**best practices**

# Healthy Neighborhoods: A Collaborative Model

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A healthy neighborhood program, as described in this article, is a context for the implementation of community projects that start with neighborhoods and their residents as the central building block and develop a synergy between residents and collaborators in an attempt to develop integrated neighborhoods that are sustainable. The concept provides a vision and an infrastructure through which a university can work with community residents and other area partners to build cooperative and collaborative programs that ensure a sense of community and vitality that set these neighborhoods apart from similar projects elsewhere.

A healthy neighborhood program promotes the active involvement of neighbors, efficient use of resources, high quality programming, and an atmosphere that stresses the importance of citizen involvement. Most important to the success of the concept is that the neighbors are involved in the design and implementation of their own projects.

The concept of healthy neighborhoods focuses on strategies and techniques that are designed to enrich, vitalize, and enable neighbors to strengthen their community together. The cornerstone of the program is the importance placed on the participation of neighbors, with appropriate coordination and leadership, in determining the future of their own neighborhood and devising and implementing solutions to common problems. The concept of healthy neighborhoods fosters in neighbors a sense of healthy interdependency — where unhealthy dependency is avoided and the goal of a sustainable community is attained.

These partnerships combine the collaborative educational and community development experience and commitment of a university, in this case the University of North Texas (UNT), with neighborhood residents and a wide range of collaborators. For example, many of our projects have incorporated nearby community colleges and health care agencies, each of which plays an important role along with the close cooperation of many other organizations and agencies from the Dallas metropolitan area. These include, among others, hospitals; health departments and the WIC program;

AARP, RSVP, and Foster Grandparent Programs; YMCA; Head Start; Urban League; Big Brother and Big Sister; Campfire Girls and the Boy Scouts; as well as area churches and businesses. The list of collaborators is dynamic and is related to their availability and the needs of the neighborhood.

## Program Goals And Objectives

The healthy neighborhoods program begins with the implementation of a carefully constructed needs assessment involving neighborhood residents. This needs assessment must be collaborative and involve residents in its design and implementation.

This assessment determines the community's understanding of health and social issues, identifies and ranks specific problems, identifies current activities, identifies resources and gaps in resources, gathers data necessary to identify leaders and "information sources," and locates the focal points in the neighborhood. It is also a useful first start and is important in establishing opportunities for "visioning" — planning potential and future directions for the community.

As a result of needs assessments, healthy neighborhood projects usually begin with goals such as the following:

- Develop programs to ensure students have school readiness, achieve success, and acquire lifelong learning and development skills. This priority is often addressed by developing tutoring programs, day care programs, and after-school projects for school-age children. Such programs must be designed to improve test scores and heighten self-esteem by providing youth with additional resources, encouraging academic success among students, and providing youth with constructive leisure and recreational pursuits.
- Develop, with residents, realistic plans to improve the economic well-being of residents. These plans can involve the generation of job training, job location, and entrepreneurial opportunities, and the exploration of cooperatives, micro-loans, credit banks, and credit unions.
- Develop neighborhood plans and an infrastructure that provides support for community crime-prevention initiatives and develop and implement substance-abuse prevention, counseling, and education projects. Such initiatives can be fostered by working with schools to strengthen their efforts to provide community education services and activities, and by working with local agencies to implement neighborhood-specific projects designed to intervene before local youth become involved in negative behaviors. Programs can be created to assist local law enforcement in organizing more visible neighborhood security and watch programs, while other initiatives may comprise work with local schools to develop substance-abuse prevention programs that are proactive rather than reactive.

- Initiate programs designed to help the neighborhood meet human health needs by providing student volunteers for health-related education. In addition, prenatal care, health care for families with young children, and preventive health care can be provided through arrangements with community and public health clinics and other special initiatives. The objective of such programs is to assist public health officials in providing education and information to reduce the incidence of child development problems, encouraging appropriate immunizations, and reducting the vulnerability associated with preventable diseases.
- Develop programs that engage neighborhood residents in efforts designed to reduce community environmental problems and beautify the area through creating and maintaining neighborhood parks and green space, reducing waste, conserving drainage areas and wetlands, and developing local gardens for community use. In pursuing the development of appropriate strategies and projects, any healthy neighborhood program should be guided by the following specific objectives:

Objective 1. Strengthen neighborhood capacity for addressing common health and social concerns in the community by:

- Exploring all existing programs and services currently offered to neighborhood residents and devising a plan not only for maintaining the desired programs but also for finding new ways in which they can be more fully integrated into the formal structure of the community.
- Identifying and implementing new programs that residents suggest through needs analyses.
- Working with residents to identify future needs and to find innovative methods to address residents' concerns through creative programming. Focus groups can be used to develop and implement innovating programs for all residents.
- Initiating with residents print and video capabilities to link the community to resources and foster political action functions in cooperation with local, state, and national political representatives. This should include developing a level of political awareness and providing the information needed to help residents maintain and increase their level of community and political involvement.

Objective 2. Develop new, and strengthen existing collaborative relationships between area institutions of higher education, state and local agencies, not-for-profit agencies, and the neighborhood. The objective is to develop more efficient use of

resources so as to have maximum impact upon the community infrastructure and the solving of community identified issues by:

- Fostering institutional commitments by education institutions to develop volunteer approaches for community service development and devising strategies for effective collaboration between neighborhood organizations, education, and social service agencies.
- Developing an on-line data base of the ongoing linkages that exist and are developed between agencies, higher-education institutions, other community resources, and community needs and to make that data base available to residents through some electronic means.
- Developing an advisory council to the community center composed of community residents, agency staff, and involved faculty to introduce a supportive structure to guide the operation and evaluation of the project. Through this structure the program should be assured of meeting the diverse needs of the residents and the cooperating partners.

