The Twin Cities Training Program for Neighborhood Organizers (TCTPNO), a program of CURA, has a strong commitment to Twin Cities’ neighborhood organizations and a belief that they can have a powerful impact on the condition of neighborhoods and the quality of life of families living there. However, many neighborhood organizations either lack sufficient citizen involvement in community efforts or lack sufficient organizational leadership capacity (i.e., staff and volunteers) to design and implement strategies for community improvement. Jay Clark, TCTPNO director and trainer, uses in-depth group training, individual follow-up sessions, and networking groups to prepare neighborhood community organizers to build community leadership and a solid foundation for neighborhood organizations. He works side-by-side with organizers, modeling skills covered in his trainings, to help them reach a broad spectrum of their constituents. Training techniques and content address the specific needs of the organizers, including increasing the participation of under-represented groups, recruiting volunteers, and building volunteers’ leadership skills.

From January to May 2003, I studied four neighborhood organizing efforts that occurred in the Twin Cities, two in Minneapolis and two in St. Paul. All four community organizers who led the projects were students of TCTPNO, and Clark identified these four organizing efforts as a purposive sample of best cases based on knowledge of the community organizer and the project. My analysis of these case studies was focused on one key question: What do effective community organizers do to successfully develop neighborhood involvement in projects that address key concerns of the neighborhood? The qualitative data on which this article is based were collected from multiple sources to capture the complexity and essence of the organizing efforts. Data collection procedures included informal informational interviews with project staff, observation of individual organizer sessions with Jay Clark, observation of project meetings and events, review of neighborhood meeting minutes and written materials (such as flyers and meeting agendas), and formal in-depth interviews with organizers and community members.

Case Study I: Light-Rail Transit
Longfellow Community Council (LCC)—which represents the Longfellow, Cooper, Howe, and Hiawatha neighborhoods in Minneapolis—faced some unique challenges from the light-rail transit (LRT) project. The large geographic area encompassed by LCC, as well as the individual identities of the member neighborhoods, makes it difficult to organize residents, particularly on an issue such as LRT, which has the force of a regional transportation plan.

The LRT line was built along Hiawatha Avenue (Highway 55), on the western edge of this community, from the Mall of America in Bloomington to downtown Minneapolis. Although residents and business owners in the area had been talking about the LRT project for several years, few decisions had been made about how to respond until construction actually started. The annual LCC survey of participants at the 2002 Longfellow Summer Street Fest, which attracted approximately 3,000 people, identified LRT as one of the main concerns of area residents.

A specific concern was that LRT planners had made no accommodations for parking. In response to the survey, LCC organizer Patricia Patche and a team of volunteers created a plan to help residents further articulate their concerns about LRT.

Staff and volunteers from LCC began by forming an organizing team that went door-to-door surveying residents most likely to be affected by LRT, namely those within a two-block radius...
of the three planned rail stations at Lake Street, 38th Street, and 46th Street. The survey included general questions about the neighborhood, as well as the specific questions about the proposed LRT line. In all, the team surveyed 35 residents, most of whom believed that people would drive from other areas of the city or from the suburbs to board LRT in their neighborhood.

In response to resident concerns, organizers planned four community meetings. Three identical meetings were to be held near the location of each proposed station, about eight blocks apart. The planners hoped that smaller, more informal meetings would encourage more input and discussion from participants. The goals of these meetings were to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of LRT, voice concerns about LRT, brainstorm solutions to anticipated problems, and identify the priorities of residents. The fourth meeting was intended to bring together neighbors of all three LRT stops to talk with their elected officials about their concerns.

Communication is key to involving the people most likely to care about a particular issue. Several methods were used to identify and communicate with citizens who were likely to be most concerned about the LRT project.

Residents who had indicated at prior community meetings that they wanted to be kept informed about community issues by e-mail were sent an e-mail about the meetings.

