, Jamaica Plain NDC)

“I had a parent tell me recently that they were thinking of leaving Worcester but that their son would be upset if he couldn’t keep going to the summer program. These are the kinds of programs and services that keep people in our community.” (Paul Hernandez, Oak Hill CDC)

CDCs in communities facing strong gentrification pressures are finding creative ways to minimize the displacement of existing low and moderate-income families. These efforts take many forms, from including anti-displacement as a major theme of community planning processes to organizing to pressure large developers and landlords to meet the needs of the community. CDCs are also providing services and programs that are attractive to residents and give them a reason to stay.

Examples:

- Jamaica Plain NDC’s successful campaign to prevent the sale of Blessed Sacrament Church for market rate housing and current campaign to ensure that public land around Forest Hills T station includes significant affordable housing component.
- Somerville CDC made anti-displacement a central goal of the East Somerville Planning Initiative; negotiated local hiring agreement with IKEA.
- Oak Hill CDC negotiated 60 scholarships for local youth at Worcester Academy summer camp and found jobs for many local youth near their homes; Oak Hill considers these strategies to be part of their effort to stabilize their neighborhood.

- **CDCs make community building and organizing a central part of their organizational strategy and provide support to CDC organizers for their leadership development efforts**

“I have learned never to ask someone to do something that I’m not willing to do myself. You have to be a role model.” (Luz Maria Colón, Madison Park Development Corporation)

“I would describe Meridith as pleasantly persistent but not pushy.” (Leanne Darrigo, Somerville Community Corporation describing SCC Organizing Director Meridith Levy)

“The board has received training and support from Urban Edge staff on how to read budgets and on the issues involved in being a co-owner. These have helped people understand what our role is and what we need to do.” (Abass Dieng, Academy Homes I Tenant Council)

CDCs understand that leadership development does not happen by accident. Every leader I interviewed could identify the exact moment when they got involved in CDC. It almost always involved a conversation with an organizer who asked them to participate in an activity and encouraged them to get more active. Recognizing that leadership development goes beyond recruiting community residents to their boards, CDCs have invested considerable time and resources into creating structured and creative leadership development programs.

Examples:

- Oak Hill CDC’s Resident Leadership Committee
- Urban Edge provides training to Academy Homes I Tenant Council to ensure their full participation as joint owners.

- Lawrence CommunityWorks organizes six month resident training program called PODER that teaches residents about the history of the community and teaches them how to organize to improve their neighborhood.
- **CDCs initiate community planning processes as a vehicle for getting residents involved in the organization and on concrete projects to improve their neighborhood**
“I got involved because I enjoy meeting new people and hearing their stories, We often have different backgrounds but we can find common issues to work on.” (Leanne Darrigo, Somerville Community Corporation)

Involving residents in community planning efforts is an important activity for CDCs, not only because it ensures that residents have a voice over how resources are used but also because it can serve as a vehicle for recruiting and maintaining committed, active leaders. Most importantly, these planning initiatives serve as a ‘reality check’ for the CDC and gives them a way to continually consult groups and residents to maintain their community focus.

Examples:

- One leader I interviewed from *Somerville Community Corporation* got involved in the organization through the East Somerville Planning Initiative. She hadn’t thought of getting involved in SCC until she saw that they were undertaking this ambitious attempt to secure the future of her neighborhood.
- Participation in *Jamaica Plain NDC’s* Organizing Committee has more than doubled over the past few months because it has become the body that is implementing the Action Plan that came out of the organization’s Neighborhood Summit. One new member has joined the board after getting active in the Summit planning.
- **CDCs are looked to by many residents as institutions that have expertise and clout to negotiate agreements with private developers that will benefit community (e.g., IKEA example in Somerville)**

Challenges

In addition to the successful community building initiatives and innovative outreach strategies described, several challenging themes emerged out of the interview process that deserve the attention of the Comprehensive Community Building Team. These challenges are not new ones and have no easy answers, but they can provide a context as the discussion of promoting comprehensive community building practices moves forward.

- **Difficult funding environment**

The kind of community building described in many of the interviews requires well-trained, professional organizing staff and an organizational commitment to integrate organizing and community building into all areas of the CDC. Several experienced leaders and staff who I interviewed expressed their concerns about the lack of funding as their CDCs attempt to strengthen and expand community building activities. Funds to support community organizing are always difficult to come by and the current funding environment continues to be a challenge, especially for the kind of multi-year funding needed to make this integration a reality.

- **Challenges of maintaining credibility as problem-solver when dealing with issues that are not local in scope**

The CDC leaders and staff who I interviewed spoke at length about the critical importance of CDCs establishing and maintaining credibility in the community as organizations that can solve problems and respond to community needs. Several leaders said that they got involved with the CDC in the first place because of the organization's commitment to bringing diverse groups of people together to find real solutions to the community's problems. There are numerous examples in this report that illustrate successes that CDCs have had by using this approach, both in terms of concrete quality of life improvements and opportunities for leadership development.

The premium placed on credibility leads to a basic question: What happens when a CDC uses community building strategies to respond to a pressing neighborhood issue only to find that they cannot find local solutions for the problem, thus threatening their credibility with neighborhood residents?

The most striking current example of this dilemma is the foreclosure crisis that has devastated the very neighborhoods that CDCs are working to revitalize. Nearly every leader interviewed talked about the wave of foreclosures sweeping through their communities. They named it as a major source of frustration because it is a national problem with limited possibility to solve the problem locally.

CDCs have taken steps to address the crisis, from offering foreclosure prevention counseling to identifying foreclosed properties for the CDC to purchase but the impact of these efforts is limited at best. CDCs continue to train leaders to advocate at a city and state level in conjunction with MACDC and others, but there is no simple legislative solution to the mortgage crisis. For leaders and organizers accustomed to successfully organizing to bring improvements to their neighborhoods it is disheartening to see foreclosure signs pop up on the same streets they are working to improve and sobering to realize that there is little they can do on a local level to stem the tide of foreclosures.

- **How to use community building strategies to address potentially difficult issues and to manage conflicts that emerge from both inside and outside the CDC**

All relationships experience conflict and these conflicts often produce positive changes. Some leaders interviewed touched on the fact that CDCs inevitably face some resistance to their efforts to improve the neighborhood, despite their best efforts to build relationships and engage local government and institutions in the process. Even seemingly non-controversial community building campaigns, such as anti-graffiti efforts, can meet with surprising resistance if the efforts call for the city to put new resources into the effort or change existing practices. As CDCs continue to successfully organize for improved services and programs to serve their communities, they are going to need tools and strategies to manage conflict and overcome resistance. The Team should explore how the Community Building model can deal with issues of conflict within their communities, especially how CDCs can relate to elected officials, government agencies, and large institutions when their actions conflict with the CDC's goal of strengthening the community.

