Celebrating 15 Years of Strengthening Neighborhoods

Strengthening Neighborhoods
A program of The Denver Foundation
For 15 years, **Strengthening Neighborhoods** (SN) has been The Denver Foundation’s grassroots neighborhood development program. SN helps residents of ten partner neighborhoods use their existing strengths and assets to make their communities better places to live.

**History:** In 1996, The Denver Foundation asked 100 leading members of the community to share ideas about how the Foundation could expand its impact. Their number one suggestion was “Neighborhood and Community Capacity Building.” In response, The Denver Foundation created Strengthening Neighborhoods.


**Grants:** For a complete list of grants, please visit www.strengtheningneighborhoods.org.

**SN TIMELINE**

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<th>Year</th>
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<td>1996</td>
<td>The Denver Foundation convenes 100 community leaders who recommend creating a program to help strengthen the Denver region’s neighborhoods.</td>
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<td>1997</td>
<td>The Denver Foundation launches the Strengthening Neighborhoods Initiative, and its first grant helps create Commerce City Community Enterprise.</td>
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SN has helped neighborhood residents in its partner communities by:

- Awarding planning and project grants to groups of neighbors seeking to make change in their communities
- Offering advice and resources as people are getting their projects started and throughout their projects
- Providing leadership development in English and Spanish

**Strengthening Neighborhoods Committee 2011-2012**

Ginny Bayless
Sarah Bock
Linda Campbell, Chair
Jack Fox
David Goens
Maria Gonzalez
Ruben Medina
Paul Tamburello
Maria Zubia
Commerce City Community Enterprise

Commerce City is a blend of quiet residential neighborhoods and industrial areas, perched just north of I-70 on the southern edge of Adams County. With its close proximity to downtown Denver and the airport, the community has seen tremendous growth in recent years. At the same time, many local residents are seeking to maintain the strong sense of community that has typified Commerce City for generations.

Fifteen years ago, The Denver Foundation saw great promise in Commerce City and chose the city to be one of its original partners in the newly formed Strengthening Neighborhoods Initiative. The new initiative made one of its first grants to launch a new group called “Commerce City Community Enterprise” (CCCE) as a citizen-centered nonprofit that would help residents marshal the assets and relationships already present in their community to take action on issues that were important to them.

Now in 2012, Cristie Jophlin-Martin, Executive Director since 2003 and an employee since 2000, can tell stories for hours of working with local leaders to build relationships between diverse parts of the community. One hard-fought success was the creation of curbside recycling. “We helped a group of neighbors create Commerce City Citizens for Recycling. They conducted a campaign to build support – a campaign run one hundred percent by the residents themselves as volunteers,” says Jophlin-Martin. “It took a year, but we now have curbside recycling throughout the entire city.”

CCCE has also taken on many community-wide efforts, such as serving as the lead for an immigrant integration and community inclusiveness project called Commerce City One Community. In partnership with the city, they help over 1,000 immigrants and other community members with basic human needs, and offer a monthly legal seminar on immigration and other issues.

Cristie Jophlin-Martin points out, “… the residents can more easily speak with a specific voice about their vision for their future…”

SN holds its first Spanish-language community meeting.

SN holds over 30 neighborhood outreach meetings in most SN partner neighborhoods to help neighbors learn from one another and develop ideas for projects.
These projects would not be possible without the active support of resident leaders like Guillermo Serna and Mariá Gonzalez.Both have served on The Denver Foundation committee that oversees SN’s work, and have participated in SN’s Neighborhood Leadership Development Program. CCCE has now created its own version of the program, using a national curriculum that they helped develop for use with native Spanish-speakers. “Building on what SN taught us, we’ve expanded from 8 sessions to 20, and we had 19 graduates in our last round of classes,” says Jophlin-Martin.

Commerce City still faces challenges with helping bring together the very different groups that are driving its growth and development, which include low-income immigrant communities and higher income homeowners. One tool CCCE has used to build relationships and bridge gaps is NeighborCircles, a series of dinners that helps neighbors know one another and determine how they can work together to build community.

