

FERGUS STREET HOMEOWNERSHIP PROJECT

Cincinnati, Ohio

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

In 2005, law enforcement officials in the City of Cincinnati ranked the historic Northside neighborhood as one of the top 10 “worst” among the City’s 52 neighborhoods for crime. Northside had for years been experiencing a steady decrease in population and homeownership that was tied to a cycle of increasing drug and gang activity and a rash of crime in and around abandoned properties. In 2003 alone, the Cincinnati Police Department recorded 12,068 Calls for Service in Northside, including 1,056 identified as Part 1 Crimes: three murders, 11 rapes, 83 robberies, 49 aggravated assaults, 314 burglaries, 424 larcenies and 172 auto thefts. The quality of life losses experienced by members of this diverse neighborhood were more difficult to measure, until police and community leaders joined forces to make a change.

The Northside Community Council (NCC) Housing

other Northside organizations including Northside Citizens on Patrol, Northside Community Problem Oriented Police Team, Northside Community Council and the Northside Business Association. Public safety was therefore a fundamental concern and objective of the new organization’s leaders, and existing relationships with police helped kickstart projects to make headway against troubling trends.

The Community Problem-Oriented Policing (CPOP) model introduced by the Cincinnati Police Department in 2004 created a natural structure through which CNCURC leaders could partner with law enforcement. Through CPOP, the Police Department assigned a dedicated neighborhood officer to Northside who was empowered by police commanders to resolve local crime concerns by working with residents, property owners and business owners, and by reaching out to other City agencies to leverage additional resources.

This structure—and leadership by Northside’s Neighborhood Officer—proved critical in the partners’ successes in reducing crime and increasing economic investment in recent years.



Volunteers helped clean and renovate the Children’s Park that was formerly overrun by criminal activity.

Committee led the charge in 2003, making a push for responsible acquisition and redevelopment of blighted properties in the neighborhood. At the time, foreclosure rates in Northside were averaging 12 to 20 per month and the vacant buildings were providing new havens for criminal activity. NCC members recruited other qualified volunteers and created the Cincinnati Northside Community Urban Redevelopment Corporation (CNCURC) in 2005. Despite its relatively recent inception, the Redevelopment Corporation’s members brought years of professional and volunteer skills, knowledge and understanding of the neighborhood to the new organization. Seven of the nine board members are Northside homeowners and eight had participated in

NEIGHBORHOOD BACKGROUND

The Northside neighborhood in Cincinnati is one of the oldest in the city, still retaining most of the historic architecture built at the turn of the 20th century. It is also home to Cincinnati’s second largest public transportation hub, used widely by neighborhood residents and other commuters on their way into the downtown business district just south of the neighborhood. The neighborhood is ethnically and racially diverse, with most

households in the community getting by with incomes far lower than the City average. The 2000 U.S. Census reflected a housing stock comprised of 44% owner-occupied units, 44% renter-occupied units and 12% (504 units) vacant. 2005 marked a high for foreclosures in Hamilton County, with Northside being one of the hardest hit neighborhoods. Rapid shifts in the City’s population, flight of the middle class, illegal “flipping” investment practices and significant increases in rental units owned by absentee landlords all contributed to the neighborhood’s decline.

Just a few years ago, many of the vacant buildings were used as havens for illicit activities. Dealers conducted open-air drug sales on the corners and physically took

COURT WATCH – A MODEL PROGRAM

While the work of the Northside police and community partners increased arrest rates in the neighborhood, crime problems persisted in part due to the fact that the judicial system was functioning like a revolving door. Adult offenders were often released on probation without significant jail time while juvenile offenders often ended up back on the streets within hours. To stem the cycle of repeat victimization of their community, the Northside partners, including the Neighborhood Officer and Northside Citizens On Patrol, reached out to the Hamilton County Prosecutors office, Probation Department and several judges to brainstorm and advocate for increased sentencing for repeat offenders.

The result was the Court Watch program. CNCURC collects data on repeat offenders' arrest history including number of times arrested, reason for arrest and the result of arrest. It shares this information with police and prosecutors involved in the case who can then consider it as they make probation plea agreements and sentencing requests. In some cases, community members have testified in sentencing hearings about the impact that a given offender's actions have had on members of the Northside community.

