



Section 8: Building a Community

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Building a Community

There is a major difference between residents who live next door, down the street, or across the way from each other—and neighbors. Neighbors take pride and ownership in their community. They work together to keep their community clean, safe, and full of vitality. In short, neighbors unite to build stronger communities.

At Neighborhood Networks centers across the United States, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, residents of HUD FHA-insured and -assisted housing are moving toward self-sufficiency—and learning the importance of building strong communities in the process.

Benefits of Community Building

Uniting neighbors to build strong communities not only benefits residents, it benefits the larger community. While residents receive a sense of pride and ownership, a feeling of belonging, stronger ties to each other, and a belief that change is possible, the community as a whole enjoys a more attractive living environment and a safer neighborhood in which residents look out for one another.

Areas of Community Building

Building a strong community does not happen by itself. It takes residents who are willing to take a hands-on role in community activities. Community involvement activities typically fall into four categories:

Beautification

- Community gardening.
- Park and neighborhood cleanup days.
- Home and school rehabilitation programs.

Supporting Youth Activities

- Youth outings and teen nights.
- Mentoring and tutoring programs.

Public Safety

- Community policing.
- Neighborhood Watch.
- Senior patrols.
- Anti-drug and anti-violence programs.

Community Building and Empowerment

- Community events.
- Voter registration drives.
- Participation in Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) or other community organizations.

Ways to Build a Community

While community-building activities vary according to the individuals who reside in the community and their collective interests and needs, two tactics that have proven successful at building community spirit include planning and hosting a special community event and planting a community garden.

Building Community with Special Events

Another technique for building a stronger community is to host a special event that targets the interests of residents, as well as the larger community. Think of a special event as a building block for your center, helping you build resources, visibility, participation,

productivity, and morale in the community. Special events can:

- Unite residents and strengthen the community.
- Build interest and excitement about your center's programs and increase participation among residents and other center users.
- Attract new local partners and volunteers and publicly thank those who are already involved.

Seattle Grows with P-Patch Community Gardens

The City of Seattle's Department of Neighborhoods' P-Patch Program, in conjunction with the not-for-profit P-Patch Trust, provides organic community garden space for residents of 70 Seattle neighborhoods.

More than 6,000 urban gardeners raise produce on over 2,500 garden plots throughout the city. P-Patch programs serve low-income, disabled, youth, and non-English-speaking populations in Seattle.

P-Patch gardeners grow vegetables, fruits, flowers, and herbs using organic methods. Produce can be shared with friends or donated to food banks, but cannot be sold. Garden plots are available in sizes from 10 x 10 feet (100 square feet) up to 10 x 40 feet (400 square feet) and are rented for a nominal fee each year. Gardeners must contribute a minimum of 8 hours of P-Patch community time each year, four of which must be at their own garden site. Participants are expected to keep their garden plots weeded, watered, and harvested.

Visit the P-Patch Web site (www.seattle.gov/neighborhoods/ppatch/gardening.htm) for information about P-Patch and creating gardening space in your neighborhood.

- Educate the greater community and increase awareness of your center and its programs.
- Affirm your center's place within the community, as well as the family of Neighborhood Networks centers.

The scope of a special event is limited only by the imagination and resources of the people planning the event. Just as each Neighborhood Networks center is different, special events will vary from center to center. You know best what will work in your neighborhood and with the resources you have at hand.

Events are usually planned to celebrate or commemorate an occasion—a milestone, an important visit, or a much-deserved thank you. Ideas for events that may build a stronger community and solidify the role of your center are provided below:

- **Open your doors.** Invite residents and community partners to your center to showcase a program while it is in action. Have a demonstration, answer questions, provide refreshments, and mingle.
- **Hold a grand opening.** Opening a Neighborhood Networks center is a significant accomplishment that should not go unnoticed. Many centers host a grand opening to introduce the center to residents and the community, and promote the valuable programs and services it offers.
- **Celebrate an anniversary.** Neighborhood Networks centers provide valuable services to residents across the nation—and sustaining these programs and services takes a great deal of hard work. Many centers like to celebrate the anniversary of the date they first opened their doors and began moving residents toward self-sufficiency. These events are excellent opportunities to invite residents, volunteers, partners, and community leaders to share in a center's success.
- **Hold a health fair.** Hold a health fair to provide residents with information on health issues and obtaining access to healthcare. A number of Neighborhood Networks centers around the country have held health fairs to help residents sign up for their state's Children's Health

Insurance Program, which provides health insurance for children of qualified families. Invite community healthcare representatives to provide health information and screenings at the center.