In addition, the focus on finding common ground can potentially result in missed opportunities for CDC to take leadership on potentially difficult issues, such as race and class tensions in the neighborhood. Several leaders and staff who I interviewed pointed to immigration and the tension between newer and established residents as serious issues in their communities. However, even the

most pro-active CDCs tend to shy away from controversial topics that might interfere with the overarching CDC strategy of seeking common ground among diverse constituencies. It is worth analyzing whether CDCs are giving up an opportunity to bring residents together to address issues of race and class in their communities, in the same way that they act as a convener around quality of life issues and community planning.

- **Challenge of promoting Community Building as integral to work of CDCs**

For the most part, we chose to interview CDCs who are making great progress towards more fully integrating community building into their organizations, or who at least are actively discussing these issues within the organization. At these CDCs there is support and vision provided by the executive directors and boards to take the necessary steps to increasing the involvement of residents in decision-making structures of the CDC and to come up with new vehicles to expand the voice of residents. However at many CDCs, community organizing is still regarded as a “program” or an outreach vehicle to gain community support for particular CDC projects or programs, rather than an integral component of the CDC. A challenge for the Comprehensive Community Building Team will be to clearly explain the benefits of a CDC integrating organizing and community building into their core work, complete with concrete examples to help CDCs who are looking to change their fundamental approach to community development.

Conclusion

The interviews with leaders and organizers should serve to confirm some assumptions and challenge others about the organizing and community building strategies that CDCs are currently using. These interviews are not intended to be an exhaustive report on the issue of community building but they do hopefully provide a context for the Comprehensive Community Building Team’s report and recommendations.

I would strongly urge you to read the full texts of the interviews that are attached to this report. The summary of emerging themes does not do justice to the eloquence of the leaders and staff as they describe their successes and challenges.

**MACDC Innovation Group
Comprehensive Community Building Team
Voices from the Field Interviews**

Interview with Chelsea Neighborhood Developers

9/4/08

Participants: Ben Faust- Community Organizer, Elaine Cusick- CND Leader

Interviewer: Harry Smith

Fighting Graffiti, Building Credibility

“Credibility is a hard thing to pin down but you know when you don’t have it and when you do. Chelsea Neighborhood Developers has it.”

Elaine Cusick grew up around Boston and has lived in Chelsea for three years. She has a four year old daughter named Isabella and works in Chelsea as a Special Education administrator. “I got involved with CND about a year ago. I saw a flyer for a community meeting where people could talk about how to make the city a more liveable place. I couldn’t make the meeting but I called Ben and ended up going to the second meeting. I was impressed with the presentation and that there were so many people talking about making Chelsea a better place to live.”

Ben Faust says, “We got money to conduct a strategic plan for the Shurtleff-Bellingham neighborhood of Chelsea. We studied mobility, safety, housing models, public and green space. 25-30 people came to an initial community meeting, including 7-8 new people. At this first meeting community members gave feedback on a preliminary strategic plan. Their contributions guided the creation of a reworked master plan, which was presented with great success back to the community in a second meeting. I asked Elaine and others to stay involved on neighborhood revitalization. The city would go on to include our strategic plan in their Master plan for area. CND is now working to hold city officials accountable to implement plan and working to acquire blighted housing.”

Community Enhancement Team

Elaine later attended a NeighborWorks Community Leadership Institute training on resident-led revitalization. “I was especially interested in learning about the importance of public space in a densely populated urban areas.” She and a small group of leaders worked with Ben to form what they called a Community Enhancement Team and decided to focus on graffiti as their first issue to tackle.

Elaine says, “Graffiti is a huge problem. Some of it is gang tagging but mostly it’s random tagging all over public and private buildings and mailboxes. Two of the CET members got involved in the anti-graffiti campaign partly because they had gotten tickets from the city for not removing graffiti quickly enough.”

Ben says, “The Team invited the Quality of Life Inspector from Inspectional Services and he was excited that there was a group willing to work on this issue. Different city officials started coming to meetings and the effort mushroomed. Interest in the issue was so widespread that the city council held sub-committee meetings on graffiti that had huge attendance.”

Ben continues, “We realized that there was no one place where all the key groups and people were talking about quality of life issues. The CET created a new space for groups and individuals to come together and talk about graffiti. This included schools, police, ISD, Planning Department, the Chelsea Collaborative, and ROCA, a youth organizing group in Chelsea. We succeeded in getting everyone in the same room. Police and others have spent time on this project because they tell us that they believe CND has high a level of credibility around Chelsea..”

The CET helped to start a process that identified tagged buildings, which were reported to the city who worked with youth from ROCA to paint them out.

Elaine says, “This past July CND hosted a Get Out Paint Out Day. 30 volunteers came and painted out twenty houses that had been tagged. That event was a turning point for us.”

She continues, “It is difficult to measure your victories in a campaign against graffiti but we saw results. The city has told us that open graffiti cases have dropped from 100 to 20 since the event. More people are getting involved in this effort. There is greater awareness about graffiti as a serious quality of life issue.”

The key to success? “CND facilitated people coming together around the issue. We didn’t make attacks but instead we came up with strategy for bringing people together.”

Focus on Quality of Life

When asked why CND is putting time in the anti-graffiti campaign, Elaine says, “CND needs to focus on creating communities where people want to stay and invest, which makes them better communities to live in. If neighborhood doesn’t appear to be place where you can raise your kids then people won’t stay.”

Ben adds, “You can’t build healthy a neighborhood by building nice houses. You need to reach people in the houses and deal with the issues facing the neighborhood. People want to know that CND is spending resources on improving public space. That increases peoples’ desire to live here and stabilize the community.”

Lessons Learned

If they had the anti-graffiti campaign to do over again Ben and Elaine would have done a few things differently. One of the biggest problems was time. Ben says, “We were always strapped for time. For example, Chelsea Collaborative brought taggers in and asked what to do with them and we didn’t have a good answer. We weren’t ready to create a space for 25 kids, but if we had we would have had an even bigger impact.”

Elaine says, “Our challenge now is to get people involved on a continuing basis- there are now 5 people in the group and we need at least 10.”

While continuing to make progress on graffiti, the Community Enhancement Team plans to focus on issue of trash over the next year. Ben says, “This is huge issue in Chelsea. There is open trash in many streets and this attracts all kinds of pests. There is also the absence of recycling in most areas. We need more public awareness and incentive-based recycling program.” Both Ben and Elaine say

that the trash campaign could be even harder than graffiti because it is a complicated issue without easy solutions.

Other Challenges

There are other serious issues facing Chelsea that CND is working on. According to Ben, the foreclosure crisis has devastated Chelsea with multiple houses being foreclosed on almost every block. “In the beginning of 2008 Chelsea was second only to Lawrence in foreclosures per 1000 owners. There are boarded up buildings popping up all over the city and there is not much residents can do about it. Abandoned buildings have led to an increase in drugs and prostitution in the area. In some cases tenants are fending for themselves because there are no landlords.”

