

## Track Your Progress: See If People's Lives Get Better

As you and your neighbors work together to build a better place to live, you will want to know how you're doing. Are you making a difference? Are things better in the neighborhood? If not, why not and how can you get on track?

Checking the neighborhood's progress is not something that you do once and then forget. To continue getting better, you need to keep your finger on your neighborhood's pulse. If you use what you learn to adjust your plans, you can make even bigger gains for kids and families.

In this section, you'll find:

- ▶ **Why** you need to monitor your progress.
- ▶ **How** to make sure you stay on track to a better neighborhood – keeping your focus on the results your neighbors want.
- ▶ **How** to measure neighborhood progress – gauging how far you've come and how far you have to go.
- ▶ **How** to keep getting better – continually learning and growing a better neighborhood.

"The rung of a ladder was never meant to rest upon, but only to hold a man's foot long enough to enable him to put the other somewhat higher."

- [Thomas Henry Huxley](#),

"If you lose hope, you're just not looking far enough ahead."

- [Joe Tye](#)

# 1. Why is it Important to Keep Track of Changes in Your Neighborhood?

## ***To keep neighbors involved and excited.***

People will stay involved if they can see that they're making a difference. Feedback allows the neighborhood to see that things are changing, to celebrate successes and to renew the focus on areas that aren't improving.

## ***To keep people's hopes and dreams alive.***

People have a big stake in making sure that the neighborhood improves. Information about how kids, families and other residents are doing gives them feedback about whether everyone is making progress.

## ***To step up to the plate.***

Monitoring conditions for kids and families helps you and your neighbors take responsibility. Many people are tired of blaming others for neighborhood problems. Instead of finger-pointing, they are willing to take ownership -- to share responsibility with others for making improvements. This feedback helps people hold themselves and each other accountable.

## ***To be sure that you're getting the whole picture.***

Depending on personal, daily experiences, each person may have a very different sense of how the neighborhood is doing. You need to be able to see the big picture of the entire neighborhood.

## ***To avoid hype and keep everyone honest.***

Because they are excited about the prospects of a better neighborhood or to rally others' support, people sometimes paint an overly optimistic picture of how they're doing or of what it takes to change. To improve our lives and neighborhoods is challenging. Glossing over the difficulties only makes the challenges greater. Monitoring the opinions of the entire neighborhood and the right facts and figures helps to keep you honest and to face challenges head on.

## ***To avoid wrong turns and adjust your plans.***

For most folks, working together to improve lives is a big change. Chances are, you won't get everything right immediately. By monitoring neighborhood conditions and neighbors' opinions, you can tell if you need to re-think the plans, modify certain steps or change the way you work together.

## ***To build confidence.***

Being able to show positive changes can boost the spirits of the neighborhood and show that people can make a difference when they work together. Even if dramatic changes have not happened, checking in with folks to get their feedback shows that their opinions matter. Ongoing communication emphasizes that neighborhood change doesn't happen overnight and that you're in it for the long haul.

## ***To get new people and organizations to the table.***

At first, some people may not recognize the stake they have in neighborhood conditions. But as they're able to see changes, they may begin to recognize how they are affected. For example, owners and managers of businesses that are located in the neighborhood may not realize the impact that crime has on customer traffic or that school failure has on workers' skills. When people can see what they have to gain or lose, they're likely to have a greater sense of ownership.

## ***To influence people who make decisions that affect the neighborhood.***

Information about residents' views, activities, and neighborhood changes can be critical for informing elected officials, government planners and others. Business owners considering new locations, city or county planners reviewing zoning regulations, social service administrators adding or cutting staff, and local or state officials distributing public funds can all be swayed by information about your efforts.

***To tell your story to potential funders.***

Information about your neighborhood's progress will go far toward helping you get new resources. Many funders require that you monitor conditions and report changes.

***When people can see that good things are happening in the neighborhood, they want to get in on it. Information helps you show the changes.***

## 2. How Can the Neighborhood Make Sure It's Making Progress?

### ***Staying Connected with Neighbors***

By talking to as many of your neighbors as you can, you learn what people want for their lives, their families, and the neighborhood. From everyone's hopes and dreams, day-to-day concerns, and views of the neighborhood, you together determine the results to focus on.

