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Needs Assessment for the United Neighborhood Alliances of Omaha

In February 2013 the Neighborhood Center closed. The Neighborhood Center provided a range of programs and services to neighborhood associations in the Omaha area. The United Neighborhood Alliances of Omaha (UNAO) identified a needs assessment as a necessary next step in planning what will take its place. The needs assessment was envisioned to assist the alliances in moving forward by helping to identify strategies that make the best use of Neighborhood Scan and other existing resources and offer the best response to neighborhood conditions.

The UNAO partnered with the Consortium for Organizational Research and Evaluation (CORE) at the University of Nebraska at Omaha to conduct the needs assessment. CORE involved faculty, staff, and students from the Center for Public Affairs Research, Urban Studies Program, and other departments within the College of Public Affairs and Community Service (CPACS). The proposal can be found in Appendix A.

The needs assessment focused on identifying local assets, resources, and activities as well as gaps, barriers, or emerging needs. A comprehensive picture of existing conditions combined with a good understanding of the causes is indispensable in helping the neighborhood alliances to move forward. The needs assessment gathered information from neighborhood alliance members, neighborhood association leaders, and community members to learn more about the circumstances facing residents of the city of Omaha. The needs assessment consisted of four steps:

1. Focus groups with neighborhood alliance leaders
2. A survey of neighborhood alliance and neighborhood association leaders
3. Community forums in each of the neighborhood alliance areas
4. Neighborhood programs in cities similar to Omaha.

Focus Groups with Neighborhood Alliance Leaders

The first activities in the assessment were two focus groups with neighborhood alliance leaders. The purpose of the focus groups was to identify issues that should be addressed by the alliances and to determine how Neighborhood Scan can be utilized to help address these issues. The results served as the basis for the questionnaire that was sent to neighborhood alliance and neighborhood association leaders.

CORE worked with the Omaha Serves' Neighborhood Initiatives VISTA volunteer and representatives from the neighborhood alliances to identify participants in the two focus groups. Three to four persons from each neighborhood alliance were invited to participate.

The first focus group was held during the morning of June 22 at the CPACS Building on the University of Nebraska at Omaha campus. Eleven members from the Benson-Ames Neighborhood Alliance, Northwest Omaha Neighborhood Alliance (NWONA), and Southwest Neighborhood Alliance participated in this focus group. The second focus group was held during
the evening of June 24 at the Collaborating Center at 49th and Farnam. Participating in this focus group were 10 representatives from South Omaha Neighborhood Alliance (SONA), North Omaha Neighborhood Alliance (NONA), and Midtown Neighborhood Alliance.

Participants in both focus groups addressed the following eight questions:

1. What is the purpose of a Neighborhood Association?
2. What are the major long-term needs of Omaha’s Neighborhood Associations?
3. What is the purpose of a Neighborhood Alliance?
4. What are the major long-term needs of Omaha’s Neighborhood Alliances?
5. What was the previous role of the Neighborhood Center in neighborhood development and advocacy in Omaha?
6. What parts of this role were essential/especially helpful and which were underperforming?
7. How effective has the neighborhood scan program been in Omaha?
8. How can it (neighborhood scan program) be improved?

In addition, the participants were given note cards and were asked to respond individually to the following questions:

1. What one thing would you like to have in a Neighborhood Center?
2. Is there anything else that we did not cover that you would like to mention pertaining to neighborhoods in Omaha?

A more detailed description and results of the focus groups can be found in Appendix B.

**Survey of Neighborhood Alliance and Neighborhood Association Leaders**

The purpose of the survey was to help the neighborhood alliances understand the variety of perspectives from neighborhoods throughout the city of Omaha by asking questions of the neighborhood association leaders. CORE worked with the Neighborhood Initiatives VISTA volunteer and representatives from the neighborhood alliances to develop the questionnaire using information gathered from the previous focus groups to formulate some of the questions.