- **Host a community festival.** Invite local agencies that provide services for residents, such as transportation, education, and job training, to come to your center for a day of entertainment and education. Make the day fun by creating a fair-like atmosphere with games, giveaways, and snacks.
- **Acknowledge your partners.** Hold a partner recognition ceremony, such as a breakfast, luncheon, or dinner, to publicly thank them. Invite community leaders and potential partners as well. Ask residents to participate by sharing their experiences using the center. Consider presenting partners with a certificate of appreciation.
- **Spruce up your center.** Hold a painting party to give your Neighborhood Networks center a new look. Build some shelves. Brighten up a classroom to make it a place where residents want to go to learn. Convert a storage room into a cozy study space. Invite residents for a day of work and fun that also builds pride in the center.
- **Sponsor a forum.** A forum is a good way to open a dialogue on an important issue while raising your center's visibility. Consider hosting a forum at your center to discuss an issue that is important to the neighborhood or the larger community. Invite a panel that reflects different sides of the issue and publicize the event with flyers and media outreach. Invite local media to cover the event.

Media Opportunities Are Everywhere

Any special event can provide a great media opportunity. Invite local media to your center to meet with partners, residents, and local dignitaries. For more information on how to work with the media, see Section 9.

- **Hold a contest.** Contests generate excitement and attention and can be a good way to increase program participation. Publicize the contest with a flyer targeted to residents that describes the contest, judging criteria, how to submit entries, the deadline, and prizes. Ideas for contests include:
 - Ask residents of all ages to write a slogan, cheer, or song that celebrates your center's work.
 - Hold an essay contest in which center participants write about the most interesting and/or beneficial activity they have learned or done at the center.
 - Ask children to draw a picture with a caption that celebrates your center's work. Award ribbons to all participants.
 - Create a poster for Neighborhood Networks Week.

Other events to consider include:

- A potluck dinner.
- A Neighborhood Networks Week celebration.
- A community clean-up day.
- A family day at which parents and children can participate in games and activities.
- Milestone celebrations, such as the 100th participant or graduate of a program.
- A visit by an important public official or dignitary.

Neighborhood Networks Week

Community events are especially welcomed during Neighborhood Networks Week, a weeklong observance held each summer to recognize the achievements of Neighborhood Networks centers located throughout the United States, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. During this week, all centers are encouraged to highlight and showcase their achievements by participating in a variety of national and local events. HUD officials are encouraged to attend Neighborhood Networks Week events at their local

centers during that time. This provides an excellent opportunity to highlight your center's participation in a national initiative dedicated to inspiring residents all across the country to move towards self-sufficiency. For more information about Neighborhood Networks Week, contact the Neighborhood Networks Information Center at (888) 312-2743.

Remember, an event does not have to be complicated to be successful. A little planning and a few volunteers can go a long way. The event planning process can have its own rewards—people who are part of a successful event-planning team may be energized to make a long-term commitment to your center.

Planning a Successful Event

Whether your event is large or small, simple or complex, months away or next week, some basic planning guidelines will help ensure a successful event. Because some of the following steps are more relevant to larger events that require a longer planning time, pick and choose those steps that apply to your event and the resources available to you.

Questions to Ask Before You Begin

Answering a few questions up front will help you plan the best event for your needs and resources. You probably have your own questions to add to the

A Center Event that Soared

The Pico Union Neighborhood Networks Center in Los Angeles, California, sponsored a community fair with carnival rides, food, arts and crafts, entertainment, and health services, such as immunizations for children, eye exams, and free glasses. In addition, there was service information from 35 nonprofit organizations, information for first-time homebuyers, 6 computer raffles, and help with public library registration. The center worked with a local radio station to promote the community fair, which attracted 2,000 people during the 2-day event.

list, but the following questions will get you started:

