

Final Report

Headwaters Regional Development Commission
Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge Grant
9/30/2022 – 9/30/2024

The Neighborhood Connections Project had the goal to increase public safety.

It has three areas of focus:

1. *Youth*
2. *Adult*
3. *Neighborhood*

Youth: Engage youth in a safe, positive environment with supportive mentors and activities that promote education, fun relationship building. Build resistance and resilience skills and teach social and emotional skills while learning to feel safer and making plans for their future.

Adult: To have opportunities to be more engaged and connected within their neighborhood, to help address neighborhood crime issues at their source, access community resources resulting in a greater sense of safety for themselves and their families.

Neighborhood: Develop trusting relationships by engaging face to face within the neighborhood, building confidence in communication and information sharing.

The Neighborhood Connections Team is composed of the Community Development Specialist, Neighborhood Connections Support Specialist, Boys and Girls Club Staff, Sanford Staff, Bemidji Police Department, Beltrami Sheriff Department

[For Background see RNI Rotary Project](#)

How Did we Start?

- Started in 1990's as a Rotary effort. Rotary is a service organization.
- Re-invented in 2020 in collaboration with several community partners
- Sanford Health, private funds and support from AmeriCorps provided funding for apartment which has been branded the Resource Center; staffed full time by an AmeriCorps Housing Navigator.
- Launched neighborhood picnics every two weeks: May-September
- Hosted education events in the Resource Center (apartment) once per week

The Big Years

- Awarded MN Dept. of Public Safety Grant (name: PASSAR): \$132,679 (01/2022-04/2024): three priority program areas

Youth, Adult and Neighborhood

- Awarded USDA Grant (name: Rural Placemaking Innovation Grant (RPIC): \$229,174 (09/2022-09/2024): same priorities
- These grants helped us redefine consistent & reliable community partners expanding our programming.
- Secured the Mobile Clubhouse for 2nd location for programs
- Expanded programming & support in the Resource Center

Grant reporting to track usage of Resource Center

- 582 Children (0-18)
- 37 Job Seekers
- 12 Health Care Provider Sessions
- 654 Resident outreach contacts
- 56 Violence Interrupter Hours
- 9 Homeless Youth Service Sessions
- 205 Volunteers
- 150+ Picnic attendees each picnic

Tenant and Partner conversations:

- It hasn't been this good at Ridgeway for 5 Years"
 - Chad Nelson, DW Jones, Property Management
- "Thank you for being here."
- "I like coming here, I can be myself."
- "I like when you're here."

Variety of Ridgeway residents per September 13 & 14, 2023 surveys

- "Crime and calls for service are down in the Ridgeway Community since the inception of the Ridgeway Neighborhood Initiative. Although this program may not be the only factor that has helped to reduce crime, it has been a significant tool in building community trust and communication between law enforcement and the residents of Ridgeway." Chief Mike Mastin Bemidji Police Department

Recent Recognition

- Bemidji Chamber of Commerce
 - Award of Excellence in Community Impact
 - May 2023
- National Association of Development Organizations
 - Community Impact Award
 - September 2023

Next Steps

New Name: Neighborhood Connections

New Funding: MN Dept of Public Safety Grant, under fiscal agent HRDC \$500,000 for 2024-2025 (18 month, inclusive of two summers)

Highlights:

- Community Development Specialist: Onsite 40 hrs./week
- Boys & Girls Club Summer programming: Up to 60 kids (2024 & 2025) 4/days/week
- Funds for additional onsite healthcare programming
- Funds for additional onsite job seeker/housing navigation and education
- Funds to continue relationship building with law enforcement
- Community picnics & events and more!
- Residents serve as advisors on Program Committee

[In August 2022, the team performed a review/analysis of our programming](#)

The team conducted a survey for 2 nights on sight. If they participated, they received a 2 liter of pop and a take a bake pizza. Community and tenant volunteers talked with tenants about the survey and assisted people in filling out if needed. Tenants were very engaged with this process and were very engaged in providing feedback. The team used these survey results to assist in planning. The summer programming with the Boys and Girls Club was a direct result of survey results.

What has been the most challenging or unexpected aspects of this project?

All members of the Neighborhood Connections Team have long term experience with building relationships and working in community. However, I don't think that we realized how long it would take to build relationships with a community, who has a long-term distrust of organizations. The second thing that was very challenging was COVID and the loss of momentum that was experienced. It was a very confusing time for everyone, and it was difficult to navigate a program.

People are looking to connect but there are many barriers to connection. Mental Health, Transportation, lack of trust are a few that we are continuing to overcome.