To conduct the actual survey, CORE also worked with the Neighborhood Initiatives VISTA volunteer and the neighborhood alliances to develop a list of names, addresses, and email addresses of neighborhood association leaders. For persons with email addresses, CORE sent an email inviting them to participate in an online survey using SurveyMonkey. Persons who did not want to participate in the online survey were given the opportunity to request that a paper version of the questionnaire be mailed to them.

For persons with no email, CORE mailed a letter and questionnaire to each person inviting him or her to participate in the survey either by completing the enclosed questionnaire and mailing it back in a postage-paid envelope or by participating in the online survey.
A total of 325 persons were contacted by email, and an additional 309 persons were mailed a paper copy of the questionnaire. Appendix C contains the printed version of the questionnaire, the cover letters, and detailed results of the survey. The next section presents the highlights of the survey.

Overview

We received 168 useable surveys. Figure 1 shows the percentage breakdown of the survey responses by neighborhood alliance. The largest share of the responses came from SWONA (30%). This was followed by Midtown (22%), NWONA (18%), NONA (11%), SONA (10%), and Benson-Ames (5%). In addition, 4% of the responses could not be classified in a neighborhood alliance. Appendix C compares the survey responses for each neighborhood alliance.

Figure 1. Number and Percent of Respondents by Neighborhood Alliance

Neighborhood Association Characteristics

In the first set of questions, respondents rated characteristics of a neighborhood association on a scale where 1 was not at all important, 2 was slightly important, 3 was moderately important, 4 was very important, and 5 was extremely important. Below are the percentage of respondents who indicated the characteristic was very important or extremely important.

1. Communicating information to neighbors 93.4%
2. Improving the neighborhood 92.0%
3. Identifying problems in the neighborhood and developing solutions 88.0%
4. Being an advocate for the neighborhood 84.8%
5. Fostering a sense community 84.3%
6. Being a unified voice in presenting neighborhood issues 81.9%
7. Being a place where neighbors get to know each other 75.6%
8. Building relationships with other organizations, such as businesses, churches, schools and residents 58.4%
9. Presenting programs and events for neighborhood residents 54.6%

Although the two most important characteristics of a neighborhood association were communicating information and neighborhood improvement, the respondents reacted strongly to all of the characteristics. Only building relationships and presenting programs and events recorded less than 75% very important or extremely important ratings.

*Neighborhood Association Long-term Needs*

The next set of questions evaluated the long-term needs of a neighborhood association. These questions also used the same five-point scale as described above. Similar to the previous section, the following list ranks the long-term needs based on the percentage of respondents who rated them very important or extremely important.

1. Increasing the awareness of neighborhood associations 65.8%
2. Sustainable funding 64.4%
3. Assistance in grant writing 58.0%
4. Administrative support, such as printing and mailing 46.3%
5. Training in organizational development 40.1%
6. Training in capacity building 33.8%
7. Assistance in accounting and banking 29.8%

The respondents did not feel as strongly about the needs of neighborhood associations as they did about their desired characteristics. Only three of the needs listed garnered percentages of very important and extremely important responses that exceeded 50%—increasing the awareness of neighborhood associations, sustainable funding, and assistance in grant writing. All of these are necessary for the long-term viability of neighborhood associations.

*Neighborhood Alliance Characteristics*

Less than three-fourths (71.5%) of the respondents indicated that they had heard of a neighborhood alliance. Of those who had heard of an alliance, only 68.9% knew the alliance in which they were located. This means that only about four out of ten of the neighborhood association leaders could name their alliance.

The following list ranks the desired characteristics of neighborhood alliances based on the percentage of respondents who rated them very important or extremely important. By far the most important characteristics of the neighborhood alliances were sharing information and best practices and advocating for neighborhood issues.
1. Promoting sharing of information and best practices among neighborhood associations 79.1%
2. Advocating for neighborhood issues 78.0%
3. Mentoring neighborhood associations 41.4%
4. Being a fiscal agent for neighborhood associations 38.7%
5. Developing new neighborhood associations 38.2%

**Neighborhood Alliance Long-term Needs**

Looking at neighborhood alliance long-term needs, the two most important aspects were increasing the involvement of neighborhood associations (66.9% very important or extremely important) and sustainable funding (58.1% very important or extremely important). The importance of increasing the involvement of neighborhood associations is consistent with the fact that most leaders do not know who their alliance is.

