Twin Cities neighborhood organizations are struggling to involve diverse residents, while at the same time dealing with shrinking resources. CURA initiated the Neighborhood Partnership Initiative (NPI) program in 2007 to support collaborations between neighborhood organizations and other local nonprofits. The NPI program, which is funded by the McKnight Foundation, provides grants up to $10,000 to innovative partnerships between neighborhood organizations and organizations that focus on the arts, immigrants/people of color, and youth.

The program seeks to increase and strengthen the involvement of underrepresented community members in Twin Cities neighborhood organizations and revitalization. During the last three years, CURA has funded 35 NPI projects (Figure 1). The success that NPI has had underscores the value of seeding partnerships between community organizations to broaden community involvement and leverage the resources and experience of the community. As one Minneapolis neighborhood association community organizer recently observed, by funding projects with specific objectives, NPI contributes to creating organizational collaborations.
that can continue to serve the neighborhood:

We weren’t doing anything together before… [W]e weren’t taking advantage of our relationship. It seemed like there were ways we could work together that would be more beneficial to both of us. [Since collaborating on a Neighborhood Partnership Initiative project] we are continually creating new ways of doing things with what we have, and collaborating together. It’s hard to stay in touch when you don’t have specific objectives, and collaborative projects aren’t possible without the funding and the focus.

—Sarah Scott, Lyndale Neighborhood Association

The NPI program builds on the Bridging Communities program that CURA administered with funding from the City of Minneapolis Community Planning and Economic Development to increase the capacity of neighborhood groups for outreach to and the involvement of new immigrants and non-English-speaking residents. The Bridging Communities program, which operated in 2007, demonstrated the value of providing funding to support neighborhood organizations to reach out to new community residents and engage them. Seven community projects were funded for up to $5,000 each. Neighborhood organizations developed stronger connections and understanding of issues important to “New American” residents. One result was greater participation of immigrant residents in identifying issues, serving on committees, and—in one case—serving on the neighborhood board of directors.

For more than 30 years, the cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul have contracted with neighborhood citizen-participation organizations (called district councils in St. Paul) to gather resident and business input for city plans and projects affecting their communities. With the inception of the Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program in the early 1990s, every Minneapolis neighborhood receives long-term funding from the city to implement neighborhood-created revitalization plans.

The outreach and issue-organizing activities of neighborhood organizations have declined in recent years, due to both the organizations’ increased citizen-review and revitalization-program administrative responsibilities and declining local-government and private-foundation funding. However, the ability of neighborhood-based organizations to engage and mobilize community members around issues important to the community is an indication of their strength and purpose. Many neighborhood organizations were formed as a result of successful issue campaigns. Broad engagement of the community demonstrates the legitimacy and influence of neighborhood organizations.

The need for neighborhood organizations to broaden outreach and resident involvement is underscored by the growing diversity of residents in many neighborhoods. Minneapolis and St. Paul’s foreign-born population increased by 127% during the 1990s. According to the American Community Survey, a total of 210,344 foreign-born residents lived in the Twin Cities metropolitan area in 2000, representing 7.1% of the total population. The foreign-born population had increased 41% by 2009, when it represented 9.1% of the metro area population. The population of the Twin Cities is expected to become increasingly diverse during the next 25 years. According to a report from the Minnesota State Demographic Center, the nonwhite and Latino population in the Twin Cities metropolitan area is projected to grow from 19% in 2005 to nearly 33% in 2035.

To support neighborhood organizations in efforts to increase their outreach to and the involvement of underrepresented residents, CURA designed the NPI program to fund innovative partnerships to leverage assets among organizations. In addition to providing grants for innovative projects, CURA provides technical assistance and workshops to help organizations learn from other NPI partners. This article describes the principles of the NPI program and presents examples of several successful NPI projects.

How NPI Works

The Neighborhood Partnership Initiative provides financial support for neighborhood organizations to collaborate with other organizations to build connections with underrepresented constituencies and work together on shared objectives. The organizations must decide on a project and submit an application jointly to ensure that projects are not one-sided.

When applying, the organizations include a description of the collaborative project and how the partner organizations will involve the underrepresented constituency—youth, immigrants, and/or people of color. It is important that the project address an issue that is significant both to the community and to the underrepresented constituency to whom the organizations have chosen to reach out. Partner organizations are expected to identify innovative project ideas that will achieve something they could not do alone, without a partner organization. In addition, projects are expected to be not only innovative and relevant to the community, but also sustainable, so that the work can extend beyond the initial round of funding.