- What is the goal of the event? To attract new partners? Draw more participants to center programs? Involve the community with the center?
- Will the event appeal to those you want to attract? Will the date, time, and location work for everyone?
- Do you have time to successfully produce the event you want? Make sure to develop a detailed to-do list and budget early. Is it possible to recruit sponsors to donate goods and services?
- Is weather a factor? Do you have an alternative plan, including a rain date or an indoor location?
- If you want to attract media, do you have a story to tell? Profiles of residents who have benefited from your center make appealing stories.
- Do you want or need entertainment at the event?
- Do you want giveaways? These can be great mementos that leave a lasting impression, and they do not have to be expensive. Potential mementos include balloons, buttons, water bottles, t-shirts, mouse pads, or mugs. Consider asking a partner or local vendor to underwrite giveaways and find a way to publicly thank them.
- Do you need food vendors? Sanitation facilities? A cleanup crew?
- Is your event location fully accessible to people with disabilities?

Planning: A Quick-Steps List

To plan and execute a successful event in three to four weeks, include the following key planning elements:

- Enlist a few good volunteers.
- Establish guidelines for success, and keep those goals in mind during the planning process.
- Make a detailed to-do list, complete with deadlines.
- Set a budget. If you need donations from local merchants or partners, now is the time to ask.

- If you will have speakers or important event participants, call to invite them as soon as possible. Follow up with a written invitation. Find out if they will need support materials, such as an easel or audiovisual equipment.
- Decide who to invite and how to get the word out. For neighborhood events, some good outreach tools include placing flyers under doors

Key Planning Tips

It is never too early to start planning. As you begin planning and proceed:

- Make sure goals are realistic for what you are trying to accomplish. Goals like “raise visibility” and “get residents excited about the center’s programs” are fairly general. Be more specific, such as setting a goal to sign up 25 residents for an upcoming class.
- Develop a realistic budget and timeline and make sure the event is on a scale to match.
- Depending on the timeframe, the event team can be an ad hoc team of two or three people or something more formal. Give team members deadlines and specific assignments—such as publicity, refreshments, or invitations—to help everyone remain on track.
- If possible, involve partners and supporters and publicly thank them for their help. Involve partners in the planning process.
- Involve as much of the community as you can: children, senior citizens, schools, faith-based groups, youth groups, block clubs, and neighborhood associations. Look for ways to generate excitement for the event.
- Right before the event, do a walkthrough. Anticipate any problems and devise solutions.
- After the event, send thank-you notes or present certificates of appreciation to all participants.

and posting them in high-traffic areas, publishing information in local newspapers, and contacting key community leaders.

- Arrange early for a podium, microphones, seating, decorations, refreshments, and/or signs. If the location is hard to find, prepare signs to direct people to the site.
- If the event is outdoors, have a rain plan. Be sure the location is fully accessible to people with disabilities.
- Decide if you want to invite the media. Media coverage prior to the event can help increase attendance if you are trying to attract a large amount of people.
- Print and distribute an event program that includes a schedule and lists speakers and their titles. Double check the spelling of names.
- Write thank-you notes.

Planning: A Long-Range Planning Timetable

This is an ideal timeline for a large event that is planned months in advance. Use it as a guide to help assemble a plan that meets your needs.

Five Months Before the Event

- Identify an event committee and assign roles that include development of publicity materials, site logistics, and media contact.
- Hold the first committee meeting to set date, time, and goals for the event.
- Set event plan and timetable.

Four Months Before the Event

- Event committee meets twice each month to continue planning.
- Find and confirm location. Invite key speakers and local celebrities/notables.
- Prepare or update the center’s media list.
- Prepare an invitation list.

Three Months Before the Event

- Begin to recruit support by speaking to community groups, clubs, and organizations. Solicit funds, materials, and volunteers.
- Arrange for podium, seating, and decorations.
- Secure sound, lighting, and staging needs.
- Draft flyer or invitation.
- Print and mail “Save-the-Date” postcards.
- Recruit entertainment.

Two Months Before the Event

- Print and mail the flyer or invitation.
- Prepare public service announcements (PSAs), posters, banners, and other event materials such as a logo and letterhead.
- Kick off advance publicity activities. Include PSAs, paid advertising, and submission of op-ed articles or letters to the editor of the local newspaper.

Six Weeks Before the Event

- Develop a specific event schedule to include length of event, entertainment, and when and for how long speakers will speak.
- Order event mementos, if needed, such as buttons, banners, key rings, and t-shirts.

Four Weeks Before the Event

- Reconfirm all participants.
- Obtain speaker biographies.
- Conduct committee walkthrough of the site.
- Send event to local media for their community calendars.

