

Chapter 11. Neighborhood Restoration

Overview

Neighborhood restoration is the fourth major component of Weed and Seed. It focuses on revitalizing designated neighborhoods by leveraging local, state, tribal, and federal resources. Restoring a community can be a complex and long-term process. This chapter highlights the steps needed to implement a neighborhood restoration plan that encourages the leveraging of key resources at all levels to maximize their impact on the designated area.

Vision

Everyone wants to live in a community that has all the amenities—safe parks, grocery stores, schools, thriving businesses, homes, entertainment, and medical services. When communities experience a loss in the tax base, it is often because of deteriorating conditions such as business closings, a shift away from home ownership, negative changes in the quality of medical and social services, unkempt parks, and increased prices for basic necessities in local stores.

Communities that suffer from any of these conditions can be revitalized. Neighborhood restoration is about much more than physical buildings—it is about restoring the human capital in a neighborhood by providing tools to help residents secure livable-wage employment, start new and thriving businesses, increase the stock of affordable housing, and increase the number of homeowners. It recognizes the needs of both the young and the not so young. Youth activities in safe parks, senior housing and services, and increased medical and social services treat many community ills.

Imagine a community that provides access to local city services in strip malls (e.g., postal services and Social Security and employment offices). A competitive grocery store that offers quality food at affordable prices is often high on residents' wish lists. They would also like to have clean streets with bright lights that deter crime. The neighborhood would benefit if businesses that have been operating from homes without proper licenses would open their doors in storefronts or malls in the community. A popular idea is to develop programs that encourage residents to save their money and that provide matching funds they can use to buy a new home, start a business, or complete an education. Training programs that provide residents with increased technology skills would enable them to secure higher paying jobs. Some programs could help residents correct their credit problems and prepare them for owning their own homes.

Neighborhood restoration efforts should help rid the community of crime, improve relations between residents and police, and provide residents with programs and services that prevent, intervene, or treat problems of youth, adults, and families. That work lays the foundation for community restoration. Any effort to rid a community of negative elements brings positive resources and the physical assets needed to revitalize the community. Changes in population, economic or physical conditions, social attitudes, and business patterns all affect communities in complex ways. Many such changes are dictated by decisions made at the local government level—which is why Weed and Seed is an ideal strategy for improving neighborhoods in distress. Working in collaboration with local,

state, and federal government agencies, Weed and Seed brings community stakeholders together to leverage their collective resources and achieve the restoration goals for the Weed and Seed neighborhood.

The initial Weed and Seed strategy that results from analyzing needs and available resources provides a safer, more stable community environment that can promote restoration. Of the four major Weed and Seed components, neighborhood restoration offers residents the opportunity to actually see improvements in their community. It does more than just inject new programs into a community. Neighborhood restoration is self-defining: The process originates from and is sustained by the actions and choices of those living and working in the neighborhood. The restoration process should reflect the needs of the entire community, not just the judgment of community representatives on the Steering Committee. Neighborhood restoration must also be viewed as a long-term strategy.

Although certain changes can be made to the physical appearance of a community in a relatively short period of time, restoring a community implies that the whole area will return to its original state. For some locations, though, the strategy involves restoring only certain aspects of a community while developing new components—which moves neighborhood restoration into the arena of comprehensive community development.

This manual does not cover community development in great detail, but it can serve as the cornerstone of effective neighborhood restoration strategies. All communities are in some state of development. Implementing neighborhood restoration strategies is necessary to help a distressed area work toward the vision of community restoration.

Restoring a community begins with a vision of what it might become in the future. The

restoration process begins with taking stock of what in the community can be developed, what can be recruited or secured, and what needs to be replaced by positive, community-benefiting enterprises. This is not an easy task. However, working in incremental steps and building on small accomplishments can end in success. Remember to work from the inside out—if you build strong communities, businesses will come. When businesses come, people become employed, and when they are employed, they begin to create wealth.

Implementation Process

Restoration goals and objectives may have to be revisited after the local Weed and Seed's first-phase strategy is underway to determine if they are appropriate. This review is recommended because initial stabilization efforts may not work exactly as planned, and because restoration strategies do not work in high-crime neighborhoods. Also, the value of any community is determined by the consumers who live there. Although the Steering Committee can identify basic restoration issues with help from the city planning office, specific details and timing should be coordinated with neighborhood residents. For example, demolishing and reconstructing homes, if identified as a priority in the needs assessment, may not be as important to community members as public-private financing to expand the local supermarket. Making restoration plans that contradict community expectations and values can hinder the process and undermine stabilization efforts. Restoration designed without resident input can produce negative effects within the community and unintentionally accelerate decline.

