

Program Excellence Award for Citizen Involvement

POPULATIONS OF GREATER THAN 50,000



REGINA V. K. WILLIAMS

ICMA's Program Excellence Award for Citizen Involvement recognizes successful strategies designed to inform citizens about the local government services available to them and to include citizens in the process of community decision making. The award concentrates on such areas as community consensus building and adult (non-student) citizenship education. This year, ICMA awards two Program Excellence Awards for Citizen Involvement in the greater-than-50,000 population category. The first goes to Norfolk, Virginia, and City Manager Regina V. K. Williams for the Neighborhood Leadership Institute.

As the new millennium beckoned, the city of Norfolk, Virginia, was grappling with a difficult issue: citizen apathy. How could it better engage residents in city governance? What could be done to equip citizens with the tools they need to change their neighbor-

hoods? What could the city do to help build leadership within the community?

In 1999, the Norfolk Neighborhood Leadership Institute was started to create opportunities for citizens to learn the skills they need to bring about change in their neighborhoods. It is founded on the principle that one of the best ways to bring about change is to empower neighborhoods to solve problems on their own and to work together to solve problems in the larger community.

The Neighborhood Leadership Institute was one of the first components of the Department of Neighborhood and Leisure Services' Neighborhood University, a series of classes and programs designed to provide top-quality training to local residents to improve the condition of neighborhood housing, the vitality of neighborhood organizations, and overall quality of life.

The Neighborhood Leadership Institute is held each spring and fall and over the 11 weeks of the program, participants learn about a range of issues, from the history of Norfolk's neighborhoods, to how the city budget is prepared, to neighborhood planning. To give participants insight into the local governing process, the class also requires each participant to attend at least one city council, board, or commission meeting. Participants receive a certificate of completion and continuing education credits from Tidewater Community College.

The Institute's sessions are free and open to all Norfolk residents. The highly interactive sessions are limited to 30 participants each and are designed to build the leadership skills necessary to effect change in Norfolk's neighborhoods. City leaders and staff are present at each session to help facilitate.

Since its inception, the Institute has graduated 158 residents repre-

senting 74 neighborhoods. As a result, the city has a talented pool of residents who are eager to become more involved with governance. Graduates have built a strong network, forming an association to continue to foster ideas for resident involvement and solutions to common problems. They have also taken back to their neighborhoods the knowledge and skills they've learned, extending the citizen outreach process even further. As more and more citizens are showing an interest in the Leadership Institute, the city is planning to expand the program by offering new courses and topics.

Norfolk's Neighborhood Leadership Institute has shown that it is possible to build bridges with citizens in an effort to effect change. As one participant stated, "We have to come together and work with the city. Change is successful only when we work together." ♣

Neighborhood Leadership Institute participants meet to work through an issue in their community.

