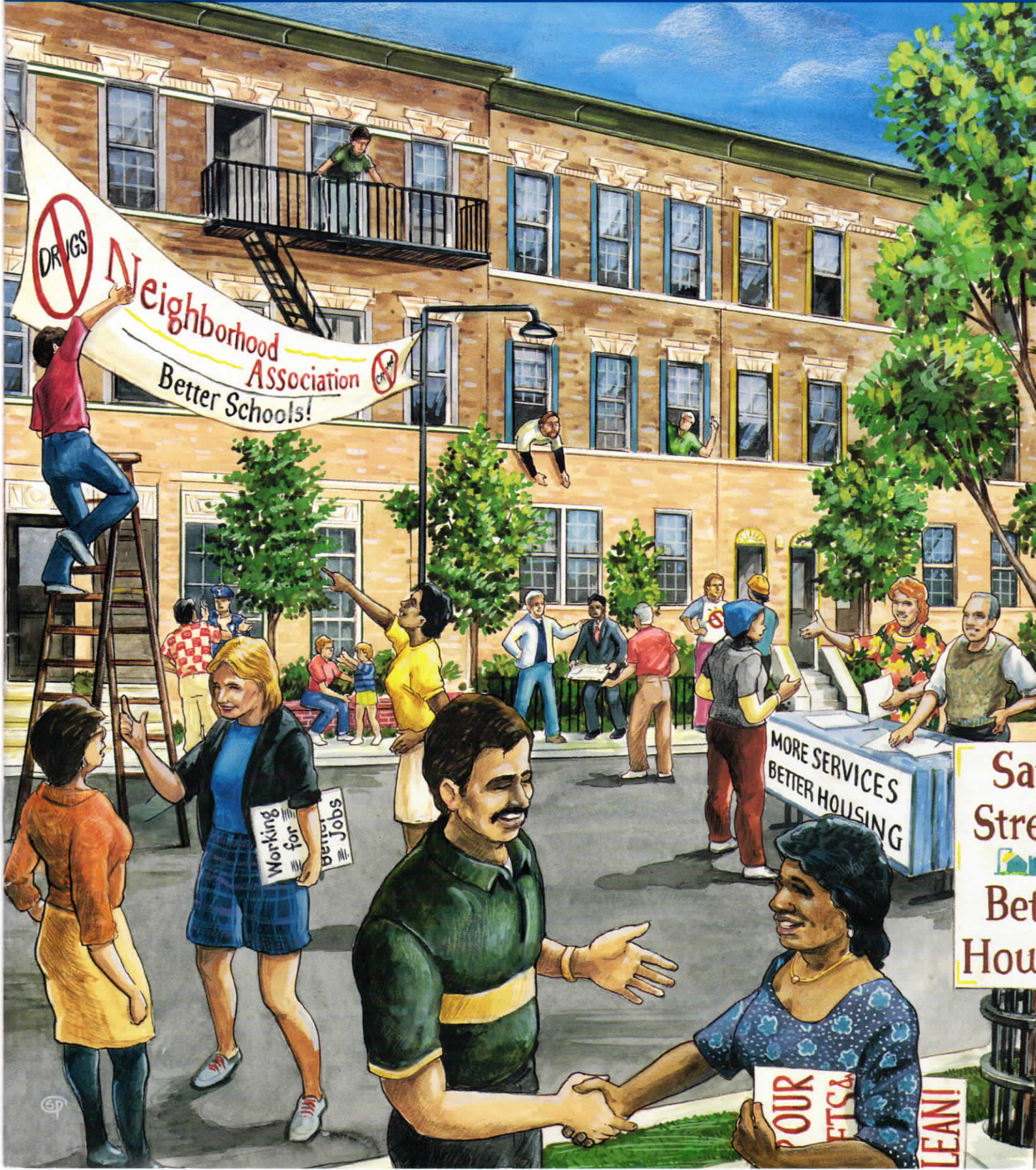


# Neighbor Works<sup>®</sup> Journal

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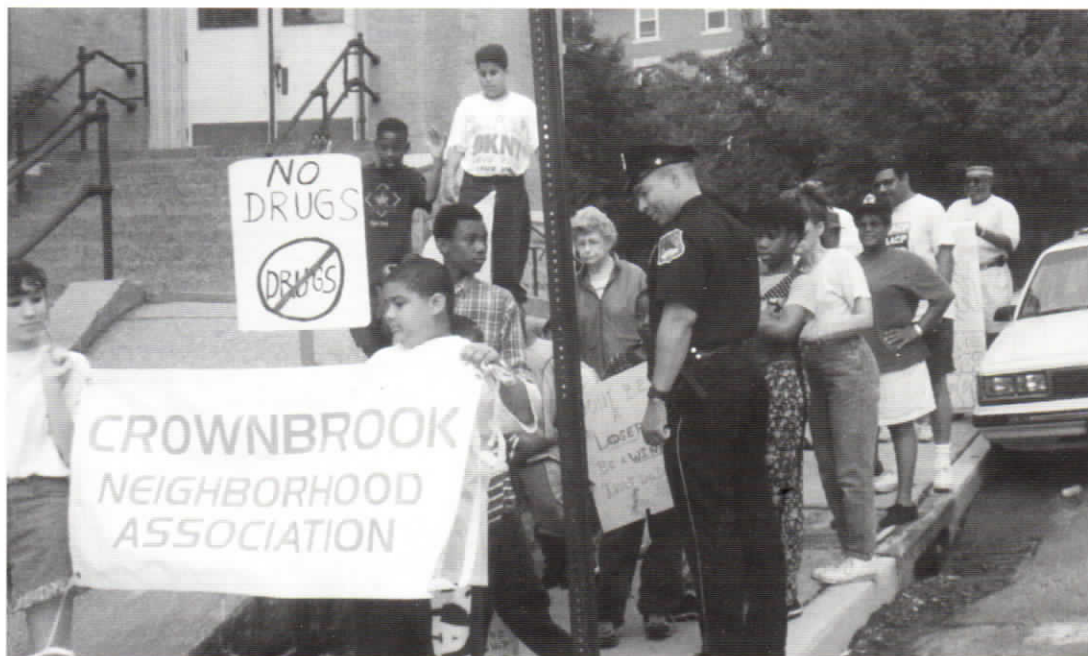
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Residents in Waterbury, Connecticut organized this demonstration with the help of Neighborhood Housing Services of Waterbury.

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Cover illustration *Robert Sprouse*



**ON THE INTERNET** — Neighborhood Reinvestment has compiled a list of internet addresses and Web sites devoted to the topics discussed in this issue of *The NeighborWorks® Journal*. To link to any of these sites, or to download the list, go to [www.nw.org/nwselect.htm](http://www.nw.org/nwselect.htm). Visit Neighborhood Reinvestment's homepage at [www.nw.org](http://www.nw.org).

# ORGANIZING: AN INVESTMENT THAT PAYS

by Lee Winkelman

**R**evitalizing an older, underserved neighborhood is a never-ending tug