A committee consisting of CURA staff and representatives from neighborhood groups reviews applications three times a year and awards successful applicants $10,000 for full NPI grants and $2,500 for summer “mini-NPI” grants. The committee looks for projects that: organize constituencies around issues important to them; clearly define the collaboration and the respective roles of the partners; lead to the engagement of underrepresented community members in the life and leadership of the neighborhood; and contribute to the achievement of goals for the betterment of the neighborhood.

Both before applications are submitted and after grants are awarded, CURA plays an active role in supporting community organizations who apply to the NPI program. Staff members are available to consult with community organizations to discuss project ideas, help identify potential partner organizations, brainstorm about community-outreach best practices, and whatever else applicants require to submit an application. CURA also hosts occasional NPI events. These gatherings help to educate community organizations about the purpose of NPI, highlight NPI projects that have been funded in the past, and provide workshops and
networking time. Staff from community organizations can get ideas about what may be possible with an NPI grant and gain feedback about potential projects and appropriate partner agencies. After NPI grants are awarded, CURA provides support through preproject work-plan meetings, periodic check-ins during the project, and a formal consultation after projects are completed.

**Why NPI Works: Examples of NPI Projects**

Since 2008, NPI has received 96 applications involving 166 organizations, and has awarded almost $289,000 to support 35 projects (Table 1). Although the projects are all unique, some common themes have emerged, including empowering and organizing youth to become more involved with and tied to their communities (25 of the 35 funded NPI projects involve youth); working with immigrant groups and their unique interests and skills to build community; and using art as a way to attract and organize various community members (Table 2). The following three examples of successful NPI projects illustrate what can result when community organizations partner to work with underrepresented populations toward a common goal.

**Lyndale Neighborhood Association and the Youth Farm and Market Project.** The Lyndale Neighborhood Association and the Youth Farm and Market Project partnered to empower and organize youth as well as immigrant groups. The Lyndale Neighborhood Association (LNA), located in south Minneapolis, is a resident-run organization that builds community by improving neighborhood safety and stability, and increasing residents’ and institutions’ ownership and investment in the neighborhood. The Lyndale Neighborhood Association applied for NPI grant money with the Youth Farm and Market Project (hereafter referred to as Youth Farm), another organization located in south Minneapolis that supports relationships between urban youth and their families, communities, and the earth by growing, cooking, eating, and selling healthy food.

LNA and Youth Farm partnered to address public-safety issues in their target area—Lake Street to 33rd Street and Blaisdell Avenue to Pleasant Avenue. This area is home to large populations of Spanish- and Somali-speaking people, and was chosen because of...
In addition, one of their youth staff had been attacked close to the gardens. Working together, LNA and Youth Farm identified two community gardens run by Youth Farm as sites to address the safety issues. These sites would serve as spaces to hold events and volunteer opportunities, as well as visible areas for neighbors to gather. They hoped that by connecting neighbors to LNA, the Minneapolis Police Department, and each other by building on Youth Farm’s connections to the neighborhood, trust would increase and the target area would be safer due to increased reporting to police and greater neighborhood vigilance.

The events in the gardens, as well as some events held at large apartment buildings, allowed LNA and Youth Farm to speak with neighbors they had never reached out to before. As one LNA staff person said:

One of the most difficult things is bringing people together with different backgrounds. There is a very divided sense of place and space. [Providing] multiple opportunities for people to get together to break down barriers is important.

Along with getting residents to meet each other, the events in the gardens and at apartment buildings also provided a way to educate them about the Minneapolis Police and their role as community partners, rather than law enforcers who should be feared. The neighbors came away with better impressions of the police and were not as afraid to contact them. More frequent neighborhood reporting of criminal activity to police has been invaluable to Youth Farm and LNA, and has helped alleviate some of the violence and illegal activity around the Youth Farm sites.

Another important outcome from this project is that a woman who worked at a local group home in the Lake Street and Pillsbury Avenue area and who came to every LNA/Youth Farm outreach event was nominated for a position on the LNA board by a Youth Farm staff person. LNA had been trying unsuccessfully to get more involvement from neighbors in that area. She was ultimately elected and now participates actively in LNA activities. LNA and Youth Farm staff reported that this woman had been looking for her niche in neighborhood activities and had not found it until she attended the events at the gardens. In addition, LNA recruited a block-club leader through an event in a community garden, and a group of Latino women and Somali residents was recruited to work on cultural celebrations facilitated by LNA.

