

Asset-Based Community Engagement
in Higher Education

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Residents and Local Groups Organize to Reduce Health Disparities in Westwood

Rachel Cleaves and Carolyn McAndrews, University of Colorado Denver, and Mike Green, ABCD trainer

Westwood is a neighborhood on the west side of Denver, Colorado with approximately 15,800 residents. Westwood's residents have high rates of overweight and obesity, and limited access to healthy foods and opportunities for exercise compared to residents of most other neighborhoods in Denver.

The problem that Westwood's residents address through Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) is overcoming health disparities. To do this, residents of Westwood have organized around poverty, community and civic engagement, and cultural identity as social determinants of health, in addition to the neighborhood's environmental factors.

Westwood is predominantly Latino, with 76 percent of residents of Latino descent. The poverty rate in Westwood is 24 percent, which is among the highest in Denver. In 2007, Westwood's foreclosure rate was the highest in Colorado. Twenty-five percent of residents are non-English speakers. The neighborhood also has a large immigrant population; 60 percent of births are to foreign mothers. Of the 3,500 voting-age residents in the community, only 700 are registered to vote.

Individuals and organizations in Westwood started working on the health initiative in 2008, when LiveWell Colorado, a non-profit organization, selected Westwood as the recipient of a 9-year, 1.2 million dollar grant to reduce and prevent obesity through community engagement, policy, and environmental change. The partnership that formed between the neighborhood and LiveWell Colorado is called LiveWell Westwood, and the Colorado Center for Community Development (CCCD) at the University of Colorado Denver is the lead agency of LiveWell Westwood. LiveWell Westwood is the organization that links the University and the community in this ABCD-based relationship.

In 2012, the engagement between LiveWell Westwood and community partners expanded when two local organizations, the Denver Foundation (DF) and Urban Land Conservancy (ULC),

began a resident-centered planning process to develop land in Westwood for civic purposes.

DF and ULC sought on-the-ground organizers to determine what types of developments residents desired. LiveWell Westwood's Community Connectors began to work with DF and ULC to do the organizing, and DF's consultant, Mike Green, began to provide technical assistance in ABCD and coaching for the Community Connectors. Coaching involves training residents to lead meetings, recruit other neighbors to become involved, become advocates who engage with elected officials and government staff, conduct research, and develop a path to achieve their own goals for personal development.

As these organizations collaborated on coaching the Community Connectors, the scope of their work together grew. At this time, the partnership explicitly decided to model the approach on ABCD principles. They strengthened a partnership of local residents and organizations, which became a new organization, Westwood Unidos. The purpose of Westwood Unidos is to bring together residents and organizations to work in a resident-centered, asset-based way to improve health and quality of life in Westwood. LiveWell Westwood contributed approximately \$50,000 and DF and ULC contributed \$25,000 each to Westwood Unidos for staffing, meeting expenses, interpretation, and mini-grants. With part of that funding, the Community Connectors were able to increase the time they spent listening to other residents, discovering what residents thought would help their community be healthier, and motivating residents to act upon their ideas. The Community Connectors are one of the main ways that Westwood Unidos identifies local assets.

To address the priorities residents identified, Westwood Unidos created Action Committees, including Training and Community Center, Built Environment, Food Access, and Safety. Working closely with the Community Connectors, these Action Committees build on local assets by creating a constituency of neighbors and organizations, developing leadership, listening for direction about what is important in the community, and organizing to take action on these issues. Additional local non-profits (e.g., BuCu West, Extreme Community Makeover, and Revision International) that

operate in a resident-centered way have become partners with Westwood Unidos and specific Action Committees.

The Action Committees have created a community and education center run by residents, a training program for residents to become certified Zumba instructors (who are offering 63 classes per week in thirteen locations in and around Westwood), an initiative to turn alleys in the neighborhood into safe and useful spaces, and an extensive network of backyard gardeners who receive the training, tools, and materials they need to grow food in their backyards.