CND is responding to the crisis with an effort to buy these foreclosed buildings. CND staff is on top of the housing market in Chelsea and have made over a dozen bids on properties, but are being out bid by speculators who will not reinvest any money into bringing these properties up to standards that CND wants to see. Ben says, “It is very hard for us to compete with buyers who don’t have to factor in rehab costs on top of their highest bid.” Nevertheless CND has purchased two foreclosed properties and hopes to acquire many more by the end of the year.

Race relations and immigration are also huge issues in Chelsea. Ben says, “CND doesn’t work directly with these issues. We work to try to bring people together who want to create relationships with their neighbors. Once they achieve these relationships we will work to provide them with resources towards solving any problem they might come up with. If a group decides immigration is their biggest problem we will help connect them to other groups, like the Chelsea Collaborative who are making great strides in the effort.”

New Strategies to Increase Community Involvement

When asked why she chose to get involved in Chelsea Neighborhood Developers, Elaine answers, “I like them because they have a clear project focus- they get input from residents and do a lot of consensus building to arrive at strategy. Sometimes the process is a little too long but the results are genuine. CND is committed to sustainable solutions, not just a quick fix.”

Ben says that rather than trying to recruit new residents directly onto the board of directors, CND is trying out new ideas to get them involved, including the Community Enhancement Team. Another innovation is CND’s Community Committee which meets with the Executive Director once a month to let her know what is happening in community. This Community Committee is a sub-committee of Board with several board members and six residents or business owners in Chelsea. Ben says, “This Committee is an effort to bring in new voices to impact how CND sets its priorities.” Elaine is on the committee and thinks it is effective because it includes a broad range of the city.

Ben says, “We are doing formal membership drive this Fall. We have about 100 informal members.” Another new way to get neighbors involved is through the Neighbor Circles program, an outreach and organizing project used successfully by Lawrence Community Works and which LCW has helped CND bring to Chelsea. Neighbors get together for dinner at a neighbors house and eventually talk about issues that they might be able to work on together. Ben says, “NeighborCircles is creating social capital and getting neighbors to know each other.”

Elaine says, “The NeighborCircles have been helpful because I have gotten to know neighbors I didn’t know before and now we all look after each other.

Ben says CND will continue to play the role of convener on quality of life issues where there are residents who express the need for change. “When we started the anti-graffiti campaign, CND saw a big demand for improving relations between the city and its constituents. No other group was playing that role, especially in regards to graffiti. Now that groups see that we can get results we hope they will stay involved in our next campaign.”

Elaine says she will stay involved on the Community Enhancement Team because it’s a place where people work together to get things done. “CET members have different opinions but we all share the belief that we need to focus on solutions.”

Interview with Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation 9/22/08

Participant: Juan Gonzalez, JPNDC Organizing Director

Interviewer: Harry Smith

Creating New Strategies to Fight Gentrification

“The mission of the JPNDC is not just to build affordable housing, but to build a stronger community. Affordable housing is one means to that end.”

Juan Gonzalez is the Organizing Director at the JPNDC. A native of Guatemala he has been involved for many years in organizing efforts around immigrant rights, tenant rights, and community control of development.

JP Neighborhood Summit

In May 2008, JPNDC organized an event called “Building an Equitable Community: A JP Neighborhood Summit.” The Summit gave JP residents the chance to face head on the dilemma that faces JPNDC and many other CDCs across the country- namely, How to make sure that the revitalization for which residents have worked so hard doesn’t lead to displacement of those same residents. The JPNDC sought to bring people together to discuss challenges and devise strategies for making JP a revitalized *and* equitable neighborhood. 250 people attended the Summit, which was endorsed by 16 organizations. Residents and representatives from community organizations, churches, health centers all over JP attended. Participants attended one of three panels and one of 12 workshops on a variety of topics.

Since the Summit Juan and the Organizing Team have been working with participants and representatives of collaborating organizations to prioritize issues and create a follow-up plan. “It’s important for CDCs to do a reality check every so often to make sure that our programs and activities are meeting the needs of our neighborhood. If we don’t do these types of activities then we run the risk of being considered as just another top-down developer; non-profit but still top-down.”

“The Summit allowed us to also bring people to the table who weren’t necessarily our friends but who wanted to work on an issue being discussed at the event. We were able to reach some new understandings with people and groups who don’t necessarily agree with our advocacy for affordable housing.”

“Since the Summit we had three follow up meetings attended by an average of 40 residents. The exciting thing is that a significant number of them are new to the JPNDC and are now working as part of our Organizing Committee to implement the Action Plan that came out of the Summit.”

The Action Plan focuses on three areas: 1) Building Social Capital in a Diverse Community, 2) Strengthening our Independent Business Districts, and 3) Inclusive Planning for an Equitable Forest Hills.

Dealing with Race and Class

Juan is particularly excited about the Building Social Capital piece because it will allow for positive dialogue around issues that few people want to talk about. “It was the young people at the Summit who pushed to have these conversations,” Juan explains. “They are going to lead focus groups where people can talk directly to each other about issues of race and class.” In addition, JPNDC is willing to work with young people to create a neighborhood map pinpointing where different crimes occur and to analyze why crimes are occurring in certain areas and not in others. This project, funded through the LISC Community Safety Initiative, will seek to understand root causes of crime in the neighborhood and to promote activities to properly address safety issues.

Juan explains that the Business District piece is also interesting because the group plans to both assist merchants in dealing with huge rent increases but also possibly launch a Campaign for Local Consumption to encourage people to support these businesses. “We are having a series of breakfasts with small business owners to look at how we can all find better ways to help them negotiate better rents and work together to promote the business district.” In these efforts JPNDC will be collaborating with the local Main Streets and merchant associations.

Forest Hills

JPNDC has a long history of direct action organizing to fight gentrification and the displacement of low-income families from the neighborhood. The latest example is the JPNDC’s participation in the Forest Hills Improvement Initiative sponsored by the BRA to develop proposals for publicly-owned land surrounding the Forest Hills T station. “We have joined with City Life and other groups to make sure that all residents’ voices are heard in this process,” Juan explains. “Up until now, the vision for the area was being discussed by a small group of middle-class homeowners. We were able to open up the discussion to include many tenants and low-income families who live in the Forest Hills area.” Not surprisingly, according to Juan, affordable housing has risen to the top of the list of priorities and residents were successful in having the BRA include language stating that 50% of any housing developed should be affordable. “This number seems reasonable because the city’s own statistics show that 50% of the families in Forest Hills have incomes that qualify them for affordable housing. We want to see development but not something that is out of reach for these kind of families.”

