

Building Community Through Cross-Cultural Organizing Workshop

Notes from the June 8th, 2009 Central NE Neighbors (CNN) workshop at Concordia University

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Summary of Community Presentations

Three projects were described, and each used culturally specific organizing tools and models. These efforts involved engaging the community, cross-cultural partnerships, and reaching common ground between groups. Key success factors as well as significant challenges were given. **The focus of the presentations was on three ACTION AREAS from the Cully-Concordia Community Action Plan:**

- **Explore Transportation Alternatives for Underrepresented Communities**
- **Link to Underutilized Sites for Community Activities**
- **Engage Youth and Parents in the Community**

1. Explore Transportation Alternatives for Under-represented Communities – Presenter: Native American Youth & Family Center (NAYA)

There are 38,000 Native Americans in Multnomah County, the ninth largest native population in the U.S. Although this is sometimes considered an “invisible population” because Native-Americans may also be white, black, Latino, etc. The Academy is located at NE 51st Avenue and Columbia Boulevard and attracts students from all over the region. Transportation is a big issue for Native American youth and elders, as many use Tri-Met to get around. It was a challenge for the community to get a bus stop at the school.

The Youth and Elders Council has been in existence for seven years. It began with focus groups to identify community improvements. In the fourth year the Council worked on Vision PDX. At a workshop Mayor Potter and other guest speakers discussed concerns the community had with TriMet. Tribal identification cards were not recognized by TriMet, and TriMet did not acknowledge the different definitions for age of Elders in the Native American Community. Examples were given of discriminatory treatment and racism.

The Council decided to move forward as the Academy opened by advocating for a new bus stop at the Academy. The previous bus stop was located at NE 47th and Columbia, causing students to have to cross five busy lanes of Columbia Boulevard and walk four block east on marginal sidewalks. The process took three years to accomplish, with the following stages: 1) Determining what was needed; 2) Developing an action plan; and 3) the coming of the bus.

The Council developed their allies, including Mayor Potter and eventually Fred Hansen, the Executive Director of TriMet. The Council strategy included a commitment to community, a letter-writing campaign, and a multi-generational approach. This was essentially a “Rational World View Model.” The Council worked with a variety of different jurisdictions and public agencies, and concentrated on collecting numerical data, including documented transit use by students.

During the process there was tension, but also patience and diplomacy. It was necessary to “fill the bucket in order to make it tip over.” The success of this action helped the whole community, not just NAYA. It was a win-win situation because TriMet ridership increased. In retrospect, the Council could have done more cross-cultural organizing. There is still work to do to make NE Columbia Boulevard safer for bicyclists and pedestrians, both traveling east and west and crossing north and south.

2. Link to Underutilized Sites for Community Activities – Presenter: Trinity Lutheran Church

The church is 119 years old and has been at the NE 55th and Killingsworth site since 1959. It began over one hundred years ago with a congregation of German heritage, and presently focuses on Latino outreach. The Church shares a Spanish-speaking minister with other parishes in the area.

An emergency food program provides hundreds of boxes of food each month, with a food bank open Wednesday, Thursday and Friday from 4:00 to 5:00 p.m. The mission is to “feed the hungry” and food is given to everyone who asks. The population of people served is increasing to a current range of 200 to 250. Thanksgiving food boxes are given to over 60 families. There are Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners, presents and piñatas.

There is English as a second language (ESL) program in the evening from September to May that also includes childcare. A summer school operates July 9 to 12 from 9:00 a.m. to noon. It is an intense course that focuses on English, reading, and speaking. The class includes 8 to 12 students and a certified teacher with two helpers. The Church has a garden to teach kids how to grow food. People from small towns have helped initiate urban dwellers who initially didn’t know that potatoes grow underground. The Church also provides scholarships, with the goal that every child is a success story. A carnival with 1,000 attendees has helped to purchase school supplies.

The Church is successful because they are known in the community and have extensive facilities. The fact that some of the congregation have not dedicated funds for outreach is a challenge, as is fundraising. Also, there have been demographic challenges within the congregation.

3. Engage Youth and Parents in the Community – Presenter: Somali Outreach Project, Central Northeast Neighbors (CNN)

The Somali population has a Muslim cultural background. The family unit is often a single mother head of household with four to six kids. Lul Abdulle, project coordinator, focuses on resolving conflicts and bringing Somali women out of isolation. There are support groups such as a sewing circle where the women sew and socialize. Informational topics are discussed and connections are made.

Lul described using a fashion show rather than a “cultural night” as a way to promote cross-cultural understanding. She noted that communication is important when food is cooked and shared, because the Somalis come from a culturally strict society. Challenges for family and youth engagement include lack of space for meeting, as the family units are large. Also, meeting locations should be within walking distance of homes. Another challenge is that Somali men send the women to all the community activities. Who works with the men? They get information from the women and children, and like to socialize at coffee shops. The Somali community had a bad experience in the past with a community garden, due to cultural challenges regarding different farming methods and miscommunication on sharing food.

Summary Small Group Discussion on Action Areas

1. Explore Transportation Alternatives for Underrepresented Communities

Introductions/why are you interested in this action area?