By the same token, the only way to keep track of opinions and perspectives is for neighbors to talk to each other – and to do it often. Regular, ongoing conversations among folks in your neighborhood are the single best way to keep moving ahead.

Neighbors also need to talk to people who have a stake in the neighborhood -- even if they're not residents. Local business owners and their employees, school staff, hospital workers, police and other service providers may notice changes in the neighborhood. They also may be able to contribute useful information about activities that are working and ideas about what might work to produce the changes the neighborhood wants.

### ***A New Kind of Neighborhood Watch: Keeping Your Eyes on the Prize***

The people who live and work in your neighborhood can tell a lot about what has changed and what hasn't – the progress the neighborhood is making toward the results they want and the areas that are not getting better.

Here are some examples of differences people may report.

#### ***The changing conditions of people's daily lives.***

- ✓ Young people may mention that they now feel welcome at school, that they no longer ditch classes, and that they are eager to graduate.
- ✓ Parents may be missing less time at work because it's easier to find affordable, reliable child care.
- ✓ Adults still can't find good jobs in the neighborhood. They must travel long distances everyday to support themselves and their families.

#### ***Differences folks observe in the neighborhood.***

- ✓ The streets and alleys are cleaner.
- ✓ There are more children playing in the park.
- ✓ Several new businesses have opened.
- ✓ Several empty lots are covered with trash.

#### ***Resources that are new, lacking or need improvement.***

- ✓ Middle school students are completing their homework with the help of after-school volunteers.

- ✓ Elders report that they are meeting neighbors they can call on for help if needed.
- ✓ Parents are able to get all the immunizations for their young children because the health clinic is open during more convenient hours and the immunizations are available at no cost.
- ✓ The program that helps many families pay for child care has been reduced drastically because of state budget cuts. Children are not receiving the supervision and care they need, and parents are missing work.

***Residents opinions about what's working and what's not.***

- ✓ Neighborhood circles are a great way to get to know each other – beyond saying hello on the street.
- ✓ Language barriers prevent some residents from learning about and participating in neighborhood clean-up days.
- ✓ Neighborhood meetings are not held at convenient times, and people with young children can't participate because there is no child care available.

## **Questions To Ask**

### ***How Are You Doing?***

How are your family and neighbors doing?  
How have your day-to-day lives changed? What is different?  
What's getting better and what's getting worse?  
Are you making progress toward the results you want for your family?

### ***How is the Neighborhood Doing?***

What changes do you see in the neighborhood? What is different?  
What are your concerns? What are the problems you worry about in the neighborhood? Have these changed?  
Are there new resources or strengths in the neighborhood?  
Are we making progress toward the results we want for the neighborhood?

### ***What's Working and What's Not?***

How is the neighborhood plan working?  
What specific activities are working and not working?  
What are you personally doing to achieve better results for your children, family and the neighborhood?  
How do you want people in the neighborhood to work together differently?  
Should the plan be changed? If so, how?

### ***How Can We Tell If Things are Getting Better?***

How can we tell if we're moving in the right direction?  
What can we watch to tell if we're getting the results we want?

### 3. How Can You Measure the Changes?

Along with getting your neighbors' opinions about progress toward results, you can count or directly observe many changes. Here are some questions consider:

*What tells you if conditions are changing in your neighborhood?  
How can you tell if people's lives are getting better or worse?  
What can you track to see if you're getting closer to the results you want?*

For example, if the result your neighborhood wants is more financial stability for residents, you might measure progress by counting:

- The number of businesses that close and new businesses that come into the neighborhood.
- The portion of local businesses that are resident-owned.
- The percentage of students who complete high school on time and become employed or further their education.
- The portion of residents who own their own homes, rent and live in public housing.

#### **The Numbers May Go Up or Down**

If a safer neighborhood is the result you want, you might be looking for increases in some numbers:

- ↑ Functioning streetlights.
- ↑ Residents who say they feel safe going outside at night.
- ↑ Police patrolling the neighborhood on foot, on bicycles and in squad cars.