Why would the JPNDC spend time and resources to educate and mobilize residents around this planning process, especially when, according to Juan, the JPNDC has not decided if it wants to pursue a development role on the sites? “It’s simple. People at the Community Summit pointed to Forest Hills as a place where we needed to fight for affordable housing, whether the JPNDC develops it or not. If we don’t get involved then we lose credibility in the neighborhood among our friends and supporters.”

Challenges

Besides the huge problems caused by foreclosures and escalating commercial rents, Juan cited other issues that remain a challenge for the organization.

“It is challenging to work in a diverse community and to try to deal directly with the conflicts that come up around race and class, and between theory and practice. We are always looking for creative ways to deal with these issues.”

One concrete example of JPNDC’s commitment to community building is the organization’s history of developing resident controlled housing, particularly limited-equity cooperatives. “At these cooperatives residents have more control over their neighborhood because they can oversee the management company and approve the budget. It is a challenge to organize them correctly but cooperatives are a great example of going beyond building housing to build a stronger community.”

Juan looks at the Community Summit as the best example of JPNDC’s role as a convener of other groups in the neighborhood. He also sees the benefit of such initiatives for the organization. “All organizations must change according to conditions but we must always be community-based. If we’re not working on issues that the community is interested in then we will be viewed as an ‘outside’ group, even though we are based in the neighborhood.”

Interview with Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation

9/23/08

Participant: Betsaida Gutierrez, former organizer and board member

Interviewer: Harry Smith

“Jamaica Plain is a wonderful diverse community and we have to fight every day to keep it that way. We need our CDC to be there with us in that fight.”

Betsaida Gutierrez is a native of Puerto Rico who has been living and working in Jamaica Plain for more than 30 years to improve the lives of Latino and low-income residents.

Betsaida participated in the JPNDC’s Neighborhood Summit last spring along with members of her church and numerous other neighbors. The Summit had particular meaning for her because she had been involved in pulling together the Jamaica Plain Planning Coalition in 1985, the first local planning process that included strong representation from the Latino community. At the time Betsaida was working as a community organizer for the JPNDC and she played a key role in creating a Latino caucus that promoted the participation of Latinos in the process. In the end several hundred community residents participated in the process, which resulted in concrete recommendations on land use and community control of resources that were later adopted by the Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Council.

More than 20 years later Betsaida was glad to see the JPNDC pulling together even more organizations to identify neighborhood issues and develop action plans. “This summit was different than the Planning Coalition because now we have more experience and knowledge about how to get what we need for our community. Back then we were just starting out and we were educating ourselves about the issues.”

Betsaida later joined the staff of City Life/Vida Urbana where she helped organize to pressure banks to increase lending to Latino and African-American homeowners and formed the *Latinos Comprando Casas* first-time homebuyer program. She later joined the Organizing Committee and board of directors of JPNDC, serving as a bridge to help support new Latino leadership in the organization.

Blessed Sacrament Church

In 2005 Betsaida helped lead the community campaign to stop the Blessed Sacrament Church from being closed and sold for market rate housing. When it became clear that the Archdiocese of Boston was intent on selling the church and adjoining buildings, Betsaida, a former parishioner, helped rally residents to demand that the property be sold as affordable housing. In large part because of the organizing campaign the JPNDC was able to purchase the church with a proposal for affordable homeownership and cooperative housing, new small businesses, and community space. “We were happy to see that the church would be used to benefit the community. If it had been sold for condos it would have been like a double slap in the face to our community.”

Fighting Displacement

Betsaida explains that the JPNDC has a commitment and duty to the neighborhood to fight displacement of existing families in the face of the gentrification that has driven rents and home sale prices sky high. “There are many families and residents, mostly renters, who were in the lead in cleaning up the neighborhood, fighting drug dealers and holding candlelight vigils against violence. Now that the vacant lots are gone and the neighborhood is more attractive these are the same people who are being told to leave if they can’t afford it.” She remembers the early 1990’s when the JPNDC was working together with neighbors and other organizations to address blighted housing and vacant lots in Hyde-Jackson Square, a process that led to the creation of the Hyde Square Cooperative and the building of a new Stop and Shop and health center. “The JPNDC never looked at it as building one cooperative or fixing up a building. The idea was always that we needed to meet all the needs of the community. The JPNDC has a pact with the neighborhood to work together with neighbors to keep the diversity of our neighborhood. That’s why they keep fighting to keep the neighborhood alive.”

Betsaida cites the need for continued organizing to improve the quality of life for low-income residents. “We need more health centers, parks, youth centers, and employment centers. The housing is very important but we also need to keep dealing with the other issues the neighborhood is facing.”

“If we had let Blessed Sacrament go we would have lost the gains we had made over the past 20 years. It would have been the first step towards losing our identity as a strong Latino neighborhood. Our businesses wouldn’t have been able to survive.”

Betsaida says she will keep fighting to help her neighbors. She points out that when she visits wealthier cities like Brookline she is amazed at the community facilities they have to help their residents and says there is no reason that Jamaica Plain couldn’t have first-class services for low-income residents. “Our job is never really done. There are many new struggles coming and we have to be ready. One thing I have learned is that we really do have the power if we know how to use it. We need to keep sharing knowledge and our good ideas.”

About the JPNDC, Betsaida says, “A CDC is like a person. You can’t just get stuck in one place. You always have to change and adapt and that’s what JPNDC is doing with projects like the neighborhood summit.”

Betsaida will continue helping residents to learn about their rights and become active in protecting their community. “I guess I never learned to be quiet when I’m supposed to be quiet,” she says.

Interview with Lawrence CommunityWorks

9/18/08

Participants: Maria Betances, Delmy Rosales

Interviewer: Harry Smith

Making a Place in Lawrence

“Lawrence CommunityWorks is not really an organization, it’s a network of people working together. People can get involved in all different ways and for as much time as they can.” (Delmy Rosales)

Sitting in the lobby of the year-old Our House community center it is easy to understand what Delmy Rosales means by the above statement. The interview with LCW leaders Delmy Rosales and Maria Betances was interrupted numerous times by residents approaching the two women to ask about class schedules and upcoming activities. “Our House is the center for all our activities,” says Maria Betances. “Tonight there are full classes here for GED, ESL, Computers and Foreclosure Prevention. Everyone knows that this is the place to come if you want to improve yourself and your family situation.” And in fact that evening there were more than 100 residents packed into the basement classrooms in Our House, as well as youth upstairs participating in LCW’s Movement City youth initiative.

Maria Betances has been active in LCW for the past seven years. Originally from the Dominican Republic she has been in the US since 1980. First went to New York City and then to Salem and in 1989 moved to Lawrence. She now lives nearby in Methuen. She got involved with LCW eight years ago when she was looking for youth programs for her teenage son. She signed him up in an LCW youth program and then decided to look for adult programs for herself. She signed up for an LCW computer class. “The computer class was the bridge that led me to get more involved in the community. After that I joined the Family Asset-Building (FAB) Committee and then helped start the LCW’s Membership Committee. I’ve been president of FAB committee for the last four years.”