What will CCCE take on in the years to come? Right now, CCCE and its resident leaders are working with the city to name all the neighborhoods in Commerce City, and to give the newly-identified communities a specific voice in city planning and decision-making. As Jophlin-Martin points out, “Once these neighborhoods have an identity, the residents can more easily speak with a specific voice about their vision for their future, and more easily garner resources like community development block grants.”

CCCE has just merged with the organization Partnerships for Healthy Communities so that it can expand its highly-regarded resident leadership work into south Thornton, south Westminster, and the Perl Mack community. The new organization, called simply Community Enterprise, will combine CCCE’s resident action model with a focus on healthy eating and staying active. “We eventually hope to have an annual summit of neighbors from throughout south Adams County coming together to take action,” states Jophlin-Martin.

Fifteen years after its founding, SN can be proud of the outstanding work of Community Enterprise and its neighborhood leaders. Together, they are creating a community that provides opportunity and connection for all of its residents.
In the ebb and flow of community leadership, passing the baton is essential to a consistently strong community voice in any neighborhood. This is especially true in Skyland (North City Park).

Al Rue, the recently deceased past president of North City Park Civic Association (NCPCA), was determined to change how leadership operated and to get others involved. “We were stumped,” stated Rue in a 2009 interview. “We had just been doing things by the seat of our pants. We had to learn not to tell others what to do, but how to encourage others to be involved, to lead.” Rue participated in the Strengthening Neighborhoods Neighborhood Leadership Development Program (NLDP), through which local resident leaders learned how to reach out and draw new people into their work. “Being a part of the Neighborhood Leadership Development Program opened our eyes to new ways to re-energize the Association,” Rue reflected.

As a result of lessons learned in the NLDP, as Rue prepared to hand off the leadership mantle in 2007, Elder James Brown was ready to step up. “I committed to this organization in 2005,” says Brown, “I did so with a promise to be available 24/7.” Brown also brought a community village concept to the work. “The true meaning of community is when we all know each other and share,” he says, “…not just in the good times but with all the ills and hurts.”

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— David Goens (top) and Elder James Brown

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<td>2004</td>
<td>SN expands to include Original Aurora as its tenth partner neighborhood.</td>
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<td>2005</td>
<td>SN Committee announces five new program goals, focused on building connections between neighbors, leadership development, social change, cross-neighborhood collaboration, and helping institutions include resident voices.</td>
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Following the tradition of leadership and community engagement fostered by Rue and Brown, Dave Goens stepped into NCPCA’s lead role in 2008, ready to stretch the neighborhood’s vision for itself. “I got involved in NCPCA because I truly believe that the more folks are involved, the stronger their community will be. I looked around this community and I saw people with ideas for projects - ways to bring connection between diverse neighbors and buy-in by the community,” says Goens. “My job was to help prioritize, and ensure we had all the resources, including people and solid plans, to be successful.”

Now Deborah Fard, a long-time resident deeply involved in the neighborhood’s life, is leading NCPCA as the organization broaches a new frontier of community development and creates a long-term vision.

“As the new and current President of NCPCA, my vision is a collective one. It is inclusive of our children, seniors, businesses, and all residents. I believe I am continuing the same vision that past presidents have embraced,” states Deborah. “It has been 30 years since NCPCA had a woman at the helm. In addition, our neighborhood is more diverse than it has ever been. Embracing culturally intelligent practices is a necessary skill in successful leadership today. Successful leadership skills tend to be more relationship-oriented, team-collaborative, and include innovative structures for harmonious and successful outcomes.”

Big plans are on the horizon for NCPCA – the Skyland Cop Shop (a citizen safety office, conceived and staffed by community volunteers), a model seed harvesting and garden program, and community engagement to reopen discussions for the redevelopment of the former East Denver YMCA, a community space that long-served as a hub of neighborhood life. These are just a few of the undertakings in this reenergized community.

Through this legacy of leadership - from Al Rue to Elder Brown, Dave Goens, and now Deborah Fard - the neighborhood has become a stronger community, filled with hope and pride. The only question is - who will be next to take the baton?