Two to Three Weeks Before the Event

- Hold volunteer orientation session.
- Identify staff/volunteers to serve as technical sources for reporters.
- Arrange for event photographer.

- Develop certificates for participants.
- Select contents for a press packet.

Eight to Nine Days Before the Event

- Complete media advisory, if using.
- Write news release.

Six or Seven Days Before the Event

- Fax, e-mail, or mail media advisory.
- Call media to confirm receipt and pitch story.
- Draft talking points for speakers, if necessary.
- Call event participants to check needs.
- Make follow-up calls to invitees.
- Hang banners and posters.

Four to Five Days Before the Event

- Complete and e-mail or fax news release.
- Develop a script and send it to the master of ceremonies and participants.
- Prepare event agenda.
- Prepare press packets.

Day of the Event

- Arrive at the site 2 hours in advance to make sure everything is in place and working, including microphones, sound system, and other equipment. Setup for the event can occur the evening before.
- Make sure speakers have their talking points.
- Greet reporters as they arrive, distribute press packets, and introduce media to speakers, residents, and partners they may wish to interview.

After the Event

- Send journalists any materials promised.
- Respond to media inquiries.
- Follow up with potential new partners or anyone else who needs additional information.

- Send thank-you notes to speakers and participants.
- Thank your volunteers.

More detailed information about planning a Neighborhood Networks Week event can be found in the *Neighborhood Networks Week Event Planning Guide* available on the Neighborhood Networks Web site (www.NeighborhoodNetworks.org).

Growing a Garden—and a Community

Several thousand community gardens operate in the United States. They range in size from 100 square feet to several acres and may serve anywhere from a single gardener to more than 50 people. Some community gardens are designed for special populations, such as youth, seniors, or individuals with disabilities. Most gardens are used for growing vegetables, but others cultivate flowers or herbs. Some community gardens generate income and are considered urban agriculture.

Getting Started

When developing a community garden, there are several issues to consider (excerpted from the American Community Gardening Association at www.communitygarden.org):

- **Determine need and interest.** Survey residents and neighbors to determine if there is enough interest in community gardening. Experts say that a minimum of 10 committed gardeners is needed to begin a community garden. Determine if the garden will be open to all or to specific users, such as seniors, youth, minority or ethnic populations, or people with disabilities.
- **Organize the planning process.** Organize a steering committee to plan the resident outreach and develop the garden.
- **Identify potential partners.** Identify contributors for the site who might provide topsoil, seeds, tools, fencing, and technical expertise. Churches and city departments of parks and recreation or community development are common sources

of assistance. Several foundations provide funds for local projects. Existing gardening groups in the community can be helpful for models, advocacy, technical assistance, or partnerships. These groups could be garden clubs or groups already operating community gardens.

- **Select an appropriate site.** Find an available site that meets your needs and does not have any major environmental or incompatible use problems. The slope of the land should be limited or suitable for terracing. The site should receive at least 6 hours of direct sunlight daily. Test the soil in the fall for contaminants and nutrients. Water should be in place or easily accessible. Secure a lease or agreement for a minimum of 3 years.
- **Prepare a site development plan.** Gather resources and materials. Create an equipment storage space. Determine the plot sizes, access points, and fencing system. Schedule and organize a community workday. Establish work crews and schedule site cleanup and preparation.
- **Establish an organization.** Determine membership rules and responsibilities. Set dues and fees. Establish a decision-making process with assigned roles. Prepare a set of written rules and preferences on assignment of plots. Decide how income

Community-Supported Agriculture

Unlike smaller community gardens, Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) sites are intensely cultivated, urban minifarms designed to enable gardeners to sell produce for a profit.

Located on larger plots of land, CSA gardeners raise produce for their own use and to sell at farmers' markets or to individual subscribers who pick up fresh produce each week during the growing season.

For more information about CSA and links to resources, visit the U.S. Department of Agriculture Web site at www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/csa/.

will be budgeted and spent and how rules will be enforced. Establish a periodic maintenance schedule.