Maria’s son is now 19 and works as a guide in Our House welcoming new people into the community center, which was inaugurated in fall 2007. She also works with LCW organizer Nelson Buttén on the Neighbor Circles program, helping to identify residents willing to host meetings in their homes and helping facilitate these sessions.

In addition to satisfaction of seeing her son develop into a leader at LCW, Maria’s involvement in the organization has also benefited her in another way. “At the time I signed up for the computer class I was suffering from severe depression and I was looking to get involved in something positive in my community. Over the years of my involvement with LCW my depression has gone away. When you get involved in your community you stop thinking just about yourself.” Maria jokes, “Joining LCW was better than paying for a psychologist.”

Delmy Rosales was born and raised in El Salvador. She came to Lawrence in 2005 to be reunited with her family. She had worked in a bank in El Salvador and when she arrived in Lawrence she immediately began looking for educational opportunities and for work. She got involved in LCW's voter action drive and met Nelson Buttén while helping with a mailing. She learned more about the organization and decided to become a member. She attended graduation ceremony of PODER, a leadership training initiative organized by LCW organizer Alma Couverthie. She was so inspired that she enrolled in the 2nd PODER group and graduated. The first group published a guide to the city budget after educating themselves about the entire budget process. Her group published the first survey ever done to evaluate city services. "Through this experience I learned about everything- how to speak in public, how to research budgets and programs, and all about the history of Lawrence. I also learned how to get involved in improving the city."

Delmy and the group presented their findings at a city council hearing and to the public which gave her a chance to use her public speaking skills. She then became a Fellow in the Membership team and later became a Guide- giving tours of the Our House community center and providing information to visitors. Delmy explains, "There is also a group of volunteers called Friends who go outside of the building to do outreach to the whole neighborhood, including visiting houses, making presentations at schools, and contacting old members to get them back involved." Delmy says that one of her proudest moments was when she had an article published in MACDC's Power Journal. She also received a leadership award from LCW for her efforts to improve her community. "I enjoy representing LCW at other agencies and coordinating projects that enhance our community. I have learned to drop my fear of speaking out through the PODER program."

Our House

The Our House community center and campus is the hub of Lawrence Community Work's program. Programs in Our House include Computers, ESL, GED, New Skills Academy, Individual Development Accounts, a financial literacy program called Wallet Wise, Homeownership training and counseling, as well as Movement City a program for young people age 10-18. Movement City features afterschool programs for youth 10-13 with programs in art, music, dance, computer web design as well as programs for youth age 14-18. Our House also provides day care while residents are taking classes in the center.

Delmy Rosales says, "Our House is a place where anyone can come and find assistance. Every night of the week this center is filled with people trying to improve their lives."

New Strategies for Involving Residents

The two leaders explained that LCW has a formal structure of volunteers who play a major role in reaching out and welcoming the community as well as documenting LCW's activities. They have Guides, who are stationed in a visible location of the Our House community building, whose role is to provide information and a welcome to visitors. There are Friends who go outside the building to conduct outreach to the larger community about LCW programs and activities. There are Scribes whose job is to photograph or write about LCW events and programs. There are Fellows who work closely with the Organizing Department on different projects such as voter action.

The two leaders say that LCW believes in recruiting as many members as possible as a way to have people identify more strongly with the organization and get more involved. According to Delmy Rosales, they now have about 4,000 members, up from 1,000 just a few years ago. "We try to make

it easy to become a member, and also to make it fun for people to get involved,” says Maria. “To participate in LCW programs you must sign up for membership, but it’s free.”

LCW’s Voter Edge project has set a goal to register 200 new voters before the October 15 deadline. So far they have 170 new people registered, according to Maria. “All of us are involved in registering voters. Last Sunday after church I registered six people in my congregation to vote.”

Maria explains that LCW uses an approach called NeighborCircles to help neighbors get to know each other and find ways to improve the neighborhood. Hosts agree to organize three meetings at their homes with the help of LCW staff and volunteers. “I am always looking for people willing to host meetings in their neighborhood. That’s one way we can help neighborhoods deal with their specific issues.”

The above-mentioned PODER Leadership Institute is a six month program that gives residents the skills and confidence they need to advocate for their communities.

When asked why LCW is involved in so many activities that stretch beyond development of affordable housing, Maria replies, “Education is more important than a house. If you have education you can get a better job, save money, and eventually buy a home.”

Delmy agrees. “Education strengthens the family base and helps people develop their personal abilities and strengths. It’s not enough to buy a house, you need help to keep that house. For example, some people who bought homes were not prepared to be homeowners and are now in a crisis.”

Issues Facing the Community

In fact, one of the biggest issues to hit Lawrence in recent times is the mortgage crisis that has led to many families losing their homes or facing foreclosure. Maria says, “The city has been hit hard and many people are losing their homes. One problem is that some residents were tricked into taking out big loans on their houses which they couldn’t pay back.” She explains that LCW has people working to counsel homeowners to avoid foreclosure. They also organized a big all-day activity where banks attended and met with homeowners who were facing foreclosure. “For many people it was the first time they were able to meet with banks face to face and find solutions. Many people left that event saying they were relieved to have gotten some help,” Delmy says.

Personal Involvement

When asked what participating in LCW has meant to them personally both women cite the welcoming atmosphere as something that makes them feel appreciated and respected. Maria says, “LCW is now part of my life. Wherever I go I talk about the work we are doing. I am always carrying around information about LCW and I talk to as many people as I can.”

Delmy adds, “The people and staff are wonderful. We are all treated like family whether we are paid or volunteers. It feels like a family complete with hugs.”

She adds, “Another thing I like is that everyone tries to speak Spanish and all materials are bi-lingual.” Maria mentions an example of a white staff person who was studying Spanish and placed a sign on his desk which read, “Háblame en español,” which they all appreciated very much.

Challenges

The successes at LCW do not mean that there are not serious challenges. Delmy says, “One big problem is apathy. Some people don’t feel like they have energy to try to improve their neighborhood.” Maria points out that there are still many neighborhoods in Lawrence that are not as open to the LCW message or work. “We have to do a better job of reaching those neighborhoods with our Friends. They have to go out to schools and other places to try to reach those neighborhoods. We also have been improving our website and are going to have an email newsletter soon.”

Delmy says, “Crime is still a big issue for people. We have had meetings with residents and police to express concerns and find solutions. My house was robbed a while back and I decided to host a meeting at my house with police and it was well-attended.”

Both leaders also cite new classes and programs residents would like to see but that LCW doesn’t have the space or resources to provide, including guitar classes for adults, cooking classes, nursing classes, and a program on civic and moral leadership for young people.

Many CDCs provide top-notch programs including first-time homebuyer classes, ESL, Job Readiness workshops, and youth programming. Maria explains that the difference at LCW is that these programs are an integral part of the organization’s organizing and community building strategy. LCW spends a good deal of time and resources figuring out how to use their programs as a bridge to other LCW activities and create a sense of ownership by the community.