At the same time, there are numbers you'll want to see decrease:

- ↓ Drug paraphernalia found during the weekly park clean-up.
- ↓ Resident visits to the emergency room due to injuries or accidents.
- ↓ The neighborhood's violent crime rate.

#### **Some Neighborhood Tips:**

##### ***Pull together information that already is collected.***

A lot of information about how your neighborhood is doing may be available from schools, the local health department, police reports, newspapers, the local housing authority, the local planning office.

#### ***Who To Ask for Information***

The local librarian  
The mayor's office  
Local government agencies – social services, health, housing, law enforcement, workforce development, planning and zoning offices  
Individual schools and the district office

### ***Information That Schools Collect***

Who the students are: their ethnic backgrounds, ages, languages, new enrollments.

Student health: absences due to illness, number of visits to the school nurse, children sent home sick, children entering kindergarten with all their immunizations.

Student skills and achievements: progress reports, test scores, promotion and graduation rates, retention rates, enrollment in remediation classes, athletic competitions, awards, scholarships awarded.

Student problems: absences, unexcused absences, disciplinary incidents and actions taken, suspensions, expulsions.

### ***Start with what you have and build from there.***

Try to find the best information you can that will tell how you're doing. But don't let lack of great information stall efforts to measure neighborhood progress.

### ***Don't try to take on too much.***

Keep your list short. Remember – you'll want to keep collecting and comparing information over time. Many neighborhoods measure no more than three things for each result.

### ***Look at different types of information.***

The most important information may be what residents tell you – their opinions, perspectives, experiences and observations of progress. Other types of information that can help you monitor progress are statistics about community conditions and input from local organizations and service providers.

### ***Figure out what information is missing.***

Talk to your neighbors about what they'd like to know. What information would help the neighborhood track its progress? From there, you can make a plan for getting what you need.

### ***Getting Out the Word***

Just as important as collecting information is keeping people informed about how the neighborhood is changing. The entire neighborhood and everyone with a stake in it

needs to hear about changes and understand the message. Here's advice from other neighborhoods.

- ❑ Speak the languages and cultures of the neighborhood. The way you communicate may be as important as what you have to say. To be sure that everybody gets the word, use all the languages of residents and present information in ways that are comfortable for them. It's all part of getting to know your neighbors on their terms.
- ❑ Be straight. Don't gloss things over or cry wolf. It's important to be honest. If you paint an overly positive picture of changes, the efforts won't be taken seriously and you won't win the neighborhood's trust. You also won't be taken seriously if you exaggerate your neighborhood's problems and concerns.
- ❑ Get out the word in creative ways. There are endless ways to spread the word. Look for the best places and ways to communicate with neighbors.

Posters can be placed in doctors' offices, churches, and laundromats. Updates can be sent home with school children, delivered with meals on wheels, and distributed where services are available. More and more communities are using internet websites. Provide written materials, hold meetings, use local newspapers, radio and television.

- ❑ Present information in ways that match people's interests. Families want plain language that tells what difference they're making for their children and other family members. Business partners want quick facts about return on investment. Service providers may want details about particular program strategies and activities. Don't hesitate to ask groups and individuals what kind of information they want.
- ❑ Don't wait for a crisis, but don't avoid one. Although a crisis in the neighborhood can spur people to action, it's staying involved over the long haul that usually produces lasting big changes. Keeping folks informed is the only way to keep them interested and involved over time.
- ❑ Be realistic about the time it takes to change. Let people know that results don't change overnight. It has taken a long time for your neighborhood to become what it is today and to make major changes will take a while. That's why it's important to take manageable steps and stay focused on the end results.

#### 4. How Can You Use the Information to Continue Getting Better?

As your neighborhood works together, you may take many steps, each carrying you closer to the results you want. Even so, you will never get to the end of the journey. You and your neighborhood can keep improving – learning new skills, discovering new strengths, helping your children, your families and each other thrive.

To reap the best results possible, we all need to learn from our experiences and make continuous adjustments to our actions. Efforts to improve your neighborhood and your life are not a one-time activity. Achieving results is an ongoing learning process.