What Advice: Strengths and Limitations:

Our team speaks of this often, the fact that *consistency* is the key. You MUST be very consistent in your programing and interactions within the community.

People want the best for their kids and want their kids to be safe and happy and we focused much our relationship building on the kids. Ice cream socials, games in the common areas, homework help, supplies for school and that built the trust with the parents/adults through the children of the neighborhood.

As a team set goals and prioritize and make sure that one person takes responsibility and accountability for the goal and follow through. Trust is easily broken and must be guarded closely

This team needed to learn to communicate and create a vision. We did this with regular weekly check-ins and meetings. 4 years later we continue with these weekly meetings.

Collaboration and partnerships are the key to this work, and this takes time, persistence and consistency. Just as we are building relationships within communities, we are building relationships and trust with each other. It will take time and effort, and the time is very important at the beginning of a project.

What this team learned is that continue to do the work together and others will want to join you. Some people and organizations are not builders and do not have the expertise to create, but will want to join a cohesive, well-defined group. We need people and organizations at all levels of commitment.

We used a variety of communication strategies: Flyers, Door to Door invitations, email, texting

Identifying reasons for people to invest time in the Neighborhood Connection project had an impact on engagement. When we communicated reasons such as safety, fun for kids and connection to neighbors, our engagement increased. We assumed that people would understand the reason, and that is not the case.

Authentic and welcoming interactions are also important for community engagement. Create a vision with your team and make sure that everyone understands the vision and the barriers that the community may face.

We asked and listened to the neighbors and tenants. In the summer of 2023, we conducted an extensive survey, and used the data and responses to plan events and programming,

Survey Data

Much communication and planning went into this initiative, and we committed many hours to “getting it right”. [We started with a logic Model](#)

We spent much time learning about placemaking as a strategy.

<https://nwalaska.org/wp-content/uploads/Creative-Placemaking.pdf>

<https://placemaking.education/p/whatisplacemaking>

<https://www.innovatingjustice.org/areas-of-focus/placemaking>

What would the team do differently?

We would bring tenants/end users into the team sooner; this is difficult because we needed to build personal and organizational relationships with the tenants and neighbors. They would not join a group that they did not trust but we were uncomfortable planning when we didn’t have people with lived experience on the team. Therefore, we strategically started with relationship building activities such as picnics, open houses and listening sessions. These activities were the most successful in building relationships.

We talk often about incentives and I’m not sure if we have come up with a balance or strategy for when and how to incentivize. When people are assisting with planning and working side by side with the team we provide compensation for their expertise. In the beginning phases of the project with incentivized many things but then soon learned that we were teaching people to only come to programming if they would “get something free” and wanted them to be more interested in the relationship than the prize. We took a step back and increased our relationship building activities.

National Night Out

The National Night Out is a yearly event that takes place every summer, designed to enhance public safety with a focus on youth, adults, and neighborhoods. This year this event was hosted August 6th at the Boys and Girls Club in Bemidji, featuring 26 booth stations. Planning began several months prior with coordination between local law enforcement, fire departments, and community organizations. We had a dedicated section for our volunteers, including 10 people from sheriff’s office, 8 police department, 10 fire department, 3 FBI, 7 BCA, and 2 ambulance teams. Additionally, about 12 volunteers from the Bemidji Lions Club helped grill the food. We bought enough food for roughly 600 people and still ran out in the first half! The event included various activities such as games, bounce houses, a dunk tank, and informational booths. It was amazing to see the

whole community come together and spend an evening with one another. We estimate that approximately 1,000 individuals attended this event.

Pictures and Flyers

Community Engagement

Community engagement is the dynamic, collaborative process of working with and through groups of people—affiliated by geographic proximity, special interests, or similar situations—for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources. This process aims to address issues affecting the well-being of those people in a context of partnership, reciprocity, and facilitated communication, interaction, involvement, and exchange between an organization and a community, leading to a range of social and organizational outcomes.”

This team learned that community engagement means being REAL!

1. Relatable- We learned to share uncomfortable things about ourselves and share uncomfortable space with others.
2. Equitable- We are committed to fight for equality and access to ourselves, spaces and resources and became connectors.
3. Aware- We needed to become self-aware of our bias and or behavior that may cause disconnect between us and people who are different than us.
4. Loyal- Together we are committed to create communities for success, failure and innovation. We understand that we are complicated.

This program and placemaking strategy will continue and we are replicating this strategy in other areas of Bemidji and will be developing a strategy to bring this concept to the Headwaters Regional Development Commission 5 County area of Beltrami, Clearwater, Hubbard, Lake of the Woods and Mahanomen.