

Join with Others to Make a Difference

To build a stronger neighborhood where people will thrive, neighbors need to pull together. This section will give you ideas for reaching out to others and talking about what you want for your neighborhood. Included here:

1. **Why you need to reach out to your neighbors.** Everybody wants a better life and a stronger neighborhood. It takes everybody pulling together.
2. **Who to reach out to.** Everyone with a stake in your neighborhood needs a voice.
3. **How to reach out to everybody in the neighborhood.** Ideas from other places about how to start the conversation.
4. **What to focus on -- results you and your neighbors want.** Talk with others about their hopes and dreams for your neighborhood. This is the neighborhood you want to build.

"Never believe that a few caring people can't change the world. For indeed that's all who ever have."

-Margaret Mead

1. Why Reach Out to Your Neighbors?

Together You Can Create a Better Neighborhood.

We all recognize the truth in the saying, “It takes a village to raise a child.” To help children grow up healthy, safe, and prepared to be productive adults takes the entire neighborhood. Everyone’s concerns, opinions, and dreams need to be heard. Everyone’s talents, skills and energy are needed.

Only the folks who live and work in your neighborhood know its problems and its strengths. You know where your neighborhood is falling short, and you can discover the people and resources that can make a difference.

Change happens when people take responsibility for improving their lives. Residents decide what problems and results they will tackle and take action to achieve their goals.

[Note: I see the following as a photo montage with these phrases.]

When the hopes and passions of the neighborhood are tapped, it can lead to better lives for children, families and other residents.

Meaningful changes that improve lives require the will of the people to do together what they cannot do apart.

*People need to see that their personal involvement has an impact on the whole effort. They need to see that **they’re** making a difference.*

Lives Are At Stake

When people join together, it’s because they realize that they all have a stake in improving the neighborhood. They all want to make the neighborhood a better place to live. Pulling together will make their own lives better in some way. Maybe their children can play safely outside, youngsters will learn more in school, businesses will be attracted to the area, young adults will be able to find nearby jobs, elders will live in safety and feel appreciated

By working together, it may be possible to realize your hopes and dreams. Not getting involved means that things are likely to stay as they are. Usually, folks are willing to work together if they can see what’s in it for them: Either they stand to gain by joining up, or they stand to lose by not getting involved.

Talking About What’s Important - Find Out What Your Neighbors Think.

Start talking with others about their hopes and dreams and about results they want.

Here's why it's important:

- ▶ Your neighbors know what problems have the greatest impact on their lives, what resources help them, and which neighborhood changes will make the biggest difference.
- ▶ People are more likely to support and participate in plans that reflect what's important to them – their challenges and their dreams .
- ▶ It strengthens their commitment to improving the neighborhood. Folks are able to “own” the entire effort if they know that their opinions are important.
- ▶ Reaching out to all members of the neighborhood -- even those who are not usually heard -- shows that you're serious about working together in new ways. It shows that you want to listen to everybody and share responsibility for making your neighborhood better.

Changing the World in Their Own Backyard

For the St. Thomas housing projects of New Orleans, their motto --“It takes a village to raise a child.”-- has become more than words. It has become a way of life. “People speak to each other, share their lunch with anyone who is nearby, joke about recent card games, share stories about their children and grandchildren and give each other rides to the store.”

People here share their hopes, their dreams and their concerns. One of the results important to St. Thomas residents is fewer teenage pregnancies. But they don't see this as separate from other neighborhood concerns. Residents want to strengthen all families so they can nurture and protect each other. People challenge each other to look not only at the obvious problems, but at the roots of those problems. They want to do no less than work together to attack racism and oppression.

A strong resident council makes many neighborhood decisions. People can see that working together is making St. Thomas a better place to live. Each small step they take chips away at the roots of their problems and takes them closer to the lives they want to live.

2. Who Should You Talk To?

Get Everybody Involved

The more people there are in your neighborhood who want things to change, the better. Every single person has something unique and important to contribute. To make real changes will take the efforts of everybody.