Staff members from LNA and Youth Farm were enthusiastic about the project and felt that their efforts had several positive outcomes: a strong bond was developed between the two organizations, which continues to serve them well in better addressing the surrounding neighborhood’s issues and needs; and they were able to leverage each organization’s attributes—LNA’s ability to organize and hold events, and Youth Farm’s connection to youth and their families in the target population. They joined forces to address community safety in areas that are central to the neighbors—the community gardens.

**Hawthorne Area Community Council, Juxtaposition Arts, Kwanzaa Community Church, Northside Arts Collective, Avenues for Homeless Youth, and Homewood Studios.** This project involved several community partners and is an example of an NPI project that empowered and organized youth, and used art as a way to attract and organize community members. The project idea was developed through the Great Idea Exchange, an event organized by Juxtaposition Arts, the University of Minnesota’s College of Design, and CURA to showcase “great ideas” developed by North Minneapolis community organizations for improving life in the neighborhood through community art. Community youth and arts organizations collaborated on project ideas. Ten collaborations presented their “great ideas” to the community through posters displayed at a local coffee shop. The public was invited to view the proposals and vote for the idea they felt would make a difference in the community, and CURA agreed to fund the winning project through the NPI program. Kwanzaa Community Church’s Sidewalks Saving Lives project received the

### Table 2. Organizations Involved in Northside Partnership Initiative Projects, 2008–2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of organization</th>
<th>Number of funded projects that included this type of organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Immigrant organizations</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth organizations</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Some organizations were counted twice because they serve multiple constituencies.
most votes from community members and was awarded funding. The Sidewalks Saving Lives project brought together a multifaceted collaboration of organizations that had not previously worked together: Hawthorne Area Community Council, Juxtaposition Arts, Kwanzaa Community Church, Northside Arts Collective, Avenues for Homeless Youth, and Homewood Studios. Each organization brought its constituency and expertise to the project.

Juxtaposition Arts is a nonprofit visual arts and cultural center that hosts year-round youth programs. The programs are free and support urban expression, independent livelihood, community development, and social justice through the arts. Kwanzaa Community Church (Kwanzaa) is the first and only African American Presbyterian church in Minnesota. The congregation works toward community, justice, social change, and empowerment for the families in its area and practices community engagement ministry. Hawthorne Area Community Council (HACC) is a nonprofit neighborhood organization for the area bounded by the Mississippi River to the east, Emerson Avenue to the west, Broadway Avenue to the south and Lowry Avenue to the north. HACC addresses social and economic needs of residents of the Hawthorne neighborhood. These three organizations were the lead partners in this project. Other partners were the Northside Arts Collective, which enriches and advances the Northside community through the arts; Avenues for Homeless Youth, which provides emergency shelter, short-term housing, and support services for homeless youth in a safe and nurturing environment; and Homewood Studios, an artists’ workspace and gallery/meeting space in North Minneapolis.

The goal of the Sidewalks Saving Lives project was to use art to create an intergenerational public-health campaign designed to reduce the HIV/AIDS epidemic in North Minneapolis, with an emphasis on the African American community. North Minneapolis has one of the highest rates of HIV/AIDS in the country, and the rate of HIV/AIDS infections among its youth is increasing.

Reverend Alika Galloway with Kwanzaa Community Church said the idea for the sidewalk art about HIV/AIDS awareness came to her in the shower. She explained:

I have a calling to HIV/AIDS ministry. The charter for our church was intentionally designed for community engagement. I had been doing a lot of research on how to engage the community in the issues around HIV/AIDS. And then in my mind it all came together and I saw sidewalks painted with HIV/AIDS messages.

The project was a one-day community event held in September 2008. Project staff organized teams of youth, assisted by professional artists, to create 10 sidewalk murals with HIV/AIDS prevention messages in the Northside neighborhoods. A total of 90 youth painters showed up, along with others from the community who wanted to join in the activity. The active involvement of youth in the creation and execution of the murals helped ensure that the sidewalk murals communicated to youth.

A kick-off event started the day, and then the artists dispersed to their sidewalk sites to paint the murals. Community members visited the artists as they worked. A lunch was held midday with food donated by local businesses. To complement the murals, project staff made HIV/AIDS education information available. By the end of the day, all 10 sidewalk murals were completed. The day concluded with a block party, with food and performances. “We wanted to do public art and do it with regular people and do it in just one day,” said Satoko Muratake, Juxtaposition Arts’ managing director (who, as a University graduate student, worked with the organization during an earlier grant from CURA). “That way the community would see the results right away.”

