

PROJECT BRIEF

BUILDING INTERGENERATIONAL LEADERSHIP TO REVITALIZE BALTIMORE'S NEIGHBORHOODS



Like many older American cities, Baltimore has experienced a prolonged period of change. With a decline in manufacturing has come a steady erosion of wealth. At its height, it was a metropolis of nearly one million people; by 2010, the city had shrunk to just over 600,000.

Today, however, businesses are beginning to move back. The city is finding ways to attract entrepreneurs and grow its main street. Visitors are drawn to experience a creative, diverse, and history-filled place that is increasingly seen as dynamic and vibrant. People are once again choosing to call Baltimore home. In 2012, for the first time since the 1950s, the city's population actually grew.

For the Baltimore Community Foundation, which has worked for more than four decades to help Baltimore thrive, one of the most important measures of the city's revitalization rests in its neighborhoods. There, Baltimore's renaissance is still taking root. For too many Baltimore residents, neighborhoods that once flourished remain run-down. Even as Baltimore City shows signs of a turnaround, the Foundation has wanted to do more to bring new life to the city's most impoverished neighborhoods. But how?

In 2008, the Foundation began exploring a new approach to their investments in neighborhoods—a model whose success ultimately contributed to a decision to refocus their entire grantmaking portfolio. At the center of this approach was the realization that there was an existing, on-the-ground resource just waiting to be tapped: older adults.

"In a city that's constantly losing residents, where we can't seem to keep people, hands-down [we hear from older adults], 'This is my home, I'm going to stay here and make this place better,'" explains Baltimore Community Foundation Program Officer Jonalyn Denlinger. "They are the glue that holds the neighborhoods together. It is the older adults that continue to make Baltimore a vibrant city."

AT-A-GLANCE

BALTIMORE'S NEIGHBORS IN DEED INITIATIVE

COMMUNITY ISSUE

Improving quality of life in low-income neighborhoods

COLLABORATORS

Baltimore Community Foundation

Dundalk Renaissance Corporation

Southeast Community Development Corporation

Temple University Center for Individual Learning

University of Maryland, School of Social Work

Other community-based organizations including Comprehensive Housing Assistance Inc., Govans Ecumenical Development Corporation, Citizens Planning and Housing Association, Belair Edison Neighborhoods Inc., Greater Homewood Community Corporation, and funding partners

GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE

Baltimore, Maryland

Total population = 621,000

55+ population = 142,000 (23%)

RESULTS (FIRST THREE YEARS)

785 older adults (50% men) recruited; a majority of local leadership team volunteers were new to the organizations where they gave their time

1,273 older adult volunteer hours and 3,082 leadership hours donated, valued at \$71,040

7,009 participants of all ages engaged

27 neighborhood events and two diversity workshops were held; one documentary film created

255 storm drains painted, 676 bags of trash collected, 343 trees planted

15 partner organizations engaged; 10 partners received Coming of Age training; two partners worked in Communities for All Ages framework (from Temple University)

“This is not a traditional volunteer program where you start up something in the beginning and work through the steps of recruiting volunteers to work on the [issue]. Community organizing is about figuring out what people want to do and creating buy-in and engagement.”

—Partner, Neighbors in Deed Community Foundation

Beginning by Listening

With support from The Atlantic Philanthropies' Community Experience Partnership, a national initiative that helped communities mobilize older adults to create positive change, the Foundation planned and launched Neighbors in Deed.

From the outset, the Foundation took an approach known as asset-based community development. At its core, this approach begins with an inventory of assets—such as the skills and experience of community members—and an inquiry to understand which issues matter enough to these community members for them to want to take action. After creating a steering group of Foundation staff, other funders, older adults, and experts on community engagement and aging, the initiative partnered with the University of Maryland School of Social Work in a comprehensive asset mapping effort. They narrowed their focus to nine neighborhoods that were able to meet three key criteria: they were low- and middle-income, had high concentrations of adults over age 55, and had at least one community-based organization that was able and interested in serving as a coordinating partner. Working closely with these community-based partners, a research team of eight graduate students conducted in-person interviews and focus groups with more than 1,000 older adults over a four-month period.

The asset mapping process helped the Foundation dig deeply into the communities to find out what older adults identified as their strengths, the most critical issues they faced, and what they thought they could do to address those issues and improve their communities. There was a strong and clear response: Older adults were concerned about basic safety and cleanliness, and about the overall vibrancy of their neighborhoods. Many felt they had little political influence or ability to secure resources because their neighborhoods had been written off as beyond hope.

