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:

- 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 project
- Providing leadership development classes in English and Spanish

For more information, visit www.denverfoundation.org

Left photo: Residents of Curtis Park, Whittier and Clayton neighborhoods come together to celebrate National Nite Out - an event to build community relationships

Right photo: Anthony Fields and Stevie Warren at the 2009 Hiawatha Davis Rec Center Dominoes Club Championship showing off their trophies at their final gathering of the year
Building Inclusive Neighborhoods:
How can our communities value and include the gifts of ALL residents?

One of the most common concerns that residents of our partner neighborhoods voice is the difficulty they have coming together across lines of difference. Whether these differences are of race, class, culture, age, sexual orientation, or other potential dividing lines, neighbors are looking for ways to build bridges to those who are different from themselves.

This issue is so important that it is embedded in Strengthening Neighborhoods’ very first program goal: to support positive relationships among residents based on equality and the valuing of everyone’s contributions. And yet what we hear from our resident partners is that efforts to do this are often frustrating and unsuccessful. So in 2009, we decided to focus our learning community’s work – and this annual report – on neighborhood inclusion. Our “learning community” is made up of all the people who work to help make neighborhoods stronger. It includes our partner residents, our volunteer advisory and board committees, our technical assistance partners, our staff, and folks in metro Denver and around the country who are interested in grassroots community building.

The main vehicle for our learning is a process that we call “collaborative inquiry”: “Collaborative” because all the different members of the learning community engage in the work together; and “Inquiry” because the process involves asking broad and deep questions of all our different partners, and then listening together to the many answers, stories, anecdotes, advice, and pearls of wisdom that emerge.
Goals of the Collaborative Inquiry

The goals for this year’s collaborative inquiry include the following:

• To measure Strengthening Neighborhoods’ progress in “supporting positive relationships based on equality and the valuing of everyone’s contributions,” and to make recommendations about how SN could accomplish this goal more effectively;
• To gather stories concerning the relationship between inclusive practices and the effectiveness of neighborhood-based projects or groups;
• To develop tools that resident leaders can use to build more inclusive relationships in their communities, and to work more effectively with members of different racial, cultural, socio-economic, and other diverse groups.

The Collaborative Inquiry Process

The steps that we take to create the collaborative inquiry are critical to its success. The process itself must be broadly inclusive if the learning that emerges is to have any credibility. These steps include:

• Pulling together an inclusive group of neighborhood leaders to advise SN on the overall collaborative inquiry process;
• Conducting group community dialogues and individual interviews with residents to gather their opinions and experiences in this area;
• Creating a preliminary written report of findings on neighborhood inclusiveness “good practices”;
• Feeding preliminary findings back through reflective circles of residents and other constituents to hone conclusions, tools, and recommendations.
• Refining and producing a final report, including tools that residents, technical assistance providers, SN staff, and other grassroots grantmakers can use in their work building more inclusive neighborhoods.

The collaborative inquiry final report will be completed by early December 2009. (To learn more, or to read a copy of the report once it is released, please visit our website at www.denverfoundation.org.)

We will continue to learn about how all of us can create inclusive neighborhoods as long as neighbors are willing to reach out to one another across our differences. The stories in this report offer inspiration and hope that these divisions can be bridged successfully. We hope that they will encourage you to think about how you can make your own communities places where everyone’s gifts are valued, and where no one is left on the outside looking in.
Highland Residents at the “1st Sunday Stroll”

Connecting Diverse Residents of a Fast-Changing Community

Highland residents at the “1st Sunday Stroll”

It all started with the pedestrian bridge shooting above and across I-25 — connecting Highland to LoDo. According to Macky Bennett, a Highland resident and Strengthening Neighborhoods grant recipient, this bridge ushered in the neighborhood’s transformation. Before it was connected to downtown Denver, Highlands’ cultural and architectural landscape was made up mainly of Italian and Latino residents living in early 20th century houses. A whirlwind of development in the past several years has brought significant change to this landscape. Culturally, the area is now home to more Anglos and young families, and it has seen an influx of trendy, contemporary shops and restaurants. Architecturally, more modern lofts, townhouses, and duplexes have sprung up seemingly everywhere.

What attracted Bennett, a relative newcomer, to the Highlands most, however, was not the hip new hang-outs, but rather the neighborhood energy, which she terms “very ethnically diverse and interesting.” It was Bennett’s love for this positive energy and ethnic diversity that inspired her to create the “1st Sunday Stroll” project, which received a grant of $400 from the Strengthening Neighborhoods Program in June 2009.