1. Increasing the involvement of neighborhood associations 66.9%
2. Sustainable funding 58.1%
3. Paid staff with defined responsibilities and accountability 33.5%
4. Have better defined boundaries showing which neighborhood associations are in which alliance 27.2%

**Neighborhood Center Services**

The first question in this section asked respondents if they had ever heard of the Neighborhood Center located at 49th and Farnam. Overall, 63.1% of the respondents had heard of the Neighborhood Center. We asked persons who said they had heard of the Neighborhood Center to rate how well it provided a variety of services on a scale where 1 was not at all well, 2 was somewhat well, 3 was moderately well, 4 was very well, and 5 was extremely well. Following are the percentage of respondents who said the services were very well or extremely well.

1. Provide basic resources 74.7%
2. Provide training programs 62.2%
3. Use interns and other students 61.7%
4. Communicate neighborhood issues 57.8%
5. Provide assistance with day-to-day administrative tasks 54.8%
6. Provide help in grant writing 54.5%
7. Gather and report information 53.3%
8. Advocate to the city council for neighborhood issues 51.9%
9. Build relationships with other organizations, such as businesses, churches, schools, and residents 50.8%
10. Help find funding sources 47.7%

Almost all the services listed recorded very well or extremely well responses exceeding 50%. The service that was viewed most favorably was providing basic resources. Help finding funding was viewed least favorably.
Neighborhood Center Characteristics

After describing the Neighborhood Center, we asked everyone to rate the characteristics they would like in a Neighborhood Center. Sharing of information and best practices, providing information about funding sources, providing assistance in obtaining funding, and partnering with other organizations that provide resources were rated most highly. Comparing the characteristics desired in a new Neighborhood Center and how well the previous Center provided services, it appears that services relating to funding and information sharing should receive a greater emphasis than administrative assistance.

1. Promote sharing of information and best practices among neighborhood associations 78.1%
2. Providing information about funding opportunities 70.7%
3. Providing assistance in obtaining funding 68.4%
4. Partnering with other organizations that provide resources to neighborhood associations and alliances 68.2%
5. Gathering information about neighborhood associations 54.8%
6. Providing training, such as Neighborhood Builders 54.2%
7. Providing administrative assistance such as copying, mailing of newsletters, PO boxes, etc. 52.5%
8. Providing meeting rooms 36.3%

Neighborhood Scan Improvement

The next set of questions dealt with Neighborhood Scan. A total of 38.1% of the respondents had heard of Neighborhood Scan. For the people who had heard of Scan, we asked them to rate how it could be improved. By far the most important suggestions were better communication with the neighborhood (85.7% very important or extremely important) and having funding available to fix problems (82.4% very important or extremely important). Changing the name was relatively unimportant.

1. Having better communication in the neighborhood about the purpose 85.7%
2. Having funding available to fix problems 82.4%
3. Using as a code enforcement tool 62.9%
4. Changing the name 19.4%

Neighborhood Scan Effectiveness

Of the persons who had heard of Scan, 52.3% reported that their neighborhood had participated in Scan. In other words about one in five of the respondents had participated in Neighborhood Scan.

Those persons who had participated in Scan rated the effectiveness of Scan on a five-point scale. The participants in the Scan program did not rate its effectiveness very highly as only one item received a rating of more than 50% very effective or extremely effective.
1. Identifying problems 69.8%
2. Educating the neighborhood 42.9%
3. Working with a small area rather than the whole neighborhood 41.9%
4. Enforcing codes 40.0%
5. Connecting with neighbors 25.4%

Community Forums

CORE conducted six community forums, one in each neighborhood alliance area, with the first forum on September 11 and the last on October 24. Appendix D contains the flyer describing the forums, the agenda, the number of active participants, and the detailed results of the forums. Unlike the focus groups, the community forums asked for information directly from community members. These community forums offered opportunities for community members to raise concerns and become involved in suggesting strategies for the neighborhood alliances. We split each forum into smaller subgroups to encourage discussion and then reconvened the entire group to share common ideas.