To get the real picture, be sure that you talk with people who look like the neighborhood as a whole -- not just one group.

Here are some voices that need to be heard.

- Folks who represent the **racial heritages** of the entire neighborhood.
- People of all the neighborhood's **cultural backgrounds**.
- People who reflect the **income levels** of residents.
- Both **men and women**.
- Young people**, including youth who attend neighborhood schools, who have been in trouble with the legal system, honor students and those who struggle in school, high school graduates and those who dropped out of school, college or trade school students.

At first, youth may resist sharing their thoughts with adults, but they have important feelings and ideas to contribute. Given the right opportunity, young people can make a valuable contribution to the neighborhood – in ways that will increase their own self-esteem and abilities.

- Elders**, including some living alone and some living with kin, people who remember when the community was different, grandparents raising their grandchildren, elders people look up to and respect.

Elders who are longtime residents are often a real treasure. They can help you understand the neighborhood's roots and the causes of current conditions. They may be able to connect you with a rich history of cultural traditions.

- All kinds of families**, including single parent families, families without children, families with young children and with older youth, teenage parents, multi-generation households.
- Both **longtime residents** who have tried to make changes in the past and **newcomers** who can view the neighborhood with fresh eyes.
- People with a variety of **experiences in work** – residents who own and work in local businesses, who work outside the neighborhood, and who are unemployed.
- Residents with different **life experiences**, including for example individuals with disabilities, single parents, recent immigrants, people living alone.
- People with a range of **experiences in the neighborhood** – people who live in different blocks or areas; renters, homeowners, those who live in public housing; people who don't participate in organized neighborhood activities and those who are very active.

“Every single person has some gift or capacity of value to others. A strong neighborhood recognizes those gifts and ensures that they are given.” Everyone’s voice is important. Be sure you listen to those whose voices (and contributions) are not often heard.

Adults in one Vermont community struggled to find a cross-section of young people willing to share their opinions and goals. Finally they found a talented, out-of-school 16 year old who wanted to talk. He was able to persuade other teens to join discussions. Soon, they were hearing from youth on furlough from juvenile detention as well as honor students.

3. How Can You Reach Out to Your Neighborhood?

Starting the Conversation

To get everybody involved requires reaching out to people in many different ways. Some people may be more comfortable participating in one kind of conversation than in another, and different types of information will surface depending on how you talk to each other. Here are some ways that neighbors start the conversation.

1. Family Circles and Story Circles

Small groups of about eight to ten people meet to talk about their concerns and what they want for their kids, families and the neighborhood. A facilitator asks the group questions that encourage discussion. Someone takes notes – writing the main points that people raise.

The Story Telling Circle

Residents of several Denver neighborhoods use the age-old tradition of story telling to bring people together to talk about their concerns and hopes. Getting people together in a living room, church basement or public housing meeting space has become a way to improve communication among neighbors and build a sense of community.

A trained facilitator guides each story circle, which lasts 60 to 90 minutes. Every participant has an opportunity to contribute his or her views and ideas – no matter what they are -- and to be heard with respect. All facilitators, trainers and participants are community members.

Participants can focus story circles on any issue that interests them. Topics that Denver neighbors have discussed include safety and drugs, gaining financial independence, strengthening families, and working together across race, culture and language.

The Denver “Making Connections Neighborhoods” find story circles so valuable, they developed a tool kit to help their residents and other communities use them. It is available online at <http://www.makingconnectionsdenver.org/Documents/StoryCircleToolkit.qxd.pdf>.

2. One-on-One Discussions

Talking with individuals one at a time can bring out a lot of personal experiences and information. Some people are more comfortable talking privately rather than in a group. You might need to talk with some folks individually to get some of the details you’re after, such as:

- specific information or knowledge of the neighborhood,
- who holds particular jobs and positions or has certain skills and experience,
- how people influence others in the neighborhood.