According to Bennett, the purpose of the “1st Sunday Stroll” is “to encourage the entire neighborhood to stroll around for thirty minutes on the first Sunday evening of each month.” Bennett adds that this project is also “a free, healthy, all-inclusive activity designed to build positive relationships.” Bennett is especially interested in connecting with long-time residents, particularly those living near her. The project has encountered some challenges, however, and building these relationships has not been as easy as Bennett had hoped. She speculates that the difficulties may stem from the fact that Bennett lives in a “box”—one of the newly-built townhomes that have raised the ire of some Highlands residents.

The newer developments are seen by some older residents as ruining the historical value of older Highlands buildings, of creating a mish mash of clashing architectural styles, and of increasing the neighborhood’s density. Bennett understands that the mixing of the new and the old is a touchy subject in the neighborhood, and her hope is that the “1st Sunday Stroll” can act as “a more natural way of causing things to defrost.”

Architectural clashes, however, are not the only barrier Bennett and her neighbors working on the “1st Sunday Stroll” face in building relationships among Highlands residents. To create a more inclusive event, they have also learned that they must address language barriers. Right after the flyers and signs were in place for the inaugural “1st Sunday Stroll”, Bennett realized, to her great dismay, that they were only in English. The accidental exclusion of some Highlands residents who could not speak English was a learning opportunity for the planners. For the rest of this year’s “1st Sunday Stroll”, Bennett’s mission is to ensure that all of her neighbors are welcome to share in the positive, neighborly energy that the Stroll is celebrating in Highlands.
After greeting one another in the Manual High School community room, the group of fifteen parents and teachers sits down and begins slipping on headphones. Most of the people in attendance are African-American, but five or six Latino parents are at the table, along with a new Southeast Asian parent, and several Anglo teachers. Parent Marisela Robledo begins the meeting speaking quietly but forcefully in Spanish. It is her turn to chair the meeting, so the interpreter whispering into the monitor interprets her message of welcome into English. Since everyone in the room is using headphones, all of the meeting participants are able to speak in their own language, without waiting for an interpreter to repeat their words back to the group.

“It wasn’t always this way,” says Felicia Willis, an African-American parent leader. “We had a definite language barrier and didn’t speak to each other. But when we all came to the first meeting, we found that we all had the same issues we were dealing with: discipline, and trying to diversify the Manual teachers.”

Manual High School, located in the Whittier neighborhood

The Manual community is almost equally African-American and Latino. When the school’s parent organizing committee was first getting started with help from Metro Organizations for People (MOP), community organizer Patty Lawless made sure she held conversations with potential parent leaders from both communities. Now, more than a year down the road, Patty notes, “They (the parents) deal with the ‘language barrier’ and have built trust and quite a camaraderie. They value the bringing together of the diverse members of the school and community and work hard to keep the balance in the committee.” Ken McVey, another parent leader, also reports that quite a few of the active parents are men, which is not the norm in most parent organizing committees or parent teacher associations (PTAs).

“I like to come,” says parent María Muñoz. “I hope more parents will join us.”

Keeping the committee active, inclusive, and diverse is hard work. This hard work involves intentional efforts to make sure all members feel valued and stay connected. Another key goal is continual outreach to bring in new members. One tool that MOP uses to accomplish both of these goals is a mini-dialogue – called a “one-to-one” – that current parents conduct with potential new members. At each meeting parents report on the “one-to-one’s” they have held during the past month, and go over names of parents who have shown interest, or those who have attended in the past but whose attendance has lapsed.

So – with interpretation and shared leadership and the “one-to-one’s” in place – the question becomes, will the group remain diverse and inclusive only in the short term? Or as the existing leaders move on, will new diverse members be recruited to join? As the new school year begins, the parents on the committee continue their efforts to work in tandem on school issues and to reach out to new members – including all voices in the community.

“It really needs to start at the beginning of the school year, and it can’t just be a flyer – because no one will come,” says Ms. Willis. “You have to talk face-to-face.”
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.

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)

Contact:
Patrick Horvath, Director
303.996.7356 | phorvath@denverfoundation.org
David Portillo, Program Officer
303.996.7338 | dportillo@denverfoundation.org
LaDawn Sullivan, Assistant Program Officer
303.996.7350 | lsullivan@denverfoundation.org
Mario Flores, Leadership Development Specialist
720.974.2614 | mflores@denverfoundation.org

SN Staff (L to R):
Patrick Horvath, LaDawn Sullivan, David Portillo, and Mario Flores

Guidelines:
• Grants are limited to residents and projects in the ten partner neighborhoods.
• Although the maximum grant size is $5,000, proposals with much smaller budgets 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.
A complete list of 2008 grants is available in the Strengthening Neighborhoods section of www.denverfoundation.org.