A closely related concern was that younger generations were losing interest in strengthening their neighborhoods. Older adults feared that contemporary society was losing the Depression-era values of community and public service with which they had been raised. Further, older adults worried that their concerns were stereotyped as “senior issues,” unrelated to issues affecting the lives of younger people. In fact, they argued, neighborhood quality of life is an issue that should matter to *everybody*.

Baltimore's older adults had no difficulty describing the ways they wanted their neighborhoods to improve. Just as important, though, was their desire that future generations develop a deeper sense of civic participation and responsibility. Improving quality of life in their communities would only be successful—and sustainable—if all generations invested in the effort together.

“For us, the intergenerational component was really important,” Denlinger notes. “That was not by our design but by the older adults saying, ‘That’s how we’re going to do it.’ The older adults helped co-design the process, and they said, ‘For neighborhood growth and change, we need the young people involved too.’”

Nurturing Leadership

Baltimore's older adults were ready to take action to revitalize their neighborhoods. They just needed a little encouragement—help getting started, support for growing important leadership skills, and resources to test their ideas.

To formally launch the implementation phase of the initiative, the Foundation made one-year planning and technical assistance grants to seven of the local partner organizations that had participated in the asset mapping process. Each community established a local, older adult–led, intergenerational leadership team charged with planning and implementing projects and events. The communities defined their own priority issues and brainstormed approaches for tackling those issues, including community organizing, multigenerational engagement, advocacy, and “neighbor helping neighbor” activities.

The first year of the implementation phase purposely mirrored much of the work done during the original research. Each neighborhood leadership team designed the shell of a plan and then engaged their community to refine that plan. “We were in senior centers, in people’s homes, in churches and synagogues, at grandparents’ meetings at schools,” says Denlinger. “We went wherever [older] people were, and we asked a lot of the questions we had asked in the neighborhood asset mapping all over again.” This time, it was about building interest in taking concrete action, and finding community members who wanted to take ownership of the effort for their neighborhood.

Then, the neighborhood-based organizational partners worked as facilitators who helped community members produce the activities they had chosen. Quickly, they began supporting local groups in numerous small, “winnable projects.” In one neighborhood, for example, residents wanted to do a tree planting. The partner agency ordered the trees, volunteers planted them, and the neighborhood shared in a feeling of success and progress. For the next tree planting, however, they would give the neighborhood residents the contact information to call to order the trees. There was an intentional progression, from teaching the process to ultimately turning the process over.

Helping Communities Help Themselves

After the pilot period ended, the Foundation gave full, three-year implementation grants focused on two geographic areas. In the first community, southeast Baltimore, residents chose to develop projects grounded in arts, culture, and storytelling. The neighborhood has rapidly changing demographics, and community members were looking for ways to strengthen relationships across cultures, races, ethnicities, and generations.

The lead implementing partner, Southeast Community Development Corporation, brought on two other organizations with experience in community-based arts and culture. Together, the three collaborators helped residents create a variety of events designed to foster community. The activities included Sabor Latino, which celebrated and shared the neighborhood's Latino heritage; "Our Second Story," which captured residents' stories about the community as part of a mini-documentary; the Art Cart Derby, a downhill soapbox race with intergenerational teams; and many more.

From the funder's perspective, there was risk involved in giving local leadership teams so much freedom to design their own work. The Art Cart Derby offers a good example: The idea was first proposed by a local resident, and a team of older adults worked with youth to bring the vision to life. Their concept was to require intergenerational teams, and for entries to be artistically expressive and reflective in some way of the neighborhood. "It's kind of a quirky idea," Denlinger observes. "We weren't sure it was going to work. 'It's racing cars down a road. Is this going to be valuable?' But what made it work was all the people that came to the table to design it."

In its first year, 200 people participated; the next year, more than 500; and by year three more than 1,000 people were racing or watching. Today, the Art Cart Derby is seen as something special and identified with southeast Baltimore, drawing people to that neighborhood who wouldn't otherwise come, and helping the neighborhood to be seen—both by others and by its own residents—as adding value to Baltimore City.

The Art Cart Derby is also a great example of how community organizing can work. It starts by teaching people how to put on an event—for example, how to get permits to close the streets; how to procure liability insurance; how to promote the event so people know it is happening; etc. Today, as they head into the fourth year, there will be minimal institutional involvement—it's 100 percent resident organized and led. "The event in and of itself is amazing," Denlinger remarks. "It's got great music and art. Everyone always asks who's behind this, and it's residents."

The second community that received a three-year implementation grant, Dundalk, is often seen as an "ugly step-sister" of Baltimore. Hard-hit from the loss of the steel industry, bound by water, and on the edge of the city, it is a large "inner-ring suburb"—really a collection of 32 smaller neighborhoods—where people frequently come to dump garbage. Rats are a problem. When Neighbors in Deed asked older adult residents what would make a difference, they wanted to beautify their community and build a sense of civic pride.