The Court Watch program has provided critical support to the efforts of police and community members in Northside. As important as the decrease in repeat victimization that it has wrought is the increase in morale that has enabled the Northside partners to sustain their momentum for neighborhood change. With support from the City Solicitor's Office, the program is now being replicated in other neighborhoods throughout Cincinnati.

over the neighborhood's Children's Playground, making it unsafe for children and their families to play or picnic. Prostitutes worked the streets as children walked to elementary schools. Fights and shootings were common, and gang-related graffiti abounded in the adjoining alleys.

When residents did take a stand, they were often threatened or harassed. One resident activist lost his home to arson. With only limited coordination

making it a challenging but high priority for the new CNCURC and the Police Department.

PROGRAM STRATEGY AND ACTIVITY

Northside Community Problem-Oriented Policing Team

Even before CNCURC was established, the Northside CPOP team was laying the groundwork for improved community-police partnership. Team leaders including several residents and the Neighborhood Officer catalogued local quality of life concerns and prioritized which they would take on. In less than a year, they worked to significantly reduce litter, abandoned junk vehicles, rat infestation and related quality of life crimes. On the heels of these successes, they received a private grant to install 20 surveillance cameras in Northside in collaboration with the Northside Business Association and a local Block Watch group. These efforts were widely recognized in Cincinnati, perhaps most notably through an award by the Cincinnati Partnering Center and another from Keep Cincinnati Beautiful.



A corner store that was the center of crime problems in the neighborhood was targeted by project partners. Their efforts resulted in the demolition of the store and development of affordable single-family homes on the site.

between District 5 police officers and community members, many residents did not trust police to maintain safety or respond to problems. At the same time, low conviction rates and reduced sentencing frustrated police who were trying to make a difference. The intersection of Chase and Fergus Streets was notorious as one of the most violent crime locations,





Redevelopment of vacant properties on Fergus Street has reduced crime and attracted new homeowners.



Members of the Northside CPOP team used proven problem-solving models to analyze their local situation and develop comprehensive responses. Four CNCURC board members who participate in the CPOP team are now trained in the “SARA” or “Scan, Analyze, Respond and Assess” method for problem-solving. Long used by police agencies to make informed and strategic resource deployment decisions, the SARA method has also proven to be an effective planning tool for community-police collaboratives such as the Northside team. Through the use of the SARA model, the Northside team was able to accurately identify the sources contributing to increased drug and gang activity and create a strategic plan to alleviate it. “This collaborative process enabled the police to concentrate on the identified area with full support and help from the community, thus creating a win-win situation where both the police and the residents benefited from the joint effort,” said Stefanie Sunderland, CNCURC Director.

Taking On High Crime Locations: The Corner Grocery Store

The grocery store at the corner of Chase and Fergus Streets was known by all members of the CPOP team—and the emerging leaders of CNCURC—as one of the neighborhood’s most intractable problems. Police officers described the corner as the head and body of an octopus, with tentacles that extended outward to negatively impact surrounding streets and properties. Drug activity at that location dated back to the mid-1990s; as early as 1996, the City of Cincinnati installed a surveillance camera at the location in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to document illegal activity and pursue the perpetrators. More recently, police officers and members of the CPOP team had attempted to work

with the store owners to encourage them to more proactively report crime, discourage loitering and install lighting to deter criminal activity. These efforts also yielded little result, and both community members and police began to suspect that the owners might be actively facilitating drug sales in and around the property.

With drug dealing fully entrenched on the block, the Children’s Park across the street from the store was no longer a safe place for children to play. Residents would return home to find dealers sitting on their front steps, with gang graffiti on their property and litter all over their yards. The dealers aggressively confronted or threatened anyone who they suspected might contact police,

and many residents who felt powerless to change the situation either left or closed their doors in silence.

In an effort to respond, members of the Northside Community Council (who would later help to form CNCURC) and the Cincinnati Police Department filed a formal objection to the store’s liquor license renewal in March 2003. This led to an agreement negotiated with the store owner’s attorney in which the owner promised to discontinue sales of drug paraphernalia and to more actively partner with police in reducing criminal activity on the corner. The owner did not honor this agreement and police stepped up enforcement through a variety of uncover operations. Much to the frustration of both police and community members, these efforts had limited long-term effect, given that both adult and juvenile offenders arrested by police were often sentenced with little to no jail time, and were back on the streets sometimes before police had even completed the arrest and incident paperwork. Recognition of this problem led to creation of a Northside Court Watch program that is now being replicated throughout the City.

