

# Chapter 7. Community Mobilization

## Overview

This chapter focuses on defining community mobilization and incorporating its tactics into the Weed and Seed strategy. Community mobilization is the ongoing process of generating strong stakeholder commitment to revitalization of the designated area by building on a shared vision and common goals. Community mobilization is a key element in successful Weed and Seed implementation at the local level.

## Vision

When asked what they want the community to become, residents respond with clear ideas about their future. Out of these visions come specific goals toward which residents can work. Community mobilization is a tool that residents and other stakeholders can use to facilitate these changes.

The success of Weed and Seed depends in large part on successfully mobilizing residents and stakeholders to support the goals and objectives of the local strategy. Mobilizing residents empowers them, creating more resident leaders, a clear vision of what the community should look like, and greater resident responsibility for positive community changes.

As previously noted, Weed and Seed is not a program; rather, it is a comprehensive strategy that brings all community stakeholders together to effect change. Evidence from many Weed and Seed sites and initiatives of public- and private-sector organizations has shown that residents' involvement and leadership are essential to revitalizing communities.

Although many people associate community mobilization with residents' protests against city hall, it is much more. Often the issue is defined as a problem that can be solved through the collective persistence and responsibility of community stakeholders. Community mobilization in itself does not solve problems, but it brings together interested stakeholders who develop solutions.

Community mobilization can have many positive outcomes. Done correctly, community mobilization can enhance a community in ways that building new structures or refurbishing old ones never can. Healthy communities begin with the residents who live in them. Empowering residents to engage in rebuilding their neighborhoods is critical to promoting healthy communities. In addition to empowering residents, community mobilization can help create a vision for the community that will focus residents' energies. If a Weed and Seed community lacks a positive vision, resources may be redirected to other communities that are mobilized and that articulate their requirements for further development.

Community mobilization also can have a positive impact by helping community-based organizations work collectively to increase their service capacity. Although each small organization can provide only limited services, each can be more effective if it joins with others to leverage their collective resources to meet the community's needs. Community mobilization can greatly facilitate the building of these partnerships.

## Implementation Process

During the preparation of the Official Recognition (OR) application, meetings will be held with community residents to discuss what Weed and Seed is and what it can do for the community. This begins the community mobilization process. Community mobilization and community organizing are often confused and ill defined. Community organizing is generally seen as the broader process that focuses on an issue and promotes change. Community mobilization may be one tactic used to facilitate action. Both community organizing and community mobilization are ongoing, long-term processes that focus on bringing residents together with other stakeholders to take collective and strategic action for change in the community.

Mobilizing residents and other stakeholders at the onset of Weed and Seed is critical; however, the work begins only when the community is designated as a Weed and Seed site. Many residents of distressed communities have feelings of hopelessness after many years of watching programs start and stop, with no permanent change. They often have watched groups secure funding based on neighborhood conditions and then move out of the community. So Weed and



Seed sites may have major challenges to overcome, such as this community hopelessness, before the strategy can be implemented.

Sites should follow several critical steps to develop an implementation plan for community mobilization. The community may have already begun implementing some of them; therefore, sites may be further along in mobilizing the community than they realize.

### Step I: Secure Resident Commitment and Involvement

Community mobilization enlists residents to become involved in and accountable for the planned changes that result from the Weed and Seed strategy. A good indication of residents' commitment to Weed and Seed is their participation on the Steering Committee, subcommittees, and other groups and their involvement in volunteer activities.

To generate resident commitment and involvement, look to the leaders on the Steering Committee. Resident leaders often have community members' respect and a following in their communities. Involve these leaders in recruiting other residents. They can—

- Provide information on Weed and Seed.
- Explain how residents can become involved in Weed and Seed.
- Explore what residents perceive are the critical problems affecting their neighborhoods. (This information will be vital to the community assessment section of the OR application.)
- Engage residents in discussions about how problems can be solved and how residents can be involved in implementing the solutions.

- Use resident leaders to help facilitate meetings. (This will help build trust in the community.)

