

Program Excellence Award for Citizen Involvement

POPULATIONS OF GREATER THAN 50,000



FRANK FAIRBANKS

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 (nonstudent) citizenship education. This year, ICMA presents the award in the greater-than-50,000 population category to the city of Phoenix, Arizona, and City Manager Frank Fairbanks for the city's Neighborhood College.

"To preserve and improve the physical, social, and economic health of Phoenix neighborhoods, support neighborhood self-reliance, and enhance the quality of life of residents through community-based problem-solving, neighborhood-oriented services, and public/private cooperation."

The mission statement above is a tall order; however, since its inception in 1992, the Neighborhood Services Department (NSD) of the city of Phoenix, Ariz. (pop. 1.2 million), has risen to the challenge.

In 1993, NSD held a series of meetings with the Phoenix College Neighborhood Association, the Maricopa County Community College District, Phoenix College, and the Community Forum to discuss how they could provide more support and training opportunities for neighborhood leaders. In response, the group introduced a series of four-hour Saturday morning classes offered semi-annually under the rubric of "Help! For Neighborhood Leaders." Each class focused on a different issue, from attracting and maintaining neighborhood activists, to enhancing communication, to preventing crime and urban blight. Between 1993 and 1997, seven classes were presented to the community under the "Help!" rubric.

But planning committee members wanted to do more, and they discussed ways to expand these training opportunities into a

"Neighborhood College" that offered a more sustained curriculum. The stated mission of the Neighborhood College was to "assist residents in gaining the skills, knowledge, and techniques necessary to create sustainable communities."

Beginning in the fall of 1996, the 90-minute Neighborhood College classes were held once a month on college campuses on weekday evenings each fall and spring semester, for a total of eight classes per year. The primary focus of the classes was to build community leadership skills.

After years of observing the interaction among the Phoenix residents who attended the classes, it became clear that Neighborhood College participants gained much from peer learning. In response, the Neighborhood College invited seasoned neighborhood leaders to join community development professionals in teaching the classes.

Based on feedback from course participants, in April 1999, the Neighborhood College planning team implemented a number of new changes to the college. They assembled panels of presenters that reflected a variety of backgrounds and perspectives to address course topics. They also returned to the original four-hour, Saturday-morning format to provide adequate time to cover the complex topics presented as part of the Neighborhood College curriculum. To serve a broader constituency, the planning team also recruited several community college partners to provide locations for the new "Help for Neighborhoods" classes.

More than 180 residents have participated in Neighborhood College classes in the past two years, and post-course surveys consistently show that the course participants acquire skills they feel will help them be better neighborhood leaders. Such skill-building programs are critical to providing local leaders with the tools they need to make their neighborhoods and the community as a whole a better place to live. ♣

Phoenix citizens participate in Neighborhood College classes.