Even after a police investigation yielded evidence that the store owner and the owner of the building were complicit in a citywide stolen goods operation, the Northside partners were only able to secure a revocation of the store’s liquor license. Drug dealing continued, and the Northside partners looked to more permanent solutions. As CNCURC took shape, their strategy emerged clearly: They would work to acquire the property and other problem buildings in the immediate area so that they could literally build their way out of the current crime and blight.

Addressing Vacant Properties

Tackling Absentee-Owned Vacant Buildings

From the outset, CNCURC, the Cincinnati Police Department and other members of the CPOP team suspected that the Northside neighborhood had a disproportionate number of vacant properties that rested alongside the corner store and were at the root of the public safety problems. They began to track the vacancies by address and owner, and quickly confirmed that the areas most affected by vacancy also had the highest rates of absentee landlords. Of the 56 properties on Fergus Street alone, 35% were vacant and homeowners occupied only eight.

Without owners in the area to notice or complain, many drug dealers set up semi-permanent homes in vacant buildings. They sat in lawn chairs on the sidewalk by day, hung out on front porches in the evening and retired indoors for the night. One house on Fergus Street, where the owner had failed to turn off heat, water and electricity, was illegally occupied by drug dealers and prostitutes for four months before they were discovered. Without an owner's complaint and permission to post no trespass signs, the police did not have grounds to issue trespassing citations. At the time, there was no criminal process to punish uncooperative owners, many of whom ignored orders to barricade and maintain their properties.

In 2004, Northside Neighborhood Officer, Terri Windeler, took the initiative to work with absentee landlords/owners to acquire signed "Right of Entry" forms permitting police to arrest trespassers anytime without requiring a complaint called in by the property owner. In less than two years, she secured signed "Right of Entry" consent from 77 absentee owners. By circulating the compiled owners' signature list with addresses and contact numbers throughout District 5's beat officer division, she created a process that allowed police to protect private investors' property and arrest offenders illegally gaining access or using the grounds.

At the same time, the newly-formed CNCURC teamed up with the Multi-Neighborhood Housing Task Force, an organization dedicated to combating bad investment practices, to explore policy solutions. They successfully promoted the adoption of a new City Vacant Building Maintenance License (VBML). In addition to the 13 previous maintenance requirements, this new ordinance allowed the Buildings and Inspections Department to impose



fees, require liability insurance on vacant properties and place a lien on properties belonging to owners who fail to comply with the VBML. The liability insurance requirement was specifically added to provide protection for police officers and fire personnel entering vacant properties in the line of duty.

Putting a Stop to Illegal Real Estate Transactions

As CNCURC and its partners created their vacant property inventory, they noticed that some were being bought for unusually high prices. This tracking uncovered an illegal flipping ring involving lenders, loan officers and appraisers. The pattern was apparent: the ring participants would artificially inflate a property's market value and then pull out of the market, selling it to a second tier "well meaning" investor who, over time, would often find it difficult to afford bringing or keeping the house up to building code. As a result, many properties fell into foreclosure and became vacant.

CNCURC and the police shared their findings with the Multi-Neighborhood Housing Task Force. Soon thereafter, the Assistant District Attorney investigated and prosecuted the property owners involved in the Northside ring, with the first arrest leading to 30 convictions. Northside is currently involved in another investigation of 23 other individuals who are suspected of being involved in similar scams.



Development activity in Northside has picked up since the renovation of several key blighted properties.

Purchasing Vacant Houses and Promoting Homeownership

To turn some of the neighborhood's liabilities into assets, CNCURC began to purchase some of the most at-risk housing stock before it landed in the hands of bad-intentioned investors. The problematic Chase-Fergus intersection was their prime target for the new Fergus Street Homeownership Project. In June 2005, the Cincinnati City Council approved \$300,000 in Community Development Block Grant funding to help CNCURC acquire and demolish three buildings at this intersection and two more nearby, including the infamous corner store building. Work is underway to rehabilitate and convert the properties into single-family homes, in addition to constructing additional single-family units on a vacant lot, directly south of the Children's Playground, which the previous owner donated to the organization. The Project's second phase promises to support the purchase and rehabilitation of 15 additional properties in the target area.