Interview with Madison Park Development Corporation

9/25/08

Participant: Luz Maria Colón, Community Organizer

Interviewer: Harry Smith

Fighting Violence, Building Trust

“It’s not as hard as people think- you don’t make a promise you can’t keep and you keep the promises you make. That’s what builds trust.”

Luz Colón is originally from Puerto Rico and came to Boston in 1981. She has two kids and lives in Dudley Square, which is Madison Park Development Corporation’s (MPDC), service area. In 2002 she started doing volunteer work for MPDC’s *Technology Goes Home* program. In 2003 she joined MPDC staff as a LISC Americorps Member where she organized a women’s support group and began to work with residents of Orchard Gardens on violence prevention strategies. A year later MPDC hired Luz to continue her organizing work.

Organizing for Public Safety

Luz explains that she spent her first year at Orchard Gardens working to build trust between residents and city officials: “We started off with surveys and house meetings to learn the history of Orchard. In March of 2003 we held a community meeting at the Orchard Gardens K-8 Pilot School with residents, city officials and the police. We pretty much got chewed up by very angry people. They talked about broken promises, politicians doing nothing, and some people told us to go home. It was clear that people were hurting. At the end of the meeting I asked everyone to make a commitment to work together to solve problems and not make promises we couldn’t keep. People agreed to try to work together and that’s how the Public Safety Committee was formed.”

The group decided to meet once a month and agreed on a set of ground rules, including: Respect each other, Give everyone a voice, and Maintain confidentiality. “The key thing was that we decided to take on one challenge every month that we thought we could deal with, something tangible. As people saw that we were getting things done, they started making a commitment to get involved.”

Over the last few years the Public Safety Committee has had a positive impact on the public safety environment. According to the Boston Police Department, overall crime rates in Orchard have gone down 38% over the past three years. Orchard which had been named a “Hot Spot” in recent years to highlight it as a high violent crime area, has not experienced a homicide in 2008. “We have united the community, we now hold events that attract 400-500 people. People feel safer; they are willing to come out on their back porches, before you didn’t have that.”

Developing Trust

“I am most proud of the relationships that have been formed and the trust that has developed between residents, police and community groups. Now you have a lot of people coming to Orchard Gardens who would never have come before and we have the support of agencies who have the same agenda as the residents. For me my most important accomplishment has been making a commitment and sticking to it. We have learned to agree and disagree and grow together. We have empowered people to speak up for themselves when they have to. We have also gained the trust of the youth which is not easy.”

To celebrate the accomplishments of the community Luz and the Public Safety Committee organize several community events each year, but their favorite event is the annual Thanksgiving Gospel Dinner. “Of all the events we do, this is the one that people like the most. It brings a sense of peace and hope to people’s lives.”

Lessons Learned

Luz has learned a lot from her experiences with Orchard Gardens. “I’ve learned that it’s not just about people’s social and economic needs but about their spiritual needs. A lot of people needed help- drug addicts, families who lost people to violence. People had lost hope because of all the broken promises. I prayed with people and cried with them. I took them to shelters and hospitals. Sometimes that might be seen as doing too much but I don’t think you can show passion without showing compassion. I don’t mind giving out hugs. Some people just need to know you care. If getting a hug makes someone’s day, it doesn’t cost me anything.”

Luz has also learned a lot about herself. “I have learned to handle many tasks at one time and I’ve learned that patience really is a virtue. I have learned never to ask someone to do something that I’m not willing to do myself. You have to be a role model. It’s not about the money, it’s about understanding your purpose in life. You have to put yourself in someone else’s shoes so that you remember not to be too judgmental.”

Challenges

There remain many challenges facing the community. “The community is still not as safe as it should be and young people are at risk. Turf issues continue to be a huge problem. We have been able to break down barriers but it is still an issue. It is always a challenge to collaborate with other groups. You have to deal with people and funders who all have their different opinions about what should be the priority.”

During the interview Luz goes out of her way to praise the work of groups she collaborates with and especially the commitment of long-time Orchard leaders like Edna Bynoe who have been at the forefront of the effort to improve public safety. Luz herself has been honored for her work with several awards including the Boston Police Crime Fighter of the Year award. But her most cherished award came from the Orchard Public Safety Committee, which honored her two months ago with a service award. “This award means the most to me because it came from the youth and the residents. I hope it means that I have gained their trust.”

Interview with Oak Hill CDC

9/24/08

Participant: Paul Hernandez, Community Organizer

Interviewer: Harry Smith

Building Political Support and New Leaders

“When residents go to the State House they suddenly understand that the State House is their house and that they pay for all of this.”

A native of the Dominican Republic, Paul Hernandez has lived in Worcester since 1991. He has worked as a community organizer for Oak Hill CDC since 2006. Oak Hill CDC focuses its work on three neighborhoods in Worcester: Union Hill, Vernon Hill, and Grafton Hill, predominantly Latino and African-American sections of the city.

Paul explained that community organizing and community building are the foundation of Oak Hill CDC’s mission. “I feel very fortunate that the CDC values organizing and community building as much as it does. Having residents lead us keeps us grounded. We don’t want to start making a lot of decisions that will hurt the residents we are supposed to be helping.”

The focus of much of Paul’s work is leadership development with residents and youth. He organizes residents around specific issues with the goal of keeping the neighborhood safe and clean, creating opportunities for residents to know each other, and helping residents advocate with elected officials to improve their quality of life.

Civic Engagement

Oak Hill places considerable resources on Civic Engagement including field trips to the state house and organizing an annual Legislative dinner. Paul says, “Youth and residents help plan the Legislative dinner and come up with questions for the elected officials. I want our leaders to get as much as possible out of the process.”

“When residents go to the State House they suddenly understand that the State House is their house and that they pay for all of this.” Paul himself participated in a six week seminar at the State House that graduated 40 young people of color interested in the political process.

Paul himself has been encouraged by others to run for the Worcester School Committee.

“Sometimes things happen to my children at school and I get so mad that I want to get involved and do something positive for everyone.” For now he is happy helping other residents learn about the process and get involved. He recently helped a resident leader to complete a training on how to run for office.

Civic engagement initiatives are a key part of Oak Hill CDC's community building strategy. "Through this work residents are able to break down barriers to communication and understand the huge role that elected officials play in bringing services and programs to the neighborhood," Paul says. Oak Hill is currently undertaking a voter registration drive and reaching out to inactive voters to get them involved. "Residents are not only attending candidate forums, they are helping to facilitate these meetings and developing questions to ask the candidates." They are also working with Neighbor to Neighbor to start Voter Empowerment trainings for their leaders.