The Dundalk leadership team decided to tackle neighborhood aesthetics through greening activities and community clean ups that would reduce trash and rats. Residents came together to paint storm drains, pick up litter, promote recycling, and distribute trash cans. They created a contest for local children to design stickers to decorate the trash cans. Before Neighbors in Deed, Dundalk's 32 smaller neighborhoods rarely collaborated on anything. "Don't Trash Our Dundalk" became a rallying effort that brought those isolated areas together to accomplish something bigger than they could have achieved on their own.



Neighbors in Deed: Key Elements

- **Using a community organizing approach.** Neighbors in Deed ensured that the issues came directly from the communities. Lead organizations took direction from intergenerational participants to create projects that addressed the issues residents felt were most pressing, and that they most wanted to get involved in solving.
- **Creating leadership teams.** Implementing partners formed leadership teams that included older adults as well as younger residents to serve as the decision-makers for projects. This facilitated a process where the communities could feel true ownership of their projects.
- **Providing training.** The Foundation and implementing partners offered training opportunities to build participants' skills and comfort taking on leadership roles and participating in community organizing efforts. The trainings also helped foster relationships among participants and built social capital.
- **Creating intergenerational opportunities.** Implementing partners maintained the intergenerational focus of the project by ensuring that all activities were welcoming to all ages and fostered opportunities to work together.
- **Building strong relationships between the funder and implementing partners.** Trusting relationships and frequent contact facilitated open communication and feedback. Implementing partners were able to easily access support and advice from the Foundation, and the Foundation incorporated feedback from the implementing partners to inform development of the project and learning community.

Building Partner Capacity

Although the neighborhood-based projects are the most visible ways Neighbors in Deed has made change, the Foundation made another critical investment: helping their community-based partners build the capacity to do the work.

Although most of the implementing partners have extensive experience addressing community needs and quality of life issues, before Neighbors in Deed few had focused specifically on recruiting and engaging older adults, or on intergenerational work. Through trainings, technical assistance, information about effective practices, and access to professional development resources, collaborating partners learned how to effectively mobilize older adult change-makers, and how to successfully create opportunities for intergenerational participation.

They met together as a learning community frequently—in the first year, monthly, and by the third year, quarterly—to build knowledge and skills about working with older adults to address neighborhood needs. Often drawing from existing resources and curricula, such as the Temple University Communities for All Ages model, Experience Corps, and Business Volunteers of Maryland, the Neighbors in Deed learning community provided space and time for both formal and informal learning, and for building relationships across communities. Organizations shared their successes and challenges and came to understand that, even though they work in different parts of Baltimore and with different demographics, they face common challenges and are striving for closely connected goals.

To help create more rewarding opportunities for older adults, Neighbors in Deed also helped partners provide trainings for their older adult volunteers. The trainings covered a range of issues, including community organizing and outreach skills, event planning, engaging hard-to-reach residents, conflict resolution, and coalition-building.

Looking to the Long Term

"It's been incredibly valuable for us to get to try this process and see what worked and didn't work," says Baltimore Community Foundation's Jonalyn Denlinger. "Because of Neighbors in Deed, we rethought how we as a community foundation do funding and do partnerships." In 2013, the Foundation began shifting its grantmaking to concentrate exclusively on two areas: education and neighborhoods. Older adults continue to play a central role in their work. The key is recognizing that older adults are an exceptional—and growing—resource of energy, experience, and talent. By 2030, Marylanders aged 60 and over will account for over 25 percent of the state's population, up from 15 percent in 2000. This growth mirrors the trend in communities across the country—urban and rural, small and large, economically struggling and thriving.

Neighbors in Deed may not be a radical idea, but it is a strategy that deserves a fresh look. Even in a city with Baltimore's size and complexity, much is possible working at the neighborhood level. It may take significant initial effort to engage a neighborhood's older adults, to create the space for their ideas and energies to take life, but the promise of sustainability is great. Neighbors in Deed is not only helping nonprofit organizations learn how to recruit and work with older adult volunteers. It is not just improving neighborhoods. At its core, Neighbors in Deed is building the community's capacity to improve itself.

"They are the glue that holds the neighborhoods together. It is the older adults that continue to make Baltimore a vibrant city."—Jonalyn Denlinger, Baltimore Community Foundation

Learn about
experienced adults
leading other types
of change in diverse
communities across
the country, and
access resources
to help you do
similar work in
your community.

ceplearning.org