The Neighborhood Initiatives VISTA volunteer and the neighborhood alliances (with assistance from the neighborhood associations) identified and invited the participants and provided the locations for the forums. CORE provided the facilitators and conducted the community forums.

Participants in the six community forums addressed the following four questions that also were asked in the focus groups:

1. What is the purpose of a Neighborhood Association?
2. What are the major long-term needs of Omaha’s Neighborhood Associations?
3. What do you think should be the purpose of a Neighborhood Alliance?
4. What are the major long-term needs of Omaha’s Neighborhood Alliances?

Each forum was divided into groups of about four persons who addressed each of the above questions. After discussion, the groups presented their two most important recommendations to the larger group. After all of the recommendations were presented, each person in the forum identified their two most important recommendations for each question. We tallied the responses and have summary results below. In addition, every participant was given a note card and was asked to tell about their experiences with Neighborhood Scan and/or the Neighborhood Center and could raise any additional issues that they thought were not addressed. If they did not want to answer the questions at that time, they were given a postage paid business reply envelope. The comments from the note cards also can be found in Appendix D

What is the purpose of a Neighborhood Association?

The first question asked of forum participants was the purpose of a neighborhood association. Highlighted below are the items that were mentioned in at least five of the six forums. The numbers represent the total number of persons who selected the item as one of their two most important selections.
In addition to the above four items, identifying problems in the neighborhood and developing solutions was identified as being important by 44 persons, but it was only highlighted in 3 of the forums. With the exception of crime prevention and public safety, the items that were identified as being the most important by the focus groups also were rated relatively important by the survey of association leaders discussed above.

What are the major long-term needs of Omaha’s Neighborhood Associations?

There were only two recommendations that the participants identified as among their most important in at least five of the forums. Without the forums these items may have been overlooked in the needs assessment. Administrative support was not rated highly on the survey of neighborhood leaders, and although new member/recruitment was discussed in the focus groups it was not identified as a major issue.

1. New member/recruitment 60
2. Administrative support, such as printing and mailing 41

What do you think should be the purpose of a Neighborhood Alliance?

In defining the purpose of a neighborhood alliance there was considerable consensus among the focus groups, survey, and forums. The three most selected items in the community forums also were the three highest rated characteristics in the survey. Only creating allies and building consensus was not directly addressed in the leadership survey.

1. Promoting sharing of information and best practices among neighborhood associations 70
2. Advocating for neighborhood issues 40
3. Mentoring neighborhood associations 38
4. Creating allies and building consensus 38

What are the major long-term needs of Omaha’s Neighborhood Alliances?

The final question that was addressed in the community forums was identifying the long-term needs of the neighborhood alliances. None of the items were identified as among the most important by all six of the forums. The two most important items were capacity building and establishing a relationship with the city. The third most mentioned issue, with 38 persons picking it, was having a paid staff with defined responsibilities and accountability. However, it was only mentioned in four of the forums. Sustainable funding rounded out the list of major recommendations by the community forums.
1. Capacity building 54
2. Relationship with city 51
3. Sustainable funding 30

Neighborhood Programs in Cities Similar to Omaha

The final activity of the needs assessment process included an independent case study analysis of neighborhood assistance programs in Midwestern cities generally comparable to Omaha. These cities include: Louisville, Kentucky; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Indianapolis, Indiana; Kansas City, Kansas; Kansas City, Missouri; St. Louis, Missouri; and Minneapolis, Minnesota. The initial list of cities to study was identified by the CPAR research team and supplemented by Urban Studies graduate students. Information was collected from websites, and interviews conducted with four of the seven of the organization directors and staff, who could be reached. (Appendix E provides more detail on the research design and a summary of all of the information collected.)