- **Define leadership.** Develop an ongoing organizational structure with clearly defined leadership and program guidelines to limit potential disputes and misunderstandings. It may be useful to have a nongardener or other neutral person make controversial decisions. Decide if the organization should obtain nonprofit status.
- **Manage the garden.** All members should be given a set of written rules, which should also be posted at the garden site. Rules should cover actions to be taken if a gardener is not actively using his or her plot. The process for taking back a garden plot should be communicated to all gardeners. Rules should clearly define and discuss the appropriate use of pesticides and fertilizer. If gardeners are expected to donate time to maintain or improve the site, this should be clearly communicated to all participants before spring. Strict attendance, or arrangements for substitutes, should be required at community cleanups and for periodic maintenance.
- **Encourage community acceptance.** It may be wise to host a grand opening event in the neighborhood or at the site to draw attention to the community garden. The site's appearance is important. A perimeter of flowers will enhance the visual impact and may increase the neighborhood's acceptance of the project.
- **Consider how to respond to or prevent vandalism and theft.** One garden program set aside a *vandals' plot*, posting signs that asked visitors to refrain from taking produce from individual garden plots, but suggesting that if they must take something, take it from the identified communal plot. Pick ripe vegetables and fruit regularly. This will reduce theft. Find a way to involve neighborhood youth in the project. They are more likely to respect the property if they understand its importance or play a part in its development.

- **Overcome any barriers to a community garden.**

There are barriers that need to be considered during the planning process to determine if a community garden project should proceed. Not every available piece of land is suitable or appropriate for use as a garden. Sites should be carefully considered before initiating work. Major barriers include:

- Unsuitable land due to soil contamination.
- Unavailable land.
- Insufficient number of people interested in the project.
- Neighborhood opposition.
- Inaccessible water.

- **Budgeting for a garden project.** Community gardens are not created without expense. The initial costs of developing a site can be considerable. Ongoing maintenance costs, by contrast, are modest. Before undertaking a garden project, residents and property managers should have a clear idea of funding and labor needs. Obtaining donations of money and materials and recruiting volunteer labor will significantly reduce actual cash expenses.

Development costs may include site acquisition; labor and materials, such as fencing, a sod cutter, and cultivator; irrigation; compost and bin; tools, such as a wheelbarrow, shovels, rakes, and hoes; and soil testing.

Annual garden costs may include fertilizer, seeds, water, and general maintenance.

Reaping the Rewards of a Community Garden

Community gardens, large and small, often generate many positive changes throughout the neighborhood, including:

- **Neighborhood beautification.** Residents may be inspired to take the "greening up" of their neighborhood one step further. Often, other beautification projects, such as flowers and herb gardens in public areas, spring up around the neighborhood.

- **Community building.** Gardens often foster a sense of community. As once-isolated residents work side by side in the garden, the community is strengthened and issues, such as childcare and health, are discussed as a community, rather than individually. A community garden also can increase resident contact with the surrounding neighborhood as gardeners sell their produce to people living outside the apartment complex.
- **Education.** In addition to learning the art of gardening, resident participants learn about recycling and developing organic food sources.
- **Intergenerational activity.** Adult residents may choose to make their garden plots a family project, including their children in the preparation and maintenance of their garden plots.
- **Improved diets.** As more fresh produce is available, residents' diets benefit with many participants reporting an improvement in nutrition.
- **Cost savings.** Gardeners can reduce their grocery bills by growing their own produce.
- **Increased income.** Gardeners can earn income by selling their extra produce.

Additional Resources

The American Community Gardening Association (ACGA) is a bi-national nonprofit membership organization of professionals, volunteers, and supporters of community greening in urban and rural communities. ACGA recognizes that community gardening improves the quality of life by providing a catalyst for neighborhood and community development, stimulating social interaction, encouraging self-reliance, beautifying neighborhoods, producing nutritious food, reducing family food budgets, conserving resources, and creating opportunities for recreation, exercise, therapy, and education. Visit the ACGA Web site (www.communitygarden.org) to find information on starting a community garden or to find an existing community garden near you.

The National Gardening Association (NGA) is a nonprofit leader in plant education. NGA serves a national audience with timely materials designed to foster an appreciation of the benefits of gardening. NGA programs and initiatives highlight the opportunities for plant-based education in schools, communities, and backyards across the country. With ideas for backyard gardens and kids' gardens, the NGA Web site offers planting guides, answers to frequently asked questions, online gardening courses, and much more. Membership is free. Check out the NGA Web sites www.garden.org or www.kidsgardening.com for information that can help you get your garden started.