## **Step 2: Encourage Residents To Help Provide Community Focus**

An important step that must be completed before a site can receive Official Recognition is a community needs assessment. Many community-development practitioners use assessment models that highlight the community's assets rather than its problems. Historically, assessments focused primarily on community needs or problems with the expectation that the resources to solve those problems would come from the outside. Residents were viewed not as contributors to the growth of their community but as recipients of the programs and services offered to solve those problems. Unfortunately, this proved to be a flawed way to examine a community. The current focus of community assessment is to identify all community assets, including the skills of the residents and their interest in the neighborhood.

Community assessments serve as an important tool to help residents learn more about their community or neighborhood. The goal is to get residents to articulate their needs and contribute their skills toward changing the area. By getting residents to help decide on the changes required, the community mobilization process can help expand the base of informed resident leaders.

## **Step 3: Build Community Networks**

Every community has formal and informal networks that connect residents and other stakeholders. Formal networks include neighborhood associations, resident councils, ministerial alliances, tribal councils, social clubs, and business associations. Informal networks include

groups of families that have lived in the community for years and have become the neighborhood spokespersons. These networks are important to community mobilization because they represent a significant source of support for Weed and Seed. One of the easiest ways to build on community networks is to ensure sufficient resident involvement on the Steering Committee. Associations, clubs, and other groups form the basis of a strong community network. Keep track of these networks and their members because they can be a mechanism for informing the community about Weed and Seed.

## **Step 4: Create Resident-Led Leadership Structures**

Resident-led entities, a subset of community networks, serve as ideal resources to help identify key community leaders who possess critical leadership skills. Individuals who are leading or have led organizations such as neighborhood associations or resident councils are strong candidates to help lead the community mobilization efforts behind Weed and Seed. It is important to reach out to these leaders early in the community mobilization process. Typically, they are concerned citizens who can bring residents together for a common cause, such as affordable housing or public safety. If the cause is related to promoting positive change in the community, these leaders must be part of the community mobilization efforts. Remember, strong leaders bring many followers.

## **Step 5: Leverage Internal and External Resources**

Community transformation requires that resources both inside and outside the community be identified and incorporated into a strategy for change. This is the fundamental principle behind Weed and Seed. Community mobilization is mobilizing all types of resources, not just people.

Look outside the community for additional resources that can be leveraged as part of community mobilization efforts, (e.g., youth volunteer agencies from other neighborhoods, faith-based institutions, foundations that provide grants to community organizations, and government programs and services).

### Step 6: Create Additional Communication Vehicles

Community mobilization cannot succeed without strong communication. How the vision, issues, and opportunities are communicated influences the success of the mobilization effort. All forms of communication must consider local languages and dialects in addition to English.

Choose carefully who will communicate verbal messages. If people hear or see information about Weed and Seed but do not recognize anyone involved, the chances of getting mass participation are much more limited.

### More Community Mobilization Tactics

Weed and Seed offers communities the opportunity to achieve their own vision by mobilizing the collective resources of all stakeholders. Focusing on what the community can become, confronting problems or issues, and having committed stakeholders are critical to beginning the process of revitalizing a community. Community change does not happen overnight, particularly in distressed communities. This type of change is a long-term process that can lose its momentum over time if new ideas are not included periodically.



It is important to have a clear focus, whether on a particular problem or a new opportunity. Once the focus is clear, activities can be initiated to involve residents. Remember, residents tend to respond to specific issues or opportunities that are germane to their homes and families. A broad focus may not engage residents. Consider taking smaller steps to bring residents and other stakeholders together.

For example, inviting parents who are concerned about their children to meetings is a first step in finding out why the problems exist, what has worked in the past, what parents believe are viable solutions, and how they would like to get involved. Identify other stakeholders who might want to join the process, such as school officials and police officers. Interested stakeholders should be involved in finding a solution to each issue.

Because community mobilization is not a one-time activity, it is important to think about multiple mobilization tactics that can be integrated into the local Weed and Seed strategy.

Community fairs and similar events are ideal ways to get people into the community, but make sure they help drive some aspect of the strategy. Each activity or event should be linked to a short- or long-term goal. Do not organize mobilization activities with no purpose. This is one of the quickest ways for Weed and Seed to lose its credibility with residents.

