



BJA Bureau of Justice Assistance Bulletin

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The National Training and Information Center: Empowering Communities To Fight Crime

Introduction

Community organizing is one of the best tools for combating violence and drugs in crime-ridden neighborhoods. Organizing builds partnerships among local stakeholders who might fail to communicate and join forces to remove the causes of crime and drugs.

In the 1990s, the National Training and Information Center (NTIC) began working with the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) of the Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, to provide the training, technical assistance, and funding that grassroots community organizations need to combat crime, violence, and illicit drugs in their neighborhoods. NTIC has provided this support through four programs: Community Responses to Drug Abuse (CRDA) from 1990 to 1992; Communities in Action to Prevent Drug Abuse (CAPDA) I & II from 1992 to 1997; Project GRAND (Grassroots Residents Against Neighborhood Destruction) from 1998 to 1999; and Community Justice Empowerment Project from 2000 to 2001.

These programs have involved 53 community groups in 34 cities. Although each has unique elements, at the core of all four programs is the philosophy that community organizing is critical to making neighborhoods safe.

NTIC Background

The National Training and Information Center was established in 1972 in Chicago by Gale Cincotta, Shel Trapp, and Anne-Marie Douglas. Its mission is to build grassroots leadership and strengthen neighborhoods



Schools, communities, and police work together to create drug-free or safe school zones, a technique pioneered by the CAPDA program.

through issue-based community organizing. Crime prevention through community organizing is one of the most common concerns identified by the leaders of community groups with which NTIC works.

To carry out its mission and achieve a broader goal of revitalizing urban and rural neighborhoods, NTIC helps community residents prioritize issues and draw up action plans to address them. Through NTIC's organizing model, community residents become experts on the needs of their neighborhoods and gain an understanding of how to foster change by engaging other stakeholders in their communities such as law enforcement, public and elected officials, and the private sector. Organizers, researchers, and other NTIC staff provide training, technical assistance, research, and consultation to community groups that are seeking ways to reduce crime and improve the quality of life in their neighborhoods.

Training

On average, NTIC trains community organizers and key neighborhood leaders from 125 local organizations each year. Training is offered at a low cost because the groups that most need assistance often are the ones that can least afford it.

Technical Assistance and Consulting

When neighborhood organizations work to address local crime conditions, they can become embroiled in policy debates with local government and business representatives over where to begin. These organizations need specific information to document the problems in their communities. In many cases, NTIC can provide that information.

Every year, NTIC organizing staff members log thousands of hours on the phone and thousands of miles in airplanes and cars providing technical assistance and answering questions that usually begin “How do I...?” Since 1974, NTIC has produced manuals on how to organize a community and has published *Disclosure*, a bimonthly newspaper that reports on neighborhood organizations across the country.

Organizations receiving NTIC assistance include neighborhood groups, local institutions, religious organizations, farm groups, and senior citizen and disabled rights associations. These groups tackle issues such as banking and reinvestment, affordable housing, school improvement, and job creation/retention, as well as crime, drug abuse, and violence prevention. In addition, NTIC fosters partnerships between these groups and public and private agencies to revitalize neighborhoods.

Successes and Accomplishments

“I can let my kids play outside now” and “I’m no longer afraid to sit on my porch in the evening” are common refrains of residents in neighborhoods that have experienced the benefits of community organizing. Several communities that received BJA funding through NTIC have shown a greater decrease in crime than nearby communities that did not receive NTIC assistance.

Working In Neighborhoods (WIN) of Cincinnati, Ohio, saw violent crimes drop 35 percent in communities it was involved in over a 3-year period compared with only a 16.2-percent decrease citywide. Highlights of the program that led to this decrease included meeting regularly with police, building trust between public housing residents and law enforcement through a computer cop program that paired students with police officers in a



Cincinnati's Computer Cop program reduced friction between public housing residents and law enforcement personnel by bringing young people together with police officers.

mentoring relationship around the use of computers, and instructing individuals how to be vigilant for criminal elements in their neighborhoods.

Even such innocuous events as neighborhood cleanups contributed to the overall improvement in crime statistics because the events included participation of persons most affected by the problem and stressed shared accountability as well as general agreement on the identification of problems and strategies to resolve them.