Claudette and Al Rue
Fifteen years ago, The Denver Foundation asked 100 local leaders for their advice about how the Foundation could play a more proactive role in the community. Their number one recommendation was to "strengthen neighborhoods in metro Denver." The Foundation’s response was to create the Strengthening Neighborhoods Program (SN), which set out to help residents of low-income neighborhoods improve life for themselves and their neighbors by building on the strengths and assets they already have.

Where does this work begin? The first step is always relationship building.

“SN recognized that the most critical foundation for community change is a platform built of relationships and committed common interests, where residents, local associations, congregations, business, and agencies can all come together,” states Mike Green, a consultant with the Asset Based Community Development Institute and a long-time partner with SN.

“It was about providing financial support to help people make their communities how they wanted them to be,” says Christine Soto, who developed SN as a Program Officer and then Vice President of The Denver Foundation’s Programs Department. “We made a concentrated effort to reach out to folks in the community through one-on-one meetings and by hosting gatherings of residents. It really helped to transform the reputation of the Foundation into the place that it is today—a place that cares about people in all levels of society.”

After focusing so much early effort on building relationships, in 2001 SN was asked by leaders in several of its partner neighborhoods to create a leadership program to strengthen existing leaders’ skills and to help them develop additional skills that would serve them well in neighborhood settings. Eventually a second track was added to

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**According to Mike Green**

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support the leadership needs of monolingual Spanish speakers. Over 200 people from all of SN’s partner communities have graduated from the two programs.

Years after the founding of SN, the fruits of relationship building and leadership development are being harvested in Northeast Park Hill. After an arson-induced blaze that leveled the Holly Shopping Center, SN was approached by Aaron Miripol, Executive Director of the Urban Land Conservancy (ULC), about engaging Northeast Park Hill leaders in rebuilding the burnt-out property. SN’s LaDawn Sullivan thought SN could help to connect resident leaders with the ULC – which had just purchased the property and was trying to decide what to do with it. The outcome was that the ULC and SN partnered to create the Holly Area Redevelopment Project (HARP), a group of community stakeholders who were deeply committed to developing a vision for redevelopment that could transform the neighborhood.

The leaders of HARP worked with the ULC to develop a set of Good Neighboring Principles that the ULC agreed to use when seeking development partners for the property. Neighborhood leaders learned how to assess development proposals and interview potential developers. The result of the HARP process is that a new Boys and Girls Club, chosen by HARP and the ULC as a result of the community visioning process, will break ground on a portion of the Holly property in late 2012.

The importance of SN’s role connecting resident leaders to the development process is recognized by Dave Younggren, Senior Vice President of the Gary-Williams Energy Company and ULC Board Chair, who observes that “Strengthening Neighborhoods is a critical partner in helping ULC effectively bring the community into our ‘place making’ process. Their expertise in community outreach and organizing makes it possible for ULC to successfully target real estate investments to fill priority needs that can be the catalyst for strengthening the fabric of our communities.”

The Denver Foundation’s President, David Miller, calls the union between SN and ULC a “symbiotic” relationship. “Both sides have benefited enormously. The ULC has provided real estate assets and expertise, while SN has used its neighborhood relationships and skills.”

What SN has accomplished is rare, according to community development expert Mike Green. “SN holds the deeply genuine conviction that all people have gifts and everyone needs to be included. This conviction can transform people, groups, and whole neighborhoods into organized and united communities that have the power to create the world they want. SN has always been about valuing the wisdom in communities, and understanding that people know best what they need and want.”
Strengthening Neighborhoods is The Denver Foundation’s grassroots neighborhood development program.

In 2013 and beyond, The Denver Foundation will integrate the goals of Strengthening Neighborhoods into its grantmaking and action to improve life in Metro Denver in the areas of Basic Human Needs, Education, and Economic Opportunity. The Foundation looks forward to working with residents to address these critical issues.

Goals:
- Support positive relationships among residents based on equality and the valuing of everyone’s contributions
- Support resident leaders
- Help residents organize to create positive change in their communities
- Connect residents and resident-led groups across neighborhoods so they can learn from one another and take action on common concerns
- Bring new partners to the work of resident-centered community building

A complete list of SN grants is available at www.strengtheningneighborhoods.org

Bridges of Silence (in Commerce City) uses sign language to bridge hearing and non-hearing community members.