As you begin to think about your plan, keep in mind the KISS principle (Keep It Simple Silly). Steering Committee members are not community development experts, and it would be unrealistic to try to execute massive projects without

sufficient expertise on board. In addition, neighborhood restoration is one of the components of Weed and Seed that allows residents to actively participate in the transformation of their community through low-cost or no-cost activities. Remember, a team effort is necessary to bring about community change. Weed and Seed does not have to be solely responsible for everything. Although many people may want a new shopping center in their community, this should not be a top goal for Weed and Seed. Support existing community development corporations, which generally have the expertise to carry out these types of projects.

In developing an implementation plan for neighborhood restoration, the following steps should be taken.

Step 1: Create a Subcommittee

The creation of a neighborhood restoration subcommittee is key to involving residents and other community stakeholders in an organized restoration process. Although several local community organizations may exist, they often focus solely on providing a specific service to residents and do not consider how they might all work with each other and leverage their resources. This does not mean that they are not interested. Often, they just need to be brought together to address a common purpose. The subcommittee unites the groups.

The subcommittee could include representatives from the Steering Committee and from community organizations who are not members of the Steering Committee but who have an interest or expertise relevant to neighborhood restoration. Residents are generally interested in this type of committee, as are community development corporations, community action agencies, government agencies, financial institutions, foundations and small businesses.

Make a list of organizations that may be interested in participating on this subcommittee and

contact them. Remember, individuals who agree to serve on the subcommittee should understand that their participation is voluntary and that their organization or agency will not receive funds. Also make sure that subcommittee members have the time to attend meetings. Other members often are frustrated when someone who attends meetings infrequently wants the group to revisit issues that were addressed in past meetings.



How does the subcommittee connect to the Weed and Seed Steering Committee? The Weed and Seed Steering Committee promotes restoration plan development by enlisting professional help for the plan's design, targeting local resources, and soliciting local, state, and federal cooperation.

Step 2: Revisit the Needs Assessment Conducted for the Neighborhood

One of the benefits of conducting a needs assessment is that the priorities identified can be used to formulate goals for each of the four Weed and Seed components. Because much of the assessment may focus on the economic conditions of a target area, this information should serve as a basis for creating neighborhood restoration goals. In a subcommittee planning session, the group may want to examine these issues and to determine what role it can play in addressing each of them.

Step 3. Formulate Goals and Objectives To Be Accomplished

Once the subcommittee has identified issues, it can formulate goals and objectives and focus on how these goals and objectives should be met. Remember that some goals are directed at stabilizing the community and some at restoring it. Subcommittee members must consider activities or tasks that yield both short- and long-term results.

Residents may be frustrated by initiatives that start out strongly but finish poorly; they look for immediate evidence that Weed and Seed is a positive investment in their community. Short-term activities to produce visible results include conducting neighborhood cleanups and allocating special days for graffiti removal—activities that residents can see, participate in, and benefit from.

Long-term neighborhood restoration challenges include asset building, reducing unemployment, encouraging business startups, upgrading the quality of housing stock, and increasing the number of homeowners in the community.

Step 4: Develop Activities To Achieve Goals and Objectives

After formulating goals and objectives, it is time to identify relevant activities that emphasize serving residents. Activities may require a series of partners, both internal and external to the community. Some activities that are popular with Weed and Seed sites include (1) job fairs attended by employers and employment assistance organizations; (2) workshops on starting a business by partnering with the Chamber of Commerce or other business organization; and (3) workshops on financial management and asset building.



Step 5: Secure Approval From the Steering Committee

After the implementation plan is developed, it is submitted to the Steering Committee for approval—an important process because it provides additional opportunities for residents and other stakeholders to provide input on the plan and on how the activities described in the plan complement other Weed and Seed components' activities. Everyone involved with Weed and Seed should understand the implementation plans for all components of the program.

The coordinator is responsible for scheduling activities to ensure minimal duplication of events that target residents for participation. The Steering Committee has ultimate responsibility for monitoring the entire site plan; however, the neighborhood restoration subcommittee is directly responsible for implementing neighborhood restoration activities. The progress of planned activities is reported to the Steering Committee on a regular basis. No component of Weed and Seed is more important than another. Communication between the subcommittee and the Steering Committee not only ensures successful implementation of the Weed and Seed strategy but also permits maximum resources to be applied to each of the planned activities.