3. Neighborhood Surveys

Surveys are a good way to reach a large number of people. Options include door-to-door discussions, telephone surveys, and talking to folks or distributing written questionnaires at places where lots of people gather, such as libraries, stores, transit stops, laundromats, or festivals. It's important to keep surveys short, to offer translations in residents' languages, and to clearly explain why you're collecting the information.

4. Neighborhood Summits

Along with small gatherings, you can hold larger neighborhood meetings. Summits may be open to all residents and even include others who have a stake in the neighborhood -- like business owners, school staff, and service providers. You'll need a comfortable meeting space, a thoughtfully constructed agenda and a facilitator who can manage questions and answers, discussion, and disagreements.

Neighbors in Providence, Rhode Island, talked together in small groups about the results they wanted for their neighborhood. Then, a large meeting brought people together to sharpen their focus and find agreement about what they wanted to accomplish.

Once you and your neighbors start talking with each other, you'll find that it's not hard to get people to offer their opinions. When folks feel that their views are being heard and valued, they may want to keep sharing. Neighborhood discussions don't need to be one-time events. You can create ongoing opportunities to share your thoughts with each other – monthly meetings, open story circles, and other events.

Tips for Talking With Your Neighbors

- ❑ Regardless of how you start the conversation, make sure you help everyone feel that his or her views are welcome and important.
- ❑ Let people know that they can speak freely and that you welcome and appreciate their sharing.
- ❑ Respect different opinions.
- ❑ Try to find convenient times to talk.
- ❑ Be sure that meetings – large and small -- are family-friendly and interesting so people will want to participate.
- ❑ Make it easy for folks to participate. For example, for one-on-one conversations with parents, find a time when young children are sleeping. For meetings, you might rotate taking care of the children or ask volunteers to provide childcare. Be sure to arrange transportation for people who need it with carpools or other help.
- ❑ Provide refreshments. Sharing food helps put people at ease.
- ❑ Let people know how the information they share will be used and how it will come back to them.
- ❑ Ask everybody how they want to be involved in the future.

4. What's the Conversation About?

The Results People Want

Results are the conditions that we want for our kids, our families and our neighborhoods. These are the things that are most important to us.

From discussions with neighbors, a picture begins to emerge of what people want for their kids, their families and the neighborhood as a whole. The more you talk to each other, the clearer this picture will become. You'll be able to pinpoint the dreams that everybody shares, areas of agreement, and beliefs about how people should treat each other.

Finding areas of agreement about what folks want helps you and your neighbors put together a plan for a stronger neighborhood. The goals you share are the glue that unites people and keeps you working together. The more agreement among neighborhood members, the stronger their connection. But don't worry if there are only a few things that folks seem to agree about. Chances are those dreams are very strong and people will discover more things they have in common as they get to know each other.

Results are like the star that guides your neighborhood. Always focusing on them helps to ensure that you are heading in the right direction. Identifying clear results that people can measure will help neighbors see if they are making progress over time.

One result that members of the St. Thomas neighborhood of New Orleans want is strong, stable families that nurture and support their members. One way they can tell if they are making progress is by tracking the number of teenage pregnancies in the community.

In another neighborhood, residents are focusing on safety. To achieve a safer neighborhood, they are working to reduce the number of boarded-up buildings and the number of houses with bars on the windows. Residents also focus on increasing the number of street corners with functioning streetlights and the number of buildings that are occupied fulltime.

The Indianapolis Family Strengthening Coalition identified five priority results for families in the community:

- Families are healthy and safe.
- Families are financially secure.
- Families are engaged in each other's lives.
- Families are engaged in the community.
- Families instill and support family, heritage, faith, and cultural traditions.

Residents of San Mateo County, California have identified six results they want for their children. They have found ways to measure these conditions and monitor changes to see if things are improving.

- Children are safe.
- Children are healthy.
- Children are nurtured in a stable, caring environment.
- Children are succeeding in school.
- Children are out of trouble.
- Government and private service systems support children.