Objective 3. Develop and implement a comprehensive plan for securing additional resources to assure that an extensive and sustainable program is maintained by:

- Using the extensive grant and contract development expertise and resources of the university to leverage additional resource monies.
- Exploring grant and contract opportunities with local foundations and potential corporate sponsors.

## Service-Learning Opportunities

The healthy neighborhoods program recruits service-learning volunteers and interns from participating university and community college programs and helps them to participate in projects determined by and congruent with the needs of neighborhood residents. These volunteers join with neighborhood residents to promote healthy neighborhoods by bringing neighbors together, identifying needed resources, and building a framework that ensures the viability of the neighborhoods and their residents.

All volunteers must be trained in the concept of healthy neighborhoods and their role in project development. This training should be a collaborative effort among all of the partners.

Quality Control. The evaluation of healthy neighborhood projects encompasses all aspects of quality control. There must be two distinct levels of evaluation: first, each specific activity or project must have a mechanism for eliciting feedback and assessment of success and satisfaction with the project; and second, an evaluation plan must be implemented to judge periodically the overall success of the program. The overall outcome measures should be determined by the researcher and the community residents, e.g., crime level,

school drop-out rate, level of community participation in community programming and decision making, and resident satisfaction with neighborhood services. Structured interviews should be designed and conducted by the evaluators with key staff, community and state partners, and faculty.

Problems of Implementation. The implementation of a truly collaborative model of neighborhood development is fraught with problems. These problems may be organizational in nature or can be somewhat idiosyncratic and emanate from the interaction between individuals. A brief discussion of these problems may be useful in trying to understand how best to implement a healthy neighborhoods-type program.

Organizational Issues. The initial, and probably most difficult problem encountered in the development of projects implemented in the Dallas/Fort Worth area is the conflict among the participating partners. The culture of many partners will be outcome and bottom-line oriented. However, the culture of the university is traditionally process oriented. Outcome and process orientations are, of course, not diametrically opposed; in fact, they can be complementary. However, the weight that organizations assign to their primary orientation often blurs their ability to understand the importance of their collaborators' concerns.

For example, in the Parks at Wynnewood project in Dallas, our first project of this type, there were many disagreements between the non-profit developer and the university concerning issues related to the quality of services vs. the quantity of services. The developer understood well that good public relations are often the result of having many diverse programs, regardless of their need or quality. A problem constantly dealt with at the Parks at Wynnewood was how to compromise between those who wanted more and those who wanted better, and how to measure both. We also were often caught between our collaborators who wanted to focus only on individual problems of residents and our desire to focus on long-range resident development while also solving immediate problems.

Related to the problems of differing orientations are the problems associated with understanding and communicating the related, but often opposed, primary missions of the collaborating partners. All groups, regardless of size and complexity, have primary reasons for existence. These rationales for existence dictate the short and long-term goals of organizations. They also often dictate fund-raising strategies, hiring decisions, relations with board members, and other critical aspects of the life of an organization.

For most collaborators the healthy neighborhood project was not their primary reason for existence and thus our primary mission often took second place to theirs. This is a common problem when collaborators work together but is not obvious at first glance. It can, however, be the death knell of a collaborative project if it is not recognized and addressed. If organizations can understand their and their partners' primary and secondary

missions, and can articulate them, many problems related to misunderstanding can be eliminated.

Related to the primary mission of organizations is the need to understand that all collaborative partnerships come with strings attached. Regardless of the intent of individuals, and the organizations they represent, it is nearly impossible to put the needs of the other organization, or even the overriding value of the collaborative project, over the needs and goals of your own organization. If this is understood and delineated, conflict can be minimized.

On an individual, employee level many of the same issues emerge. In collaborative projects, employees often work as direct service providers but are employed by different agencies. For example, at this healthy neighborhood project the university directly employs staff while other staff work for the apartment management company, the developer, a local hospital, a Learn and Serve project at another university, Vista as volunteers for a state agency, Americorp as volunteers, the Urban League, etc. Organizing and integrating diverse employees who work together but report to multiple agencies and individuals can be a challenge.

Collaborative projects that involve multiple partners have extraordinary possibilities for social service delivery. However, the partners must have a clear understanding of their role, expectations that are mutually understood and accepted, and procedures and processes that facilitate cooperation and the sharing of resources. Of equal importance is the need to have a strong sense of their own organization and identity as well as clear communication between the collaborative partners and their employees. Of utmost importance is an unclouded vision of the purpose and mission of the collaboration and a buy-in from all employees of the paramount importance of the goals and objectives of the program. ■

### About theAuthor

David Hartman (Ph.D., Wayne State University) currently serves as dean of the School of Community Service at the University of North Texas in Denton. He has taught at Culver-Stockton College, Wayne State University, Virginia Commonwealth University, and the University of North Texas.His research interests include ethnicity in the United States, urban-social organization, migration, and issues related to religious conversion and rebirth. He is active in numerous community-based organizations and has developed techniques and strategies to immerse students in community redevelopment, both in the United States and Mexico, as part of their educational training.He has also published one book and numerous articles related to his research interests.