Step 6: Adjust the Goals, Objectives, or Activities

After goals and objectives have been formulated and implementation activities have begun, it may be necessary to evaluate and adjust them. When groups formulate their plans, they often tend to be overly ambitious. The time required to pull new initiatives together may be underestimated, or unforeseen challenges may arise that hamper the progress of certain activities. Initial goals may turn out to conflict with other community activities, or the support needed from local organizations to achieve these goals may not be forthcoming. Remember that the goals are established for the local community. If Weed and Seed goals appear to conflict with those of other community organizations, try to incorporate these organizations into the Weed and Seed strategy, or revise the goals.

Based on the community needs assessment conducted by the Planning Committee, the site should have a list of issues to be addressed in restoring the neighborhood, which have been identified by community stakeholders. If adjustments to the goals or objectives are needed, revisit the assessment to ensure that the Weed and Seed strategy is working to address these priority issues. Sometimes the goal or objective is fine, but the time needed to implement an activity may have to be extended. Adjustments are acceptable as long as the group remains focused on activities consistent with neighborhood restoration.

Step 7: Evaluate the Neighborhood Restoration Plan

To be effective, some type of planned evaluation must be conducted to determine the effect of the restoration efforts. It is vital for the subcommittee to know whether restoration goals and objectives are appropriate and achievable.

Subcommittee members should monitor two levels of core indicators during the implementation

of key activities. The first level pertains to outcome measures established as part of the overall planning process that relate to the objectives. For example, if an objective includes offering workshops on small business development, two evaluation indicators are the number of workshops offered and the number of people who attended these workshops.

The next level of indicators is broader than the objectives and may take months to fully document. Referring again to the example of the small business workshop, the second-level indicator is the increase in new business startups in the neighborhood. Where would you get information to document the level of business development? The city's department of economic development or the department handling business registration can usually assist in documenting an increase in the number of new businesses.

Core indicators are important because they measure the overall effectiveness of the restoration process, which includes both stabilization activities and restoration activities. You need to document whether the conditions in the community that affect residents are improving and resulting in more residents securing employment, increased capital investment in the area through new businesses, and higher rates of home ownership. Such increases suggest another level of investment in the community.

Specific indicators to consider are—

- **Property values.** The demand for housing increases as overall neighborhood quality improves. As demand increases, value increases.
- **Home or business loans.** Increases in loans indicate higher incomes among applicants, improved physical conditions in the neighborhood, increased confidence in the stability of collateral, and reductions in perceived risk.

- **Building permits.** Increases in building permits usually mean an improvement in the neighborhood. However, they should be analyzed closely because permits to convert single-family housing to multifamily units, for example, may not necessarily indicate community improvement.
- **Property taxes.** A decrease in tax payment delinquencies indicates an increase in incomes and greater community commitment and confidence.
- **Household income.** Although difficult to measure, increases in household income are directly related to neighborhood conditions.
- **Home ownership.** Increases in home ownership mean that the community is improving.

Recap of the Process

- Assemble a diverse team of individuals to serve on the neighborhood restoration subcommittee
- Review the needs assessment completed by the initial Planning Committee.
- Formulate goals, objectives, and activities to be accomplished.
- Submit the neighborhood restoration plan for Steering Committee approval, and ensure neighborhood restoration tasks complement the other components of the Weed and Seed strategy.
- Implement the plan, recognizing that adjustments may be needed over time.
- Establish core indicators, and evaluate the plan on a regular basis.

Implementation Issues

The subcommittee does not have to be directly responsible for the implementation of neighborhood restoration activities. Instead, it can coordinate such activities by already existing organizations that have the appropriate expertise.

Also, if neighborhood residents are not participating in the program, restoration will probably fail. Participation does not mean listening to Weed and Seed updates at the local community center; it means volunteering in activities designed to remove negative influences and create a positive living environment. Expanding volunteers' participation can be difficult, but it can be done. There is no formula for creating an environment that results in effective community participation. Community policing officers can help involve residents because they talk with the residents frequently.

It may be necessary to occasionally reexamine the composition of the subcommittee. As some people lose interest or cannot attend meetings, their positions may need to be filled with new members. Community youth can also play an important role in restoration efforts. Also, if it is not possible to secure the participation of top officials from local organizations, make sure that individuals who do participate have the power or direct access to power to make decisions on behalf of their organizations.

The timing of subcommittee meetings might be an organizational challenge. Although meetings for staff representing organizations might be ideal during the day, the number of employed residents able to attend at that time may be limited. It is important to find the best schedule for everyone.

Planning and managing a successful restoration process is difficult because many of the socio-economic market forces that affect the value of the community cannot be controlled by the Weed and Seed strategy. Keeping a realistic eye

on the time required to restore a neighborhood helps balance expectations for change and results in critical activities, programs, and services that positively affect the lives of residents.