

Cupertino Neighborhood Block Leader Program

The Challenge

In the last 25 years, the face of the City of Cupertino fundamentally changed. In the mid 1980s the community was 74 percent Caucasian. Now, Cupertino is 50 percent Caucasian and 44.4 percent Asian. Though the newcomers shared core values as earlier European immigrants, such as education, family, business opportunity, and safety, a two-fold challenge emerged. On one hand, long-time residents felt disconnected and uncomfortable with the growing Asian population; On the other hand, new residents brought a wide variety of cultures, languages and expectations of their lives in America.

The area's high-cost of living further widened the gap as two-income households were more widespread and residents spent more time away at their jobs and less time at home. The City of Cupertino had to maintain and strengthen those threads that would hold the community together.

Then, in February 2002, the City created the Neighborhood Block Leader program, a civic engagement program that gives residents tools to bridge cultural differences, to become acquainted with neighbors, to increase public safety, and to live more harmoniously in the neighborhoods.

Program Implementation & Costs

Block leaders have become the voices of neighborhoods and a more compelling means for the City to communicate with neighborhoods. This new partnership enables neighbors to connect

with one another and allows the City to have vital and direct contact with its residents and neighborhoods. The effect on the community has been as positive as it has been profound.

The City organizes at least four training sessions each year in which learn about programs and strategies that can be used to coordinate their neighborhoods. Participants also exchange success stories and tips for improvement.

Diversity and cultural competency have been, and continue to be, the main engines driving this community partnership program. Block leaders deliver presentations and advise their peers about how to communicate with neighbors from around the globe. In a recent training, block leaders of Chinese, South Asian Indian, and Iranian descent acquainted peers regarding some of the very difficult nuances of cross-cultural communication. The sessions have been extremely popular because they provided quick insights to cultural practices and traditions and enabled leaders to ask sensitive questions among colleagues.

The Neighborhood Block Leader program connects the City and the neighborhoods so residents can more easily navigate City Hall and feel confident accessing city services. Likewise, the City provides pertinent and timely information to neighborhoods. For instance, block leaders are among the first notified of street closures and repairs, development activities, and building permits in their immediate neighborhoods. This networking process has paved the way for block leaders to meet with senior staff to tackle neighborhood affairs.

Prior to the block leader program, residents citywide were notified of programs and activities through tradition mass communication, such as the city newsletter, cable channel, website, and mass mailings. Now, block leaders receive direct emails, letters and phone calls about new city services and programs -- And they help to spread the word to the neighborhoods.

The city has committed a part-time staff person to facilitate, manage, and organize the Block Leader program. The program's operating budget is \$76,000 for staff time, benefits, training, promotion, and mailings. This low-cost investment has produced positive and significant results within the City organization and community. The problem-solving capacity of the community has been significantly enhanced. Among its successes, the City is now called to respond to more crucial service needs rather than life style and cultural disputes among neighbors.

Measurable Outcomes: Growth in participation, neighborhood meetings, and training

As the number of cases resolved by block leaders has increased, so also has the number of participants in the program. Twenty-seven residents attended the first block leader training in February 2002. Today, nearly 300 residents take part as Cupertino block leaders. Each of these leaders organizes between five and 90 homes. It is estimated that block leaders communicate directly with more than 6,000 households throughout the city, which is approximately one-third of Cupertino households.

The City has also seen a remarkable increase in neighborhood meetings. Participation in the Neighborhood Watch program has expanded significantly from 16 active groups in 2002 to 180 groups in 2008, and city-sponsored block parties have tripled to 33 a year.

Block leaders continue to reduce crime, improve racial tolerance, increase emergency preparedness, and participate in city services and solutions. Approximately one-third of block leaders have taken the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) training, a 20-hour emergency preparedness course that teaches hands-on, life-saving skills. Block leaders also makeup more than half of the 180 active Neighborhood Watch groups in the Cupertino.

Leaders are regularly trained in emergency preparedness and various aspects of communication, such as multicultural and emergency communication systems. Leaders learn how to report neighborhood damage after disasters and how to team up with law enforcement to search for missing children and adults.

Block leaders determine the number of homes they wish to coordinate and the type of neighborhood activity they want to lead. Leaders can: develop and share neighborhood rosters for activity planning and emergencies; organize block parties; coordinate a Neighborhood Watch group; facilitate discussions on shared interests; lead a beautification project, or other activity of their choice.

The City supplies informational resources (comprehensive binders, CDs, city website) that contain samples of neighborhood fliers, tips on how to meet and greet neighbors of different cultural heritage, and articles suggesting ways to keep neighborhoods active. The informational resources are, in of themselves, a testament to collaboration as the binder and CD were created with material provided by block leaders. At every level, from documentation to implementation, the Block Leader program manifests the very essence of democracy.

The City issues block leader identification cards so leaders can more confidently go door-to-door to meet neighbors. City staff team up new leaders with experienced block leaders who act as mentors and connect block leaders with peers who speak other languages to communicate with non-English speaking neighbors.

Leaders also have replaced the City's prior contracted services for mandatory employee cultural sensitivity training. The block leaders' expertise as cultural trainers not only has been a

cost savings, it also has provided deeper, richer learning experiences for City staff to hear personal insights from the residents themselves.

The program has been replicated in other jurisdictions. Representatives from nearby California local governments (the cities of Millbrae, Mountain View, Redwood City, and Saratoga) have attended Cupertino block leader trainings, or have asked the City of Cupertino to introduce the program to their staffs. Redwood City (pop. 75,000) has since created a Neighborhood Liaison program based on Cupertino's neighborhood block leader program, and the city of Millbrae modeled its block party program after Cupertino's. Several large cities across the nation, including Kansas City, MO, and Garland, TX, have asked for permission to use program training materials.

Lessons Learned

The City has learned the imperative need to have support from top administrators and elected officials. Block leaders are empowered when the city manager and council members participate in trainings. The City also continually seeks feedback from block leaders to improve the program. For instance, feedback established the standing information sharing session at trainings and has expanded city services at block parties. Finally, we have learned that nurturing our relationships with the block leaders and providing individual attention has made program growth possible. The city's partnership with the block leaders has enhanced core municipal services and has empowered citizens to improve the quality of life in their neighborhoods. Ultimately, the City has learned that it is possible to build community amidst profound change.