Through our experience with this university-community partnership we have learned that they are a good starting point, but not an ideal organizational form in the long run. The new organization, Westwood Unidos, has been stronger in balancing decision-making across a larger group and helping create equality across residents, local organizations, staff members of the university, and other non-local organizations. Often, people in under-served communities do not expect to be treated as equal partners by organizations or to be involved in decision-making. It was important to create an organization to formalize this equality because it is only through special arrangements that residents in a low-income community have an authentic partnership with powerful government, non-profit, and business organizations and institutions. A true partnership is built on equal and shared power. Special practices, such as with Westwood Unidos, support residents to have more voice and more power, as institutions "lead by stepping back," being willing to share power, decision making, and control of resources.

To achieve this, we first needed to build trusting relationships with residents, which was not a surprise, but has been crucial. Then, we needed to create a value system and by-laws within the organization to codify the resident-centered, asset-based approach.

It was also important to put resources (both staff and financial resources) into developing the resident-centered organization. This included providing training and creating opportunities for residents to take the lead by working to increase resident involvement. Residents become leaders in advocating for change in ways that are often new to them. They meet with elected officials and city staff, research issues that affect their lives, manage budgets, run community meetings, and increase the involvement of organizations

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and residents in their communities. As an organization, LiveWell Westwood provided initial trainings for residents to strengthen their roles in each of these areas, and provided initial opportunities for residents to put what they learn into practice. Working with Westwood Unidos extended leadership opportunities such that they are no longer tied to university involvement.

We have also experienced a weak connection between residents and the knowledge that is held by universities and cities. There is a tremendous amount of research capacity available, particularly on issues of health disparities, obesity, and physical activity, but residents seldom have access to this. When residents become more expert in the technical aspects of city planning, transportation, health, and education, they become more equal partners on issues that are traditionally framed as technical in nature. The Westwood Unidos Action Committees have created resident-led opportunities for residents to take the lead in identifying solutions by conducting research outside of the university setting. A next step is to link the local production of knowledge to traditional scholarship.

We find that governments and other organizations also benefit from learning how to operate in a resident-centered way. The opportunity for the organizations that are working in Westwood to learn from Mike Green, a leader in the field of Asset-Based Community Development, has been critical in this respect. Mike has worked closely with the organizations' staff, both Executive and the Community Connectors, to examine areas where residents can take leadership roles and have more ownership of the project.

We are still learning many things. One such gap is how to do a resident-centered evaluation. Another is how to best measure increased collective efficacy. Our aim for doing a resident-centered evaluation is to learn together and apply that knowledge together and we are developing ways to create and institutionalize meaningful evaluation methods. We are currently measuring: How many residents are attending meetings? How many residents are leading meetings? What are residents' goals, and are they being achieved? Is the initiative sustainable?

We have seen within LiveWell Westwood's own work that ABCD approaches have been more effective than approaches that were not really ABCD. In instances when LiveWell Westwood has

had an idea and implemented it without putting residents in the lead, it has underperformed. For example, a garden in a local elementary school has been successful, but it remains dependent on LiveWell Westwood funding, as do the Walk to School programs. In both of these cases, the programs were catalyzed by interest from the funders rather than the community. With a stronger ABCD approach these programs would likely be more independent.

Students at the University of Colorado Denver have been a valuable resource in the implementation of Westwood Unidos, and contribute to the initiative through paid positions and as part of their coursework. Consistently, students report that their internships with LiveWell Westwood are among the most valuable learning opportunities in their educational programs and one of the most desirable internships available on campus because it is an opportunity to receive real-world experience in community development. LiveWell Westwood is a way that the University strives to serve the Denver community, fulfill its service mandate, and continuously improve and strengthen community relations.

Authors

Rachel Cleaves is the LiveWell Westwood Coordinator for the Colorado Center for Community Development at the University of Colorado Denver. She focuses on public health and community development initiatives, and in 2012 her work with LiveWell Westwood was recognized with an award from the American Planning Association (APA) Colorado.

Mike Green offers ABCD training, focusing on the practical implementation of ABCD principles. He was the training director of the ABCD Institute's Neighborhood Circle for four years, and is the co-author of a book about ABCD implementation for successful community partnerships, *When People Care Enough to Act: ABCD in Action*.

Carolyn McAndrews is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Planning and Design at the University of Colorado Denver. Her research focuses on how transportation and land use planning can help reduce health disparities, and the need for community engagement in these areas to lead institutional and policy change.