In general, the information collected on the neighborhood assistance centers from the case study cities includes organizational details, staffing patterns, funding sources, organizational relationships, staff size, and types of programs. Interviews with center directors or staff addressed issues pertaining to organizational dynamics, local networks, and relationships with neighborhood associations. In order to maintain the confidentiality of the interviews, which were often frank in nature, the names of the communities, where the center was located, were removed in this report. To be able to make references in the analysis, cities were given an identifier number and the interview numbers correspond to the city numbers.

Prior to collecting data from the case studies, the research team identified four possible models or organizational approaches to neighborhood assistance programs or centers. The models reflect the possible logical strategies to providing supportive services to neighborhood associations and alliances in Omaha.

1. **Independent Neighborhood Center Model:** A separate 501(c)(3), not-for-profit entity is created, under the laws of the Federal Tax Code. A board of directors provides direction to the activities and programs of the center, with permanent staff and a budget.

2. **Strong Alliance Model:** Services to neighborhood associations are provided by the coordinating efforts of a strong, grass-root, alliance of groups of neighborhood associations. The alliances independently provide the locus of neighborhood development and advocacy.

3. **Alliance Board Model:** Neighborhood alliance leaders serve as the majority of members on a board of directors of a permanently staffed center providing assistance and programming to neighborhood associations.

4. **City Department or Municipal Agency Model:** City employees in the planning or community development offices, the mayor’s office, or a separate agency provide
assistance in neighborhood development and function as advocates for neighborhood associations and groups.

The following summarizes the key findings from the case studies:

1. Mission statements: All of the centers had some language in one of their primary mission goals to help develop neighborhoods and improve the capacity of neighborhood associations.

2. Organizational structure: There is a wide variety in the organizational structures of the case studies. In general, there seemed to be an equal split between the city department (Cities 4, 5 and 6) and independent (not-for-profit) neighborhood center models (Cities 1, 2, and 3). No single approach prevailed. Like many other aspects of cities, there is a variety of approaches to neighborhood assistance centers. City 7 used a university-based neighborhood center.

3. Funding sources: The case studies showed a range of funding sources. Many centers relied on grants and strong support from the private sector donors and foundations. However, dollars from city government played a major role in most of the case studies. Only City 3 indicated that they received little funding from city government.

4. Relationship with city government: The majority of case studies revealed that the centers had a regular relationship with the city. The nature of these partnerships varied but the collaboration appeared to be regular in nature. Functioning as a liaison between the associations and the city is a common role for the centers. According to the case studies City 2 contracts with the city for some funding, but also receives significant dollars from the private sector. They noted that their independence from direct control was beneficial to advocating neighborhood issues.

5. Programming and services: Leadership training seems to be a popular program among the case studies. Providing various types of clerical support to neighborhood associations also appears to be a basic service. Crime prevention services are also often listed.

6. Role of neighborhood associations: In terms of the level of involvement by leaders of neighborhood associations in the management and operation of the centers, the case studies showed a mixture of approaches. While there is not overwhelming evidence that neighborhood associations dominate the boards of directors or advisory boards, neighborhood associations are a critical part of the mix. City 4 indicated that they have strong representation on board from neighborhood associations. Not only are neighborhood associations important to the operation of the centers, so are people with special skills, such as legal or financial, according to interviews.
Summary

After reviewing data collected from the two focus groups, neighborhood leadership survey, and community forums several conclusions are apparent.

Neighborhood Associations

All participants felt positively about neighborhood associations. The purposes of the neighborhood association expressed by the various groups varied considerably, but there was a consensus on several aspects. People thought that neighborhood associations should be proactive in advancing the neighborhood by fostering a sense of community, identifying problems and developing solutions, and improving the neighborhood in general. In addition, some community forums thought that neighborhood associations could help promote public safety in the neighborhood. Finally, respondents mentioned that it was important for neighborhood associations to represent the neighborhood in the broader Omaha area by being a unified voice in presenting neighborhood issues and in being an advocate for the neighborhood.