CNCURC's activities have been bolstered by support from many partner organizations. In an ongoing effort to encourage participation by neighborhood investors, Fannie Mae sponsored a training seminar on home rehabilitation and funding resources in April 2006. Additionally, a partner non-profit, Working In Neighborhoods, recently purchased five houses for rehabilitation and completed new construction of another. All of these projects are helping to create a stable base of homeowners in the Northside neighborhood, and to restore the sense of community and pride that residents once enjoyed.

PROGRAM IMPACT

The Northside Community Problem-Oriented Policing Team, CNCURC and the Cincinnati Police Department have achieved a highly visible turnaround in the Northside neighborhood. The results include both reduction in crime and new economic investments, as well as a restored sense of community that is proving critical to the rebirth of the neighborhood.

Public Safety Impact

The visible reduction in open air drug activity in the Northside neighborhood is borne out by the crime data collected by the Cincinnati Police Department. Overall, Northside saw a nearly 15% drop in Part 1 crime and a 34% drop in Part 2 crime in 2005 as compared to 2004. In that same time period, Part 1 and 2 crimes increased significantly in other, less active or non-active communities in Cincinnati. Police and community members alike have observed that drug dealing at the corner of Chase and Fergus Streets has ceased and the Children's Playground has been restored as a safe and healthy place for families to enjoy.

Due to the exceptional work of the Northside

Neighborhood Officer, Terri Windeler, who received an Outstanding Officer Award at the First Annual Community Problem-Oriented Policing Award Banquet held in October 2005, quality of life concerns on Fergus Street and throughout the neighborhood have decreased and the relationship between community members and the Cincinnati Police Department has greatly improved. With more trust that their input will be heard and taken seriously, residents are more actively involved in crime reduction. As evidence of the value the Cincinnati Police Department places on such partnerships, police leaders recently expanded the Neighborhood Officer program to deploy three (instead of one) officer per neighborhood. CNCURC predicts that their partnership's effectiveness will increase exponentially as a result of this new investment in community-based safety initiatives.

Community Development and Building Impact

As stated earlier, investment in the community is increasing as crime decreases and homeowners begin to reclaim their neighborhood. Several neighborhood organizations are following CNCURC's lead by building and rehabilitating homes, such as the five redevelopment projects being led by Working in Neighborhoods. Many of the vacant properties



Judge Susan Dlott, Northside Community Council President Paul Green, CNCURC Director Stefanie Sunderland and Officer Terri Winderler have been important leaders of the Northside projects.

identified in CNCURC's early inventory have now been redeveloped or are in the process of being acquired for renovation by affordable housing developers. Eight new homeowners recently moved into homes within a block of where the corner store stood and another five are renovating homes several blocks away. In addition, Northside was chosen as the neighborhood of choice by The Contemporary Arts Center's HOME House Project which will involve construction of two new,

environmentally conscious homes. The homes will be energy efficient and cost effective while promoting environmental consciousness and a high standard of contemporary design. The Arts Center stated that Northside was chosen because of the community's long-standing commitment to environmental values, its openness to new ideas and the breadth of current redevelopment efforts underway.

All of this activity demonstrates the power of an alliance between police, organized residents and committed community developers to achieve a sweeping neighborhood transformation. By combining their resources and using their unique institutional positions to leverage other City and non-profit partnerships, the Northside team has fostered a momentum for positive change that is restoring the neighborhood's proud heritage and making it a safe and healthy community for long-time residents and newcomers alike.

WINNING PROGRAM

Fergus Street HomeOwnership Project and Northside Community Problem-Oriented Policing Team

APPLICANT

Cincinnati Northside Community Urban Redevelopment Corporation
Cincinnati Police Department

TARGET AREA

Northside neighborhood of Cincinnati

INCEPTION DATE

2004

KEY PARTNERS

Cincinnati Police Department
Cincinnati City Solicitors Office
Cincinnati Department of Community Development and Planning
Cincinnati Department of Buildings and Inspections
Hamilton County Prosecutors Office
Northside Citizens on Patrol
Northside Community Council
Northside Court Watch
Fergus Street Residents and Non-Resident Property Owners
Multi-Neighborhood Housing Task Force

FUNDERS

City of Cincinnati
Local Initiatives Support Corporation
Cincinnati Community Development Corporation Association
Contemporary Arts Center
Northside Community Fund

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