Resident Leadership

Paul also points to Oak Hill's Resident Leadership Committee as an example of the CDC's commitment to real resident participation. Paul helps recruit leaders onto this committee and then works with leaders to prepare them to make the jump to the board of directors. "In the past two years, four committee members have moved up to the board, including the current board chair and secretary," Paul explains. "Eleven of the CDC's seventeen board members are neighborhood residents. My goal is to make the residents my boss."

Challenges

Oak Hill CDC has faced many external and internal challenges in the past year. The foreclosure crisis has hit Worcester hard and Oak Hill's Homeownership Center has been trying to respond. One issue that a resident leader brought to Paul's attention was the plight of tenants of multi-family apartment buildings whose owners had been foreclosed on. "I hadn't realized how big an issue it was until she told me her own story of being told to leave because her landlord was being foreclosed on. It made me realize that there is no communication between these landlords and the tenants in foreclosed buildings."

The CDC is also facing financial difficulties but Paul is hopeful that the Community Organizing and Community Building team will not face cuts. "The executive director is very supportive of our resident leadership and community building work. Plus our board has made it clear that they don't want the CDC to cut back on our efforts. Right now we are the only CDC in Worcester with a strong community organizing component."

Organizing to Stabilize the Neighborhood

When asked why the CDC puts so many resources into community organizing Paul answers, "Building housing is important but if your child's school is closing or you are losing your job that is going to affect your housing." Oak Hill focuses its efforts on retaining existing residents because it helps stabilize the neighborhood. He cites a youth employment program that places youth in jobs near their homes as well as an agreement with Worcester Academy that provides 60 slots for neighborhood youth in the Academy's summer program. "I had a parent tell me recently that they were thinking of leaving Worcester but that their son would be upset if he couldn't keep going to the summer program. These are the kinds of programs and services that keep people in our community."

Paul closes with a dramatic example of the impact of neighborhood organizing and leadership development. Recently residents have been organizing to oppose the Worcester Fire Department's decision to close a fire house that has been serving their neighborhood for 100 years. One of the neighborhood's leaders, himself a firefighter, had researched the impact of the station closing and concluded that it would lead to response times up to two minutes longer for fire and medical emergencies. "He came to the community meeting with a big clock and during his time to speak he

simply held the microphone up to the clock for two minutes so that everyone could hear the seconds ticking away and imagine themselves waiting for an ambulance or fire truck. It was a very powerful moment.”

Interview with Somerville Community Corporation

9/11/08

Participants: Leanne Darrigo, Yvette Verdieu

Interviewer: Harry Smith

Planning the Future, Creating New Leaders

“I got involved because I enjoy meeting new people and hearing their stories. We often have different backgrounds but we can find common issues to work on.” (Leanne Darrigo)

Born and raised in Haiti, Yvette Verdieu has lived in Somerville for 15 years. She has always tried to be involved in her community. She is very involved in her church, as a member of the vestry and lay minister. When she moved to Somerville she noticed that it was diverse but she also saw and experienced racial prejudice. Once when she parked in a spot ‘reserved’ by a neighbor she came out to find all four tires flattened. “I reported the incident to the Somerville Human Rights Commission and I ended up getting involved on their Board.”

Yvette decided to get involved with Somerville Community Corporation (SCC) after SCC Organizing Director Meridith Levy asked her to come to a meeting. “I was timid at first but now I realize that leadership takes all different forms. You can be a leader and wait back and listen. Now I am more vocal and less timid and I feel more powerful.” She has been on SCC board for 3 years and is also a leader in East Somerville Neighbors for Change (ESNC), a neighborhood group that takes the lead on many neighborhood quality of life issues.

Leanne Darrigo is originally from Medford and has lived in Somerville for 16 years. She has a daughter who is 15 who is at Somerville High School. She first got involved in the PTA at her daughter’s school, then helped run a youth soccer league and currently runs a community garden through the Somerville Conservation Commission. She was invited by Meridith Levy to take part in SCC’s East Somerville Planning Initiative because of her work at the community garden. She decided to join the Initiative’s Environmental Justice Working Group because she was concerned about contaminated sites in East Somerville.

Issues Facing the Neighborhood

Leanne and Yvette both see major changes happening in their community with the potential to harm or benefit the city. Leanne says, “Possible displacement of families is a big issue. The big question is: How do you bring services and improve quality of life without displacing existing families?” She cites the development of an IKEA store at the Assembly Square Mall site, a project that was delayed many years because of neighborhood opposition, as an example of something that could help or harm East Somerville. Leanne says, “SCC has been involved in a campaign to get IKEA to hire East Somerville residents. We all pushed to get commitments from them by signing local hiring agreements. Thanks to our work IKEA has agreed to sign an agreement with the city.”

Another major development facing East Somerville is the planned extension of the Green Line T through Somerville into Medford. Both Yvette and Leanne fear that most East Somerville families won’t be able to afford any of the housing that will be built around new T stations. Yvette says,

“Traffic and parking are already huge community concerns and now we are facing new housing being built that no one in East Somerville will be able to buy.” She also fears that many concerns about this projects won’t be addressed. “People are too interested in taking credit. To me it’s not important who gets credit as much as how it gets done.”

Leanne says, “We have to make sure that these projects don’t hurt our community. We won’t get 100% of what we want but we have already had a positive impact on these developments.”

East Somerville Planning Initiative

Over the past two years SCC has brought together over 350 people to develop and implement an Action Plan to improve the quality of life in East Somerville while developing strategies to minimize displacement of the residents who live there. This effort, called the East Somerville Planning Initiative, has resulted in the involvement of many new leaders who have been able to discuss and plan for the future of their community.

SCC organized three community summits. Eight working groups were formed in the winter of 2007, to analyze different issues such as jobs, schools and housing. The final community summit was held in the fall of 2007 and resulted in the adoption of an Action Plan with 27 goals.

Leanne says, “One of our top priorities that we identified in the Action Plan was to promote local jobs in these new developments. The local hiring agreement with IKEA is a big step forward on that goal.”

She continues, “Hundreds of people have been involved in the process. There have been surveys, community meetings, and people contacted door to door. We identified many issues and some floated up to the top during the process.” She says that affordable housing was identified as one of the biggest priorities to avoid displacement of families.

Yvette says, “Another major priority is Immigration- especially dealing with impacts of recent immigration raids in our city. There are always rumors that ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) is coming and sometimes their truck is out in front of the elementary school.” Other major priorities identified in the Action Plan are: Preventing home foreclosures, combating environmental pollution, and adding new youth services.

Yvette says, “The East Somerville Planning Initiative has been important not just because it gives SCC a guide on what issues to work on but also because it has brought in many new leaders who will make sure we are following up on the goals.”

She also appreciates the role of SCC in this process. “This initiative spurs collaboration. SCC helped get groups together to work on issues. SCC can’t take the lead on all these issues but it is helping to find groups who will take lead. SCC organizers are always there to coach and guide us.”