- No sidewalks; walking safely to school needs to be addressed; safety is a barrier, we need more transportation choices
- Encouraging people of color to bicycle in Portland
- Getting over Columbia Boulevard to the Airport and on to Marine Drive, especially for bike trailers
- Sixty percent of families with children at Rigler are Latino
- Increasing fuel, obesity, climate change

What are the most important community Issues and challenges regarding this action area?

- Organizing the Latino community around transportation safety issues
- Difficulty for low-income families to get around and with the assumption that everyone has a car
- Societal assumption that “buses are for poor people”

- For some people in our community, even riding the bus or affording a bike is expensive
- Long bus rides and transfers; the Line 75 to Line 12 transfer can be unreliable.
- Home and work are often far apart

What efforts are happening that can be supported, and what is missing?

- Lots of bicyclists live at Columbia Eco Village; it's a place one can retire without a car because of good TriMet Service and a recent pedestrian safety project on Killingsworth.
- Bus service from Cully to Hollywood is good, but there aren't direct bus routes to Downtown Portland
- Bike donations
- One on one marketing through PBOT's *Smart Trips* Program
- Education for adults on how to be a bike commuter, how to carry stuff on your bike, knowing the best routes
- Expand Safer Routes to School for youths
- Educate drivers as well as bicyclists and pedestrians

What skill, talent, and or resource can you bring to build community?

- Match Community Cycling Center resources with community needs, for example designing a bike program for Latinos
- Be a "bike mentor"
- Organize group rides focused on people of color, but keep in mind that people in the community work hard, often six days a week

How to continue this discussion that may lead to collective action?

- A shared bike pilot project for the CNN area (like the former Yellow Bike effort, like programs in Europe)
- Survey the community regarding bike sharing; investigate liability issues, advertising support
- Advocate for safe sidewalks
- Work collectively, because transportation is a big, expensive issue and it is had to fight for change without the support of wide coalition of interest groups, including sustainability, climate change, etc.; be willing to write grants, to go door-to-door
- Columbia Eco-Village is looking for interaction with the Cully Association of Neighbors and the wider community

2. Link to Underutilized Sites for Community Activities

What are the most important community issues and challenges regarding this action area?

- Space issues: lack of parks, community gathering, meeting, and event space in the area

- No places for youth and not many activities are available and accessible to them
- Relationship building and communication
- Small business development, farmers market, and cart vendors; challenges with funding, insurance, liability and bureaucracy

What efforts are happening that can be supported, and what is missing?

- Churches such as Trinity Lutheran are sharing land and facilities
- Thomas Cully Park planning effort
- There is a need for fundraising; funds are necessary for using school space

What skill, talent, and or resource can you bring to build community?

- Event planning, passion and commitment to Cully (Tulsi)
- Relationship building (Andrea)
- Our United Villages (OUV) toolkit for door-knocking, help with developing and providing resources for non profits and community members (Vanessa, OUV)
- Skilled at growing food (Narris)
- Organizing volunteers (Carrie)
- Overall community resource, Bureau of Planning and Sustainability (Debbie, BPS)
- Outreach and Translation to Somali Women (Leyla)

How to continue this discussion that may lead to collective action?

- Survey available spaces and land in the community; have a community conversation around space, and programming and further develop a vision
- Find funding sources for vacant sites and community vision process
- Connect with Fruit Tree Project
- Go after community support from Albertsons in Cully neighborhood and other businesses
- Conduct needs assessment, door-to door outreach, and look at existing information (Diggable Cities, Parks and Recreation, Planning documents, Equity Atlas)

3. Engage Youth and Parents in the Community

What are the most important community issues and challenges regarding this action area?

- In the Somali community, there is a cultural disconnect with youth in schools, and with their parents
- The challenge of the dominant culture versus newcomers
- Opening lines of communication for cultural celebration and build intercultural ties
- Building interpersonal relationships between and among groups; the importance of face-to-face communication and getting to know families, not just sending out a flyer

- Lack of father and male involvement, including cycle of violence. Impact of single parent household funding; for example a single mom with child getting benefits but disenfranchising the male. How can we educate and support the whole family?
- Not enough free and large enough community gathering space
- Funds for childcare and transportation are lacking
- Columbia Ecovillage on Killingsworth is grappling with gentrification; Our United Villages can be a resource, engaging neighbor to neighbor conversations

What efforts are happening that can be supported, and what is missing?

- Translation and interpretation policies from school staff to parents (citywide curfew, school dress code, field trips, etc.)
- Meeting space is available for Somali and Latina women to gather (including materials for sewing projects) but also limited
- Big Brother/Big Sister Program; but there is a need for culturally specific mentors
- Our United Villages Community Conversations

What skill, talent, and or resource can you bring to build community?

- Community building and interpersonal skills
- The Clinic and the Ortiz Center are resources

How to continue this discussion that may lead to collective action?

- Working on Latino and Somali cross-cultural events (September 15, Trinity Lutheran Church); exchange contact information
- Find common dates for intercultural events
- Develop relationships through dance and celebration
- Identify contact person (Lul, Mona and Anisa) and spaces to meet (Trinity Lutheran, the Ortiz Center, Rigler and Harvey Scott Schools)
- Continue to communicate, ask for help and resources
- Utilize community meetings and small group relationships; includes multi-cultural events to come together; initiate dialogue about human relationships and culture in small groups of 10 to 12 people
- Define clear agendas; be clear on expectations
- Have monthly meetings to connect to youth resources and promote safe family environment