Community mobilization is one of the hardest tasks associated with Weed and Seed. As a new initiative in the community, Weed and Seed has to win the confidence of residents before it will secure their support. This takes time, but it can be done.

Weed and Seed sites have used a variety of creative community mobilization tactics. Some of them are listed here:

- Door-to-door campaigns.
- Tribal gatherings such as tribal council meetings, community meetings, and powwows.
- In-house coffees at community centers, police stations, and storefronts.
- Street fairs and festivals.
- Community rallies.
- Promotional materials that highlight Weed and Seed such as T-shirts or water bottles.
- Fliers placed in public facilities and at events in or near the Weed and Seed community.
- Church-based functions such as revivals, church meetings, and concerts.

Community mobilization is an important tool for successfully implementing a local Weed and Seed strategy. As the Steering Committee develops goals and objectives, consider how community mobilization tactics will generate additional resident support. Specifying separate action steps that are designed to build community support goes a long way toward ensuring that Weed and Seed is accepted and integrated into the neighborhood.

If you find you are not generating enough resident support over time, ask the following questions:

- How are we communicating to residents what Weed and Seed is about?



- Did we get feedback from residents about the effectiveness of the message?
- Have we leveraged relationships with key community leaders to help promote Weed and Seed?
- Have we asked why people are not interested in Weed and Seed?
- Are we not addressing other issues confronting the community?
- Are the events we are hosting offered at convenient times for residents?
- Are we expecting too much resident participation too soon?

Although these are tough questions, the answers will provide a clearer sense of what needs to be modified to generate the desired level of support for Weed and Seed.

## Exhibit 7–I. Community Empowerment and Participation

Empowering residents and other stakeholders in the community is vital to the Weed and Seed effort. Community residents must be empowered to take responsibility for promoting positive changes in their neighborhood, with the reinforcement of public- and private-sector resources. By acting collectively with others, residents can mobilize financial and other resources to create change in their community and improve their quality of life.

If Weed and Seed is to be successful, residents must be involved in the effort. There must be public places in the neighborhood where Weed and Seed strategies and activities can be discussed. Additionally, neighborhood residents should be invited to serve on the various committees. Proposed plans and actions should be shared with the community in an effort to obtain their support. Faith-based and other community organizations should host forums and workshops as part of the Weed and Seed activities identified in the local strategy.

The following are suggestions for empowering neighborhoods:

- Sponsor rallies, marches, and vigils so residents, in cooperation with local police departments, can non-violently and proactively confront and expel drug dealers from the neighborhood.
- Ensure that neighborhood residents are sufficiently represented on the Steering Committee and any other task forces.
- Ensure that grassroots organizations active in the neighborhood are well represented on committees.
- Contract with neighborhood residents and organization staff to provide research, survey, and evaluation work. (At a minimum, convene focus groups for residents to voice their concerns.)
- Contract with neighborhood organizations to conduct workshops to brief and involve residents before, during, and after Weed and Seed activities.
- Contract with neighborhood organizations to publish a newsletter to communicate with residents or write a column in an existing newsletter.
- Contract with neighborhood organizations for additional services (e.g., drug abuse prevention, employment training and job searches, child care, tutoring programs, youth entrepreneurship projects, and parent training workshops) whenever possible.
- Have the local government contract out public services to neighborhood groups, individuals, and businesses. These services may have to be scaled down to a size that groups can handle (e.g., lawn care, park maintenance, boarding up abandoned buildings, maintaining bus stops, alley cleanup, and tree trimming).
- Request that technical assistance organizations (e.g., National Crime Prevention Council) concentrate some of their resources in the designated neighborhoods.
- Cohost resource workshops with federal, state, and local public and private organizations and foundations or technical assistance organizations to assist smaller groups in applying for resources to carry out seed work.
- Connect smaller groups with larger ones that can assist with editing and proposal writing.
- Help raise money for a local migrant fund that a local organization can operate to provide assistance to groups with good seed proposals.
- Publish a resource list of neighborhood organizations that provide technical assistance and resources in this area and include some of their organizing materials.