Neighbors who had asked to be kept informed about the LRT issue, such as many of those contacted during the door-to-door survey, were notified of the meetings by phone.

A meeting announcement flyer was created that included the top five concerns of residents identified through the door-to-door survey: commuter parking, economic development near the stations, traffic congestion, pedestrian safety, and crime.

A “buffer zone” was identified that included those most affected by LRT, defined as six to eight blocks around the planned rail stations. Three groups of youth volunteers helped deliver flyers door-to-door to residents in the buffer zone.

The evening of each meeting, the LCC team went door-to-door delivering flyers and talking with people within a one- to two-block radius of the meeting location.

At each meeting, LCC staff asked attendees if they would help distribute flyers in their neighborhood on related issues. For a later meeting, 120 volunteers helped distribute flyers to more than 7,000 households.

At each of the station-specific meetings, facilitators led brainstorming sessions to identify resident concerns and possible solutions to the problems. Everyone who attended these meetings was also invited to the fourth meeting, at which residents had an opportunity to meet with their elected officials, ask questions, and voice their concerns. In preparation for the fourth meeting, Patche compiled a 35-page packet of information for elected officials that included resident feedback on various options for parking management, minutes and fact sheets from the station-specific community meetings, results from the LRT community survey, and sample letters received from residents concerned about the LRT plan. Six elected officials attended the meeting, including two state representatives, a state senator, and the Hennepin County commissioner who represented the district. Also in attendance were staff from Metro Transit and two representatives from the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT). More than 45 residents attended the meeting, giving elected officials an opportunity to speak directly with residents about their concerns and possible solutions.

Since this study was conducted, the LRT line along Hiawatha Avenue has been completed. A park-and-ride lot was constructed near the Lake Street LRT station on the west side of the intersection, meaning that LRT riders must cross Hiawatha to get to businesses located in the Longfellow neighborhood. The Longfellow neighborhood has not reported significant parking problems to date, probably because most riders likewise do not want to cross Hiawatha Avenue to board LRT and thus prefer to park on the west side of Hiawatha. Neighborhoods located on the west side of Hiawatha have reported more serious parking and traffic problems as a result of the LRT line. The Longfellow neighborhood continues to negotiate with officials about pedestrian traffic, and LCC is currently working with researchers from the University of Minnesota to identify possible solutions. One option being discussed is a walkway over Hiawatha Avenue.

Case Study II: Emergency Language Interpretation Card

North Minneapolis has a large Southeast Asian population, predominantly Hmong. In 1998, an organizer for the Hawthorne Area Community Council in north Minneapolis realized the neighborhood’s Hmong residents were not becoming involved in neighborhood issues. When he met with organizers from the Cleveland Area Neighborhood Association and the Jordan Area Community Council to discuss the problem, he found these organizations were experiencing similar difficulties getting Hmong residents involved.

The organizers contacted the executive director of the Southeast Asian Community Council (SEACC), a social service organization with a reputation...
for serving the needs of the Hmong community in their neighborhoods, to discuss the problem. After several meetings, the group obtained funding to form a new coalition called North Minneapolis Southeast Asian Initiative (NMSEAI). Among other things, the funding paid for a Hmong organizer, Friendly Vang, whose first assignment was to contact and interview 150 Southeast Asian residents in north Minneapolis to identify their needs and concerns and begin developing relationships within the community. Vang’s second assignment was to hold informational forums on four topics identified most frequently during the interviews: housing, education, crime and safety, and business opportunities. Advertisements for these meetings included public service announcements on KFAI Hmong Radio, personal phone calls to those who had been interviewed, bilingual flyers distributed to Hmong children through their schools, and a mailing to the SEACC mailing list.

A key to encouraging attendance at these informational forums was providing information and inviting guests who could help with issues of concern in residents’ lives. For the meeting on crime and safety, for example, the advertisements announced experts would be present to discuss gangs, the 911 emergency system, property crime, and personal safety. City council members and the precinct police inspector were also present. When asked why people came to these meetings, Nhia Lee, the NMSEAI organizer in spring 2003, said that Hmong elders came because SEACC had established relationships with many of them already, which had created a level of trust that is particularly important in Hmong culture.

