

PROFILES OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE IN NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL CORPORATIONS

NORTH END COMMUNITY RENEWAL CORPORATION (NECRC)

www.necrc.org

NEAP: AMBASSADORS FOR COMMUNITY SAFETY

The North End Ambassador Program (NEAP) addresses safety concerns in the North End of Winnipeg by using a holistic approach and community economic development principles. This innovative program comprises one stream of activity in NECRC's comprehensive neighbourhood renewal strategy. Rob Neufeld, Executive Director of NECRC, says that while the primary focus of their 2006-2011 Five-Year Plan was the improvement of safety in the community, NECRC's holistic approach to development led to the creation of a safety program that could also be a training ground for local residents seeking training and employment opportunities.

NECA— the beginning

The impetus for this program came out of NECRC's Five-Year Plan for 2006-2011, which was developed through extensive consultation with community stakeholders. North End Community Ambassadors (NECA) – as it was originally called - was designed to address the persistent feelings of insecurity experienced by residents through the creation of a volunteer-based foot patrol. The program was also intended to dispel the public's negative perception of the North End, largely due to the media's unfavourable portrayal of the neighbourhood.

Although the name of the program has since changed to the North End Ambassador Program, the original purpose has remained intact. By having a trained, community-based group of volunteers increasing foot traffic and street presence, NEAP's goal is to reduce the incidence of crime, while also improving community and broader public perceptions of safety in the neighbourhood.

Multifaceted Approach

While NECA prioritized safety, it also exemplified how programming can simultaneously accomplish several key tasks when using a community economic development approach. If planned and executed effectively, NECA would not only address safety goals for the community, but also address employment development goals, support the local business community, and improve perceptions of the North End outside of the community.

With these goals in mind, the ambassadors focused their efforts on the most active streets where the majority of North End businesses are located. Rob says this worked out to an approximate 30-70% split in time between residential streets and commercial streets.

To meet NECA's training and employment development goals, volunteers were provided with

training in Non-Violent Crisis Intervention, First Aid, security training, and money management that will provide them with better opportunities to gain paid employment. It is evident that when designed with a holistic vision in mind, one program is able to fulfill multiple areas of the Five-Year Plan.

From NECA to NEAP

Despite a strong model and a strategic approach, it soon became clear that NECA was not reaching its full potential. In 2008, a strategic planning process through community consultation was led by a representative steering committee to review NECA and create a plan to re-launch the program.

The review process started with a few focus groups, but became more broadly consultative as time went on. An entire planning process was established before re-launching the program, this time with a more community based mandate and operational plan. The strategic plan completed as part of this process found a number of challenges that needed to be overcome for the program to have maximum community impact. Some of the challenges included:

- strained police-community relationships
- clarity of the program's purpose
- a lack of diverse representation in staff and volunteers that matched the neighbourhood demographics
- the lack of local engagement throughout the planning, accountability, and execution of the initiative.

The ambassadors were meant to function as the eyes and ears of the community, but some residents felt the program was primarily serving the interests of local police. This perception was likely due to the community's strained relationship with law-enforcement officials and the fact that many early volunteers came from outside the neighbourhood. While strong partnerships with police and the other Winnipeg BIZ (Business Improvement Zone) patrols are necessary, there needed to be stronger accountability, representation, partnerships, community development and

tactics tailored to the specific needs and concerns of the North End neighbourhood.

It was also observed that while the program had started out with local goals and leadership, the focus had shifted with the presence of volunteers who came from outside the community, which only added to a lack of trust. The geographic boundaries had also grown since the start of the program, spreading the volunteer force too thin to build in-depth relationships and acquire the necessary knowledge of the local community – both of which are essential to the success of this type of program.

Addressing Challenges Head On

These various challenges were addressed by establishing specific recruitment strategies to ensure representation from various population groups. This was especially important for the Aboriginal community, which is now a key focus of the program. The geographic boundaries were also reigned in to focus on the key thoroughfares where many local businesses are located.

The strategic plan also put realistic and necessary goals in place to improve the program. These pragmatic goals included enhancing relationships with the business community and local residents, and managing a healthy and trust-building relationship with the Winnipeg Police Service. Crucially, another goal was thoughtful recruitment that considered barriers to certain populations such as visible minorities, women, and particularly Aboriginal people.

After this process, NEAP or the North End Ambassadors Program was re-launched. Today, the NECRC website states that a total of 50 volunteer ambassadors have been enrolled in the program since its inception, and that NEAP accomplishes its safety goals through a number of activities including:

- supporting local businesses through daily Ambassador walks and check-ins
- making 311 calls to deal with garbage and other street concerns

- providing support and intervention when incidents with local residents occur
- working with both the Winnipeg Police Service to compile a list of local security cameras and with City Councillor Ross Eadie to compile a list of vacant and for-sale properties
- partnering with Street Connections to pick up discarded needles and crack pipes.

Looking to the Long-Term

Any program that has faced challenges and been reworked should come out of that process with a clear long-term goal in mind. This can involve broad visions, but also requires concrete goals. For NEAP, the broad goal is to improve safety in the North End, to act as “community connectors,” and to improve the way the neighbourhood is perceived.

However, the long-term plan also includes a real shift in the core operations from a solely voluntary program to an employee and trainee model, with volunteer support as needed. In a related effort to increase awareness and accessibility of their safety programming, NECRC will be moving into a storefront location in the near future where their safety-related activities will be based.

Conclusion

Foot patrol programs have been used in many communities to varying degrees of success. Sometimes these programs succeed. In other cases, foot patrols contribute to tension between residents who feel over-policed and misunderstood. This is why it is very important that foot patrol programs do not lead to law-enforcement or security personnel taking a punitive approach to safety.

NEAP has avoided these pitfalls through a thoughtful and extensive community consultation process. Grounding the program in community feedback, shaping it around potential training and employment, and ensuring that it is implemented by a dependable group of people has set NEAP on a track to long-term success both in terms of their safety goals as well as NECRC’s broader community economic development and neighbourhood renewal objectives.

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