There was much less agreement concerning the long-term needs for neighborhood associations than there was about their purpose. The largest concern expressed by the groups focused on the viability and sustainability of the neighborhood associations. There was considerable discussion about the lack of volunteers and the need to recruit new members and increasing the overall awareness of neighborhood associations. A source of sustainable funding and grant writing assistance also was viewed as necessary in keeping neighborhood associations viable.

Administrative assistance such as photocopying, mailing, etc. was not viewed as a consistent need throughout the city, but the participants who expressed the need felt very strongly about its importance.

Neighborhood Alliances

The neighborhood association leadership survey and the community forums revealed the fact that neighborhood alliances are not very well understood. Many participants were unaware of their alliance and did not know what their purpose was. The purposes identified could be combined into two categories. First, neighborhood alliances should provide support for neighborhood associations by providing information and sharing best practices and mentoring neighborhood associations. Secondly, alliances should advocate for neighborhood issues and create allies and build consensus with other organizations in the community.

As far as long-term needs are concerned, there were few suggestions that were supported by large portions of the respondents. However, it was pointed out that the alliances needed to increase the involvement of the neighborhood associations and help build their capacity. Alliances also need sustainable funding and to develop a closer relationship with the city of Omaha.
Neighborhood Center

Because only 63% of the survey respondents had heard of the Neighborhood Center, we did not ask participants in the community forums to address this topic in the group sessions. Instead they were given the opportunity to respond separately. Based on those comments and the leadership survey, it appears the areas that the Center performed best were in providing training, basic resources, and information to neighborhood associations. Although it did not receive strong support on the survey, administrative assistance such as photocopying, mailing, etc., was used extensively by some participants in the focus groups and community forums.

When asked to evaluate the services that they would want in a Neighborhood Center, respondents looked to a Center as a source of information and best practices among neighborhood associations. A Neighborhood Center also should provide information about and assistance in obtaining funding. Finally, people mentioned that a Center should develop partnerships with other organizations to help meet the needs of neighborhood associations and alliances.

Neighborhood Scan

Neighborhood Scan garnered some of the most positive and most negative opinions from all the groups in the study. However, Scan was not very well known. Only 38% of the survey respondents had heard of Scan, and only one-half of them participated in a Scan project. Therefore, similar to the Neighborhood Center, we did not ask participants in the community forums to address this topic in the group sessions. Instead they were given the opportunity to respond separately.

Based on those comments, focus group comments, and the leadership survey, it appears that for Scan to be effective there needs to be better communication in the neighborhood about the purpose of the program. If Scan is to be used as a code enforcement tool, there needs to be a source of funds or other assistance available to fix problems. In addition, some people thought it might work better on a small area rather than the whole neighborhood.

Recommendations

After reviewing all of the information collected from the focus groups, leadership survey, community forums, and case studies, CORE has developed six recommendations for UNAO to consider when planning on how to replace the Neighborhood Center. We reviewed four possible models that UNAO could use to implement these recommendations, but we are not advocating any one of them. Regardless of the model chosen, we recommend the following:

- The loss of the Neighborhood Center created a void that needs to be filled.
Neighborhood Associations need support to maintain their viability and sustainability. This support could be funding, organizational development, and/or administrative support.

Omaha’s neighborhood alliances should play a more active role in the operation, development, and mentoring of the neighborhood associations. They should be advocates for Omaha’s neighborhood associations.

There needs to be a more structured relationship with the city of Omaha with a stable base of funding.

In addition to neighborhood associations, neighborhood alliances, and the city of Omaha other stakeholders who have interests in neighborhoods must be identified.

Neighborhood Scan can be an effective tool to help understand neighborhood conditions, but before it is implemented the neighborhood has to be adequately informed of its purpose, and the neighborhood association cannot be viewed as a code enforcement agency.