In keeping with Hmong tradition for social gatherings, a traditional Hmong meal was provided. Organizers showed government representatives to tables interspersed throughout the room, and placed at each table a bilingual volunteer who had prepared a few questions ahead of time to stimulate conversation between residents and officials during dinner. These meetings were perhaps the first opportunity for many Hmong residents to speak directly with their council members and police about issues that concerned them. For example, residents shared stories about being awakened in the middle of the night by police who took a family member away, the difficulty of getting information the next day from police because no one at the precinct spoke Hmong, and dialing 911 in an emergency only to have someone arrive hours later.

Again and again, both in the initial interviews and at the crime and safety forum, Hmong residents voiced serious concerns about communication problems with police. The fact that 120 residents attended the forum on crime and safety indicated to NMSEAI staff that this was an issue people cared about deeply and would respond to. Consequently, the NMSEAI organizer, volunteers, and community leaders planned a series of community meetings to involve residents in developing solutions to the problems identified by residents. In these subsequent meetings, participants identified four possible ways to improve communication with police:

1. have a 911 emergency line in Hmong;
2. provide training for police on Hmong culture;
3. translate documents into Hmong, such as the 911 Emergency Packet and the Community Crime Prevention (CCP) Safe Accident Report Form; and
4. develop a card with information about legal rights and defense.

Staff and volunteers from NMSEAI decided to begin with an adaptation of the legal rights card. The card would be printed in both Hmong and English, would list ways to contact a Hmong interpreter, and would be made available to residents free of charge. Eventually the card was funded and developed with the help of elected officials. The card has a place to write the name and phone number of a close relative who speaks English, and includes phone numbers for the NMSEAI interpreter and the AT&T Language Line (which is for police use only). A major distribution campaign was conducted to distribute the new Minneapolis Emergency Language Interpretation Card. As of June 2003, 300 people had signed up for the card.

As NMSEAI continued to listen to the Hmong community, however, people began reporting that police and other emergency workers were not responding to the card, often refusing to use it. In response, NMSEAI invited elected officials and police to a series of events to talk to residents about the use of the card. At one of these meetings, police officials and city council members heard residents share stories of officers refusing to use the card. At another meeting with the Minneapolis mayor and chief of police, the mayor signed a memorandum of agreement pledging to work with the Southeast Asian community to overcome cultural and communication barriers, and to hold police accountable for using the Emergency Language Interpretation Card. Once again, these meetings were tailored to encourage the participation of the Hmong community.
and to build trust in community relationships through persistence, respect, and consistency.

Since this study was conducted, the Minneapolis Police Department hired a new chief of police, who issued an administrative order requiring officers to use the language interpretation card when it is presented by a citizen. In addition, the Minneapolis mayor continues to be supportive of the initiative. Community organizers for NMSEAI continue to go door-to-door registering residents for the card. In the process of talking to residents, organizers have heard no complaints of non-use by police officers. Currently, NMSEAI is working with police departments in St. Paul, Richfield, and Bloomington to have the card officially accepted.

Case Study III: Job Corps Property Use
The Hubert H. Humphrey Job Corps Center encompasses an entire city block of the Como Park neighborhood. The Job Corps is a federal program to teach job skills to young people who have difficulty finding a job. When the Humphrey Job Corps Center first moved into the neighborhood in 1980, neighbors protested because they thought the young people were criminals. Difficulties also stemmed from racial/ethnic differences between the center’s neighbors, who were mostly white, and the Job Corps participants, who were mostly young people of color. During the 1980s, there were many complaints from neighbors of the center about partying, drinking, and break-ins. The mayor of St. Paul eventually created a Neighborhood Advisory Committee (NAC) composed of residents from the surrounding community to act as a conduit for neighborhood input regarding problems between the Humphrey Job Corps and the surrounding neighborhood. Through NAC, resident concerns were brought to the attention of the Humphrey Job Corps site director, and things began to settle down. Having achieved a measure of success, NAC’s membership steadily dwindled and the committee’s leadership stagnated.

In spring of 2002, neighbors began contacting Sue McCall, community organizer for the District 10 Community Council, one of 19 community councils in St. Paul designed to facilitate citizen participation. They were concerned about rumors that construction plans for the Humphrey Job Corps site called for replacing the tennis court park with a parking lot. McCall and the District 10 Community Council investigated and confirmed that the rumor was true. Unfortunately, NAC had not shared this information with the neighborhood.

In response, the council expanded their regular board meeting agenda to include the Humphrey Job Corps green space issue, relocated the meeting to the Humphrey Job Corps site, and invited Job Corps staff to attend to share its construction plan with the public.

To get neighbors involved, McCall and District 10 leaders built on established relationships and practices. Initially, McCall went door-knocking at houses across the street from the Humphrey Job Corps property to identify the closest neighbors’ main concerns. In a letter sent to all residents within a 10-square-block area around the Humphrey Job Corps site, McCall explained the Job Corps redesign plan, framing the issues strategically to motivate people to attend the meeting. About a week before the meeting, McCall posted signs near the meeting location, and the evening of the meeting, volunteers stood on the street holding signs encouraging people to attend.

More than 100 residents and many Humphrey Job Corps staff attended the June 2002 District 10 Board Meeting. Residents’ concerns ranged from bad upkeep of the property to $52,000 of available federal money for communications that NAC never used. Emotions flared when the Humphrey Job Corps assistant director said he had instructions not to share certain details of the reconstruction with the public and refused to answer most neighbors’ questions. The meeting ended without a constructive resolution.

In the weeks after the first meeting, McCall worked with the District 10 Community Council leadership, neighbors, and the neighborhood’s city council representative to develop a strategy to involve elected officials and decision makers in addressing the Humphrey Job Corps issue. McCall and the District 10 Community Council planned a second neighborhood meeting for early July, with the goal of bringing together elected officials and residents to define and prioritize the neighborhood’s concerns. The Job Corps regional director, the area’s city council representative, District 10 Community Council members, and 58 residents attended the meeting. Notably absent were members of NAC. At this meeting, the Job Corps regional director and his staff were more cooperative and responsive. Neighbors voiced their concerns and identified their priorities. After the meeting, residents’ concerns and priorities were summarized in a letter to the

Neighborhood residents voice their concerns about the Humphrey Job Corps Center at a District 10 Community Council meeting.
Job Corps regional and national directors, the mayor of St. Paul, the District 10 Community Council, the area’s Congressional representative and two U.S. senators, and the U.S. Secretary of Labor.

The District 10 Community Council called a third meeting in November 2002 in response to a letter from the Assistant Secretary of Labor. The letter explained that the Job Corps had conducted a technical review of the redevelopment plans for the Humphrey Job Corps Center and had several options to present to the neighborhood. The Job Corps regional director attended the meeting, along with representatives from the U.S. Department of Labor, the Chicago Job Corps director, a representative from Senator Paul Wellstone’s office, and 60 neighborhood residents. Once again, no members of NAC attended.

At the meeting, the Job Corps regional director announced that the groundbreaking schedule had been pushed back to 2004, that the Job Corps would rework the design to address neighbors’ preferences, and that the redesign plan would be submitted to the City of St. Paul for a Site Plan Review, a step not required by law for federal projects.

From June to November, McCall sent out five mailings to residents who had attended any of the meetings or who had expressed interest in the issue. After each meeting, she published updates on the Job Corps issue in the District 10 newsletter, Como Park News. At the first meeting in June, McCall also identified 12 volunteers willing to play the role of “point person.” Whenever anything happened on the Job Corps issue, McCall sent an e-mail or made a phone call and the volunteers spread the word around the neighborhood. They also kept McCall informed about what residents were saying about the issue.

Since the time the research for this article was conducted, the Humphrey Job Corps presented a site plan based on the proposal negotiated with the neighborhood to both the City of St. Paul and to the Neighborhood Advisory Committee, and construction on the project has begun. McCall continues to keep neighbors updated through the Como Park News.

**Case Study IV: School Change**

In the fall of 2002 when West Side Citizens Organization (WSCO) hired Rainbow Hirsh, she was given the task of organizing in the Latino community on St. Paul’s West Side. Although she’s not Latino herself, she speaks Spanish fluently and had worked in the neighborhood while she was in college. Her first weeks with WSCO were spent conducting one-on-one interviews with people from a list of contacts she received from WSCO and other neighborhood nonprofits. During her interviews, Hirsh discovered three people with very similar missions. Derek Johnson worked for Neighborhood House, a community center with a long and successful history of providing services to the Latino community in West St. Paul and, more recently, to Somali, Hmong, and other immigrant residents. Nan Kari was one of the founders of Jane Addams School (JAS) for Democracy, a place where immigrants of all backgrounds—especially Latino, Hmong, and Somali—come to learn English and to study for the American Citizenship Test. Kari Denissen worked at the Neighborhood Learning Community, an organization that helps to develop learning opportunities for families and youth on the West Side.

These three organizations—Neighborhood House, Jane Addams School, and the Neighborhood Learning Community—shared WSCO’s commitment to the immigrant communities in the area, and Johnson, Kari, Denissen, and Hirsh began to meet weekly. As they talked, an issue and an opportunity around schools quickly presented itself. The St. Paul School District had announced neighborhood forums all around the city to collect public opinion from parents about “school choice,” the policy of allowing students to attend any school, not just their neighborhood school. Two years previously, Nan Kari had been involved with a neighborhood group that had attempted to engage neighborhood parents of all ethnic backgrounds in a discussion about the education of their children. The effort had lost steam, and Kari, Johnson, Denissen, and Hirsh thought the district forums might offer an opportunity to revive the effort.

During the next few weeks, the four began asking neighborhood parents of all ethnic backgrounds about their concerns regarding schools and education. After sharing what they had learned, they decided to look for ways to help parents bring their concerns to the District School Choice Forums. The group devised a plan to hold a pre-forum workshop just before the neighborhood’s district forum on February 27. During the next few weeks, each collaborator sought ways to spread the word about the pre-forum workshop. Hirsh connected with the Latino community in a few key ways. The pastor of San Martin Lutheran Church invited her to share information about the workshop and district forum with his congregants. While attending a Spanish-language class offered through Chicanos Latinos Unidos En Servicio (CLUES), another West Side service organization, Hirsh worked with her teacher to develop an in-class discussion on school choice and civic engagement. When it was time to promote the workshop, Hirsh attended all the Spanish classes at CLUES to talk about the pre-forum workshop and to distribute flyers. Kattia, one of the women in Hirsh’s class, volunteered to talk to people she knew about the forum and workshop, and Ana, a
Spanish early childhood family education teacher, posted notices in her building. The Jane Addams School members discussed the pre-forum workshop and district forum at their Wednesday evening Spanish circle groups and distributed the workshop flyers. In addition, members of JAS talked personally with their Hmong and Somali participants, especially elders, about the events. Johnson of Neighborhood House said, “I think the key to people attending was... personal invitations that connected the meetings to peoples' self-interests. . . . People did seem interested in issues around education.”

Forty-five people (including children and trainers) participated in the pre-forum workshop. Dinner and childcare were provided, as was transportation home after the meeting. The training was conducted in three languages: Hmong, Spanish, and Somali. The main purpose of the workshop was for participants to learn and practice the basic public skill of framing a personal concern as a public issue. After dinner, participants broke into smaller groups called “sharing circles” where parents introduced themselves, explained why they were there, and shared their biggest concerns about their school or their child’s education. After demonstrating that other people shared these personal concerns, the trainers talked about what to expect at the district forum and how parents could connect their concerns to the district agenda on school choice. Volunteers were assigned to ask a specific question or to make a specific comment on the issues discussed in the training.

Johnson said the vast majority of people who came to the district forum had attended the workshop. The planners agreed at their evaluation meeting that conducting training in people’s first language proved very helpful. At the district forum, the people who had participated in the training seemed to be comfortable expressing opinions, asking questions, and generally speaking with school administrators. It seemed important for parents to realize they were part of something larger and that there were other parents who also cared about the issues and were willing to work for change.

Conclusion
Neighborhood/community organizing is the practice of developing and nurturing civic involvement. Organizers use techniques and skills to bring people together around issues that affect their personal lives and their community. Although these case studies represent quite different neighborhoods, all the organizers successfully faced the challenge of how to get new people involved. The details of each project reflect similar techniques that were key to their success and that can be replicated in other situations as well.

First, because relationships are critical in working with people, when an organizer lacked relationships with particular community members essential to an organization’s work, the organizers used their existing networks and collaborated with other organizations, organizers, or community leaders that had relationships with those essential members. When the three north Minneapolis neighborhood associations collaborated with the Southeast Asian Community Council to form NMSEAI, for example, the trust and relationships that had previously been established were critical to getting people involved.

Second, cultural differences were respected. For example, the neighborhood organizations respected what SEACC brought to the partnership and followed SEACC’s lead to involve Hmong community residents. When people with limited English skills were asked to participate, interpreters were always provided. Organizers had interpreters present for meetings even when they were not certain they would be needed. This cultural sensitivity extended to providing culturally appropriate refreshments, childcare, or transportation when appropriate. In short, successful organizers did everything they could to make everyone feel welcome and comfortable when they participated.

Third, organizers are communicators who rely on a wide range of methods to communicate with citizens, including public service announcements, flyers, posters, newspapers, letters, e-mails, door-knocking, and phone calls. They collect names of stakeholders using sign-in sheets, partner networks, organizational mailing lists, and contact lists obtained from related organizations. For the LRT project, the LCC staff successfully used a volunteer sign-up form to identify participants willing to distribute flyers four times a year, while the organizer in the Humphrey Job Corps project had 12 “point persons” to assist with communication. This range of communication methods is the very essence of the creative resourcefulness that typifies successful organizers. No single method was ever relied on to bring out people for a public meeting.

Finally, each of these projects was successful at connecting people with each other. Neighbors were brought together and then worked through their differing concerns to arrive at some consensus on issues. Participants were taught how to take many different concerns and find at least one common, specific issue on which they could agree and act together. Then, organizers helped to connect participants to the appropriate policy makers, such as government staff or elected officials, for the purpose of influencing decision making. Hmong residents on the North Side were connected to the mayor and to the chief of police; Longfellow residents were connected to city council members and transit authorities on the LRT issue; Como Park neighbors were connected to the mayor of St. Paul, Congressional leaders, and the U.S. Secretary of Labor; and West Side St. Paul residents were connected to St. Paul School District officials.

In summary, organizers deliberately teach people the skills that are required for civic engagement. None of these case studies demonstrated this as explicitly as the case of the school choice organizers. Their pre-forum workshop curriculum was designed to teach the concept of how public issues arise from private ones. Other organizers relied entirely on teaching these skills experimentally through talking and interacting with public officials—for example, by hosting forums with city officials as NMSEAI did. People’s confidence that their newly acquired skills could make a difference was increased because all these projects ended with some measure of success for the people involved. Each project is living proof that people do want to be involved in making their communities better places to live. As these case studies illustrate, the organizer’s craft is empowering people to learn that their concerns are valid and that, together with their neighbors, they can make a difference.

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