A similar pattern was experienced in Iowa by the Des Moines Citizens for Community Improvement (CCI). In 1998, the Des Moines city council passed two laws that CCI's local control task force had advocated for more than a year. One law was aimed at tavern and liquor store owners that required them to enforce/uphold drug and safety laws in their establishments. Through this law these business people are held responsible for criminal activity by their patrons. The council also expanded the city's nuisance abatement ordinance—a law holding landlords responsible for the conduct of their tenants—to businesses where drug dealing occurred. Leaders of the Des Moines CCI have also visited the workplaces of landlords who fail to maintain their properties, an effective strategy for ensuring timely building improvements.

Effective community organizing campaigns must target the physical surroundings that breed crime, drugs, and violence. Local concerns may include abandoned buildings, lack of city services, rodent infestation, street cleaning and repaving, and stop sign placement. For example, Sunflower Community Action in Wichita, Kansas, worked with residents to identify rundown properties in high-crime areas. In 1998 and 1999, through a series of public meetings that drew the spotlight of local broadcast and print media, the group pressured local landlords to invest more than \$100,000 in repairs and improvements.

Additional crime intervention and prevention approaches used by community groups include drug-free school and park zones; hotspot card campaigns, which allow residents fearful of giving their names to police a chance to report drughouse activities and other crimes anonymously; and strengthened nuisance abatement laws and similar ordinances.

Critical Partnerships Developed

Law enforcement agencies are the most obvious resource to partner with neighborhood groups through NTIC's community organizing programs. Other potential partners include job training agencies, small businesses and mortgage lending institutions, educational associations, and local governments.

For example, after successfully reclaiming a park that had been taken over by drug dealers, community leaders and residents from United Neighbors for Justice in Carrboro, North Carolina, persuaded the city to turn the property over to their organization for development into affordable housing. Some of the labor to rehabilitate the homes was provided by convicted drug dealers as part of a creative sentencing program the group's leaders worked out with the city.

In 1998 and 1999, Project GRAND organizations partnered with lending institutions to make home and small business loans worth more than \$33 million available to their communities under the federal Community Reinvestment Act. In Iowa, residents worked with several Des Moines banks to create a Designated Improvement Fund that allows depositors to specify that their money be used for home and other types of loans in their community.

The unique safety/jobs initiative of Blocks Together in Chicago is another partnership example. Working with parents from 5 public schools, the Chicago Board of Education, and the Chicago Police Department, Blocks Together created a program to hire 40 parents who were former Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) recipients. The parents are now paid to patrol areas around schools identified as having high levels of crime and drug activity during school hours.

At the Michigan Organizing Project in Muskegon Heights, 300 jobs were created for community residents through agreements with private sector corporations and through innovative service-delivery models developed by local groups, such as a workers' council of area churches.

How NTIC Works

A grassroots group that receives BJA funding through NTIC must be:



Leaders of community groups that participate in CAPDA meet with law enforcement officers during conferences in Washington, D.C.

1. Certified as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization by the Internal Revenue Service.
2. Controlled by a board or leadership group made up of neighborhood residents.
3. Staffed by one or more community organizers.
4. Able to document fiscal responsibility and provide other pertinent information upon request.
5. Committed to beginning or expanding efforts by working with all elements of the community to develop strategies that will decrease crime, violence, and substance abuse and increase reinvestment in the community by building public/private partnerships.

Furthermore, each group must agree to:

1. Establish a multifaceted neighborhood planning team that includes youth, community residents, clerics, business leaders, media representatives, law enforcement officers, prosecutors, financial managers, educators, and government officials. The planning team must be responsible for determining community assets and for the development, implementation, and assessment of the program.
2. Provide an opportunity for residents and other stakeholders to develop innovative strategies to secure resources, services, programs, and community improvements through technical assistance and training provided by NTIC.
3. Improve deteriorating social and economic structures in the target neighborhoods through the development of public/private partnerships that will result in reinvestment, economic stability, and neighborhood revitalization.
4. Involve youth in prevention strategies and alternatives to crime and drug activity, including after-school programs, leadership development, and increased educational opportunities.

5. Implement models of community service, alternative sentencing, and restitution in tandem with judges, prosecutors, social service providers, and community residents.
6. Share strategies and programs for increasing community assets and resources and work with other community groups and NTIC to develop effective evaluation criteria.

For Further Information

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Clearinghouse staff are available Monday through Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. eastern time. Ask to be placed on the BJA mailing list.

U.S. Department of Justice Response Center

1-800-421-6770 or 202-307-1480

Response Center staff are available Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. eastern time

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