Leanne and Yvette both agree that it is vital for SCC to work to solve local neighborhood issues. Leanne says, “These issuee affect the quality of life of our neighborhoods. The quality of schools and the environment affect the quality of your home. Everyone deserves a decent place to live.”

Yvette says, “SCC is right to focus on quality of life issues and not just on building housing.”

Personal Involvement

When asked what her involvement with SCC has meant to her personally, Leanne says, “SCC is a great group of people. They are very welcoming. They teach without being preachy and they are

always there with resources to help. They make you want to give back to the community. I want to set an example for my daughter and neighbors to be able to get involved. We are often all wrapped up in our own problems. Being involved with SCC reminds me that there are bigger problems than our own.”

Yvette says, “I feel blessed to have gotten involved. I have grown so much through this experience. I am less timid and I can negotiate for myself now. I have experienced injustice but I have also found ways to solve problems. It’s a long journey and sometimes it is very discouraging but it is worth it at the end.” She recently took a ‘vacation’ to Mississippi to help build housing in 98 degree heat. Her reaction: “It was inspirational.”

Support from Community Organizers

Both leaders stress the importance of having caring, committed organizers to provide support. Yvette says, “Meridith is a strong mentor- she will often step in to offer guidance if I need help.” Leanne credits Meridith with encouraging her to stay involved. She describes Meridith as “pleasantly persistent but not pushy,” and also cites Alex Pirie of SCC as a mentor who has taught her how to write environmental grants, how to educate the public and organize to address clean up of contaminated sites in East Somerville, including sites contaminated Tetrachloroethylene (commonly known as PERC), a manufactured chemical that is widely used in dry cleaning establishments.

Challenges

Not every campaign has gone the way they wanted them to. Yvette cites her frustration with the slow pace of their campaign for traffic improvements on McGrath Highway which has been spearheaded by East Somerville Neighbors for Change.

“I’m frustrated with the DCR (Department of Conservation and Recreation) about improvements on McGrath Highway. We have won some changes in the timing of the lights but the road is still very dangerous. It is discouraging to put in so many hours on that issue and not see a big result.”

Leanne says, “Some of the politics can be discouraging. It is difficult to get the attention of some elected officials. I can’t understand some decisions of local government: For example, Why would they unknowingly build an early education center on a toxic site and then name it after a Congressman? They didn’t do a thorough job of investigating. SCC teaches you how to speak to these issues and connect to the people in charge.”

Leanne says she would like to see SCC get more funding to make sure the East Somerville Initiative’s goals are met.

Yvette loves being part of the SCC board but she would like to see them become more diverse. “We are working hard to diversify but we need to do more.”

Interview with Urban Edge/Academy Homes I Tenant Council

9/22/08

Participant: Abass Dieng, President, Academy Homes I Tenant Council

Interviewer: Harry Smith

Residents Taking Ownership and Building Skills

Abass Dieng came to Boston from Guineau in 1997. He realized that his first barrier was lack of English so he enrolled in classes at Roxbury Community College. Eventually he was able to enroll in a Masters program at Cambridge College which he will be completing next year. Abass lives with his family in the Academy Homes I, a 202-unit development owned by the residents in partnership with Urban Edge.

Even as he was taking classes to overcome obstacles to self-improvement, Abass wanted to get involved in his community. "I didn't want to just come home from work and stay in my room," he explains. "I always believed that the value of life is helping other people to improve their lives."

Abass got his chance when long-time tenant leader Betty Greene called out his name one day as he came home from work. "I don't know how she knew my name, but it seemed like she knew all about me. A couple of weeks later she reached out to me again and told me she needed me to get involved on the Tenant Council." Abass joined the Tenant Council board in 2005, serving as Vice-President. In 2006 he was elected President and has served in that capacity ever since.

"Betty was very encouraging to me and helped me learn my responsibilities," Abass says. "I was made to feel so welcome in this development that I knew I wanted to give something back."

A troubled development for much of its first 30 years, Academy Homes I has experienced a major turnaround since The Academy Homes I Tenants' Council partnered with Urban Edge to purchase the development.

Improving Management-Resident Relations

When he took over as President, Abass set out to create a program development plan for the development and the Council began to map out activities to inform residents of available programs and events. "A big priority was involving more people from different backgrounds so that everyone's voice could be heard. We also gave the board a chance to brainstorm ideas so that we could begin to assess what people needed and wanted."

One area where the Council has placed great emphasis is the improvement of relations between the management company and the Tenant Council. He instituted monthly meetings between management and the tenants where residents could bring their concerns and have them addressed. "We now have a new management company and we have worked to build relationships with them." At one point they wanted to move Academy's maintenance staff to other developments but the Council was able to persuade them to keep the staff in place. "It takes time to work with management companies but we are able to bring our concerns directly to them and get many of them resolved."

Training and Support

Urban Edge staff provide training and support to help the Tenants Council achieve its goals. "The board has received trainings from Urban Edge staff on how to read a budget and on the issues

involved in being a co-owner. These have helped people understand what our role is and what we need to do.” Urban Edge also works with tenant leaders to contact city and state officials and get them to meet with the Tenant Council to hear their concerns. Abass also cites the Resident Leadership Team formed by Urban Edge and consisting of resident leaders from several Urban Edge-owned developments. “This group helps us network with other tenant leaders and share our ideas. It is a very worthwhile group.”

Issues

Despite the Council’s success, public safety remains the most important issue in the development. Just this spring Abass lost his 22 year old nephew to violence in Jackson Square. “We have pushed for more resources for public safety and gotten management to install security cameras all over the development. We are now trying to get a commitment for more security officers on-site. The police do a good job here but we need more coverage.”

Abass cites as his biggest accomplishment the amount of resident participation in the Tenant Council. “I am proud that many young people are getting involved. I am also proud that new people have gotten involved with the Tenant Council and that each Council member realizes the role they have to play. He is also proud that the Tenant Council has been able to expand the services and activities available to residents, including the Computer Learning Center, the Food Pantry, the annual Family Day celebration, and the summer trip to Six Flags amusement park.

Abass says that it has not always been easy to work, go to school and fulfill his duties as president of the Tenant Council. When it gets difficult he remembers how welcome his neighbors made him feel when he moved into Academy Homes and it makes him happy to know that he is helping. He enjoys meeting with neighbors and hearing their concerns and explaining the role of Urban Edge and the management company.

In 2006 Academy Homes suffered a major blow with the passing of Betty Greene. “Losing Betty was a terrible loss for me personally and for the whole community. She was the one who got me involved and encouraged me to become president.” Urban Edge and Academy Homes Tenant Council held a ceremony where they renamed the Academy Homes I Community Room in honor of Betty Greene.

Abass plans to honor Betty by continuing her important work of improving the quality of life for Academy residents. “For me the purpose of life is to help your fellow human. I will definitely continue to be committed to helping my community.”