Although the six community organizations struggled with this project at times—mostly because of the large number of partners and the various roles of each individual organization—it was a successful project. The community organizations trained 100 people as HIV/AIDS educators and installed 10 different murals in 10 different Northside neighborhoods. The project brought together many different types of people and community organizations, and they all worked toward a common goal of eliminating HIV/AIDS in their community.

Kwanzaa Community Church and Juxtaposition Arts have continued to work together on other projects. Kwanzaa initiated further research, with support from CURA, to investigate factors that contribute to the disproportionate rate of HIV/AIDS among African American residents in North Minneapolis. In addition, by the end of 2010, Kwanzaa plans to open Northside Women’s Space at the church, a drop-in center providing services and support for prostituted women, who are especially vulnerable to HIV/AIDS (see Lauren Martin’s article on page 12 of this issue). The drop-in space will involve numerous partnerships and collaborations, including PRIDE and Breaking Free (two nationally recognized organizations working with prostituted women), the University of Minnesota Physicians’ Clinic on Broadway, the Minnesota Department of Health, NorthPoint Health and Wellness Center, and African American Family Services.

Summit-University Planning Council and Lao Family Community of Minnesota, Inc. Two organizations, the Summit-University Planning Council and the Lao Family Community of Minnesota, Inc., came together to partner on a project that involved working with an immigrant group to build community. The Summit-University Planning Council (SUPC) is the district planning council for District 8, which covers the Summit-University neighborhood. It acts as a liaison between the community and the City of St. Paul, providing a way for residents to voice concerns about the community. The council also forms block clubs and organizes crime-prevention activities. Lao Family Community of Minnesota, Inc. (Lao Family) is a nonprofit mutual-assistance association founded in 1977 by Hmong refugees. Located on University Avenue in St. Paul, Lao Family works to empower Hmong families to be successful in American society while preserving their traditions, values, and heritage. Its services include English education, employment assistance, chemical-health support, and youth and family programs.

Lao Family staff attended a CURA NPI event at the University of Minnesota, where they heard about the NPI grant. The director of Lao Family wanted to apply for the grant money to expand its network into the area surrounding its building and thought that SUPC would be a good partner because of its close ties to the Summit-University area. More specifically, Lao Family was increasingly aware of tensions between Hmong
neighbors and non-Hmong neighbors, and wanted the non-Hmong neighbors in District 8 to know actual Hmong people, not just what the media reports.

The NPI project proposal was for a Hmong youth outreach/organizing project that would help Hmong families get involved in and integrated with their neighborhood through their children. Initially, SUPC and Lao Family had planned to hire and share a part-time Hmong community organizer to recruit and develop Hmong youth leaders to serve on SUPC committees, hold monthly community forums at Lao Family, and create an “organizing toolkit” for working with Hmong communities. Ultimately, the project became less youth-focused, and SUPC and Lao Family reconfigured their project through a collaboration with Minnesota state representative Cy Thao, who lived close to the Lao Family building.

Representative Thao, who is Hmong, had come to SUPC for assistance in organizing the blocks in his neighborhood. Hmong neighbors had been contacting him about their concerns with neighborhood crime and wanted help with addressing the problems. Upon Thao’s contact with SUPC, SUPC staff contacted Lao Family to reconfigure their NPI project.

The partners’ first step was holding a series of meetings at Thao’s home and the Lao Family building. Over the course of these meetings with Thao, the number of Hmong households attending increased. Eventually six households within a two-block span were attending meetings and discussing their concerns with SUPC, Lao Family, and Thao. Police officers came to speak to neighbors about safety and to demonstrate their commitment to working with the Hmong community. This interaction was a breakthrough for both SUPC and Lao Family, because SUPC had struggled to involve the Hmong community in its neighborhood-safety efforts, and Lao Family had been hearing Hmong families’ concerns about neighborhood safety. The police were able to convince the families that their purpose is to work with the community, and that if they had concerns to report, their identity would be kept anonymous.

After several meetings held by SUPC and Lao Family, residents formed a block club. Previously, SUPC had not been successful in developing a block club in the neighborhood around Lao Family, but with the involvement from Lao Family and the support of Thao, neighbors saw the value in organizing together. They have held cookouts and meetings, and now have open communication with both the police and local government. The SUPC staff reported that their organization never understood that, traditionally, Hmong people are not used to interacting with their government. Lao Family clarified that it is not commonly understood among Hmong families that they can make a difference in their neighborhood by working with police and government. The Summit-University Planning Council expects more block clubs to develop in this neighborhood, because another Hmong man a few blocks over has expressed interest in leading a similar effort, and Lao Family is ready to support him and duplicate what was accomplished with the first block club.

