Strengthening Neighborhoods (SN) is 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.

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

SN helps neighborhood residents in its partner communities by:

- Giving 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
- Providing leadership development classes in English and Spanish

For more information, visit www.denverfoundation.org
At a time when research shows a decline in civic engagement, Strengthening Neighborhoods (SN) has the privilege of working with hundreds of strong leaders throughout its ten partner neighborhoods. These leaders of all ages care deeply about their communities and take action to address the issues that affect their lives and the lives of their families, friends, and neighbors. And they are working tirelessly to encourage their fellow residents to get and stay involved in community life.

Because these individuals are so critical to creating community change, Strengthening Neighborhoods conducted research on how grassroots neighborhood leaders develop, the personal qualities, skills, and characteristics that make them effective, and how they can best be supported in their work.

**What Helps Neighborhood Leaders Develop?**

Four factors emerged as most significant in the development of grassroots leaders:

- **Support and inspiration from family and friends**
- **Mentoring, both formal and informal, from elders and seasoned leaders**
- **Lessons learned from life experience, such as exposure to injustice, overcoming obstacles, pursuing a passion, acting on spiritual beliefs, or playing sports**
- **Formal training through a community organizing workshop, civic leadership retreat, or similar opportunity**
What are the Key Traits of Neighborhood Leaders?

SN’s research also identified personal qualities, skills, and characteristics shared by successful neighborhood leaders, some of which differ sharply from those supposedly necessary to succeed as a corporate or business leader. Successful grassroots leaders:

• Are good listeners and good communicators
• Care for their fellow residents
• Exhibit honesty, integrity, patience, and humility
• See themselves as servants of others, and do not seek credit for their actions

How Does Strengthening Neighborhoods Support Leaders?

Providing support for neighborhood leaders is one of SN’s most important goals. SN provides this support in the following ways:

• By offering its Neighborhood Leadership Development Program in both English and Spanish each fall. Participants:
  — Meet monthly to learn neighborhood leadership skills
  — Develop a project to strengthen their community
• By offering residents the assistance of SN’s Leadership Development Specialist, who helps residents:
  — Identify issues
  — Develop research skills
  — Take action on important community concerns
• By providing technical assistance to residents as they develop neighborhood projects

Whether you are a neighborhood resident seeking to develop your own leadership skills, a funder or community-based organization seeking to support neighborhood leadership, or someone who is interested in increasing civic participation, we hope that you will be inspired by the stories in this publication. They go to the very heart of what it means to live in a democratic society, and they offer thoughtful guidance on how the authentic renewal of civic life that is taking place in America can best be supported and grown.  

For a copy of our full report on Grassroots Leadership, please go to www.denverfoundation.org and click on the link on the home page.
The plaque demarking Douglas Kornfeld’s imposing red sculpture at 26th and York in North City Park simply reads “Meeting of Minds.” This statement captures the essence of community-based leadership, in my opinion,” says David Goens, owner of Genesis Conservation Company and President of the North City Park Civic Association.

David, a native Denverite who attended Gove Junior High and East High School, got involved with the Strengthening Neighborhoods Program (SN) after a conversation with Al Rue about SN’s Neighborhood Leadership Development Program. Al, who was the first president of the North City Park Civic Association (NCPCA), went through the training in 2001. “I learned a great deal,” David states. “The most important thing being that stakeholder buy-in and communication are key.”

“I got involved in the NCPCA because I truly believe that the more folks are involved in civic activity in some way, the stronger their community will be. The strongest communities have healthy volunteerism and seek to make improvements through civic participation,” David declares.

David is working to address many of these issues through the NCPCA. One recent project was an alley clean-up in which neighbors partnered with Keep Denver Beautiful. Over fifty residents came together to clean the yards of senior citizens. Additionally, residents are working on a survey initiative that originated from the office of Councilwoman Carla Madison, which will assess the needs of the community.

“Thus far, we have been able to update economic development data and document changing demographics of the neighborhood, which were significant. With the remaining money we’ll expand the survey to the Clayton Neighborhood,” David says.

David has also helped lead the effort in North City Park to deal with the East Denver YMCA. A task force on which he sits is investigating possible uses for the building, which has been closed since 2003, and ensuring community participation in any development of the property.

David says, “I look around this community and see projects everywhere that we can do. My job is to hold back on starting everything and prioritize. There are never enough people. But I subscribe to the principle that through relationship building, making solid plans, and stepping out in faith, we can accomplish a great deal.”
One of the most effective ways that leaders can be supported is through training in the basic principles of community organizing. With help from SN staff Mario Flores and David Portillo, a group of residents in Original Aurora has been receiving such training for the past several years. This is the process they have followed to address traffic safety issues in their neighborhood.

1. Analyze the Problem
The low-income Latino community that makes up nearly half of Original Aurora’s population was considered by some to be highly transient and unlikely to get involved in civic life. SN, however, built relationships with parent leaders at several schools, helping them establish small parent groups that sponsored school-based activities like homework clubs and ESL classes. Parents became highly active and soon wanted to do something about the very dangerous traffic situation around the elementary schools. “Crossing Peoria to get to school, we became quite nervous,” says parent Sylvia Juarez. “It didn’t seem as if anything was going to be done to improve things unless a child would one day get hit by a car!” Parents from different schools joined together to study the problem and look for solutions.

2. Determine Causes
Parents learned that their neighborhood is between several large building projects, including Fitzsimons, Stapleton, and Lowry. They learned that each month pedestrian/car accidents are reported in the area and are increasing. They also learned that traffic in the area is expected to grow much worse in coming years.

3. Research Solutions
The parents learned that the best way to develop a solution is to ask questions and learn about how decisions are made. A survey of parents identified dangerous locations around each school and led to possible safety solutions. An interview with Aurora’s Public Works Dept. led to the discovery that the city was creating a school safety survey but that it did not include parents.

4. Take Action
Accountability sessions with officials in the Public Works Dept. and at the City Council resulted in changes to the survey. The maps, graphs, and proposals prepared by parents resulted in some very immediate changes. “Aurora Public Works is now installing flashing lights next to Peoria Elementary, just as parents had asked for!” declared leader Maria de la Vega.

5. Evaluate Effectiveness
Reflection after every victory or research action allowed parents to refine their presentations, find out what else there is to learn, and plan for more actions and solutions. The Traffic/Safety Campaign continues to grow and plans to have even greater impact in the coming year.

Members of the Original Aurora Traffic Safety Group
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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.


How it works: SN makes grants directly to residents for projects that the residents develop and lead.

Grants: SN has two grantmaking programs:
• Planning Grants up to $500 (average grant size is $250)
• Project Grants up to $5,000 (average grant size is $2,300)

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Guidelines:
• Grants are limited to residents and projects in the ten partner neighborhoods.
• Although the maximum grant size is $5,000, proposals for efforts that are much smaller are strongly encouraged.
• All proposed projects must be created and led by residents.
• Projects must build on assets or strengths already existing in the neighborhood, such as residents’ specific skills, a local park, or the resources available in an existing neighborhood group.
• Groups do not need to be tax-exempt nonprofit organizations to qualify for funding.

The Application Process: There are no application deadlines for Strengthening Neighborhoods grants. Applications can be submitted at any time. It takes approximately one month from the time the application is submitted until a funding decision is made. Applications for $500 or less receive a funding decision in approximately one week.

How to Apply: Please read the Strengthening Neighborhoods Guidelines before applying for a grant. You can receive the guidelines by calling The Denver Foundation at 303.300.1790 or by visiting www.denverfoundation.org. Grant applications can be completed on-line (English and Spanish versions available), or you may request that an application be sent to you by mail.

Please call LaDawn Sullivan at 303.996.7350 for more information about Strengthening Neighborhoods grants.