Lao Family reported that, after working with SUPC, it is easier to network with other community organizations. As the director put it, “This grant had us open our door and go out into the community.” Another side benefit to this project was that Lao Family was placed on the ballot for membership on the SUPC board. Although it was not chosen as one of five organizations on the board, it lost by a very narrow margin. Lao Family had never even been on the ballot.
before, and the SUPC director expects that it would most likely be elected next year. In addition to Lao Family being considered for a membership on the SUPC board, Lao Family invited SUPC to be on its board. Both organizations and their staff found themselves stepping out of their usual work for this project, and were rewarded with increased involvement from Hmong families in District 8, particularly around the Lao Family building. As the Lao Family director said, “With partnering, ten hands are better than one. With even just one partner you can go much further [in your work as an organization].”

Lessons Learned and Best Practices
The projects above illustrate how many of the NPI projects were developed and implemented. Most NPI projects were a catalyst that led to a sustained partnership between community organizations. This is the ultimate goal of NPI—to support community organizations to work together and engage underrepresented constituencies in a meaningful and sustainable way. Each project may achieve this goal or at least make steps toward this goal, but funding alone is not enough to be successful. The NPI projects also require substantial dedication and hard work from each community partner.

The CURA staff who have been involved with the NPI program have identified several lessons to be learned from the hard work of NPI grantees:

- **Be strategic.** Perhaps the most important step when beginning a collaborative project is the prework of planning and relationship building. Because many NPI projects involved organizations that had not previously worked together, it was necessary to spend time clarifying what each organization brought to the project and defining the role it would play. This groundwork leads to more successful and sustainable partnerships. Projects can be initiated in many ways—by one of the partners, by the partners identifying their project together, or by constituent groups who bring issues to the neighborhood organizations. No matter how a partnership begins, partner organizations should have a clearly defined and achievable goal. Ideally, each partner has equal stake in the project. The responsibilities should be complementary to ensure effective project implementation. Developing a written work plan with realistic timelines and goals ensures clarity of roles and responsibilities. The work plan should be used throughout the project and amended as needed to ensure the commitment of all partners.

- **Be flexible.** Sometimes a project hits an obstacle or dead end and, if partner organizations are flexible, they can revisit their work plan and original goals to change gears and work toward a different or modified end goal.

- **Be in constant contact.** Regular face-to-face meetings ensure open and ongoing communication. It is helpful to designate representatives from each of the partner organizations to facilitate communication.

- **Be open.** Although some issues will inevitably arise during the project, organizations that respect each other's strengths and shortcomings are able to address issues and change gears when necessary.

- **Be consultative.** CURA is a great resource for community organizations during implementation. Staff at CURA can consult with organizations on projects and help examine or re-evaluate goals with partners. They can also provide a neutral, third-party perspective, which can be helpful.

- **Be sustainable.** A formal debriefing between the partner organizations at the conclusion of the project provides an opportunity to reflect on the experience of the partners, the project’s effectiveness, and how the organizations can capitalize on their relationship and experience to work together in the future. In addition, CURA NPI events provide an opportunity for NPI participants to share their experiences and learn from one another.

**Conclusion**
With ongoing funding challenges for community initiatives, collaborative projects are an effective way to leverage organizational strengths and constituencies to increase participation in neighborhood-revitalization efforts, especially to increase the involvement of underrepresented residents. The NPI projects have produced some great results for community organizations—both short-term and long-term. Many grantees reported success with reaching out to underrepresented constituencies, something that many had struggled with in the past. Many saw immediate results with these communities in their willingness to engage with the organizations and their work. The organizations also found great value in the long-term benefit of the social capital formed with their partner organizations.

CURA plans to continue the NPI program in 2011 and 2012, contingent on funding. To better ensure the increased involvement of youth, immigrants, and people of color, some program guidelines will be changed. These changes include a focus on effective partnerships that use place-based organizing and broadening eligible project partners to include any resident-driven organization focused on a neighborhood-level geography. A letter of inquiry may also be instituted to give organizations an opportunity to develop a greater relationship before submitting a project proposal. More information about the NPI program, application guidelines, and deadlines for future awards can be found at www.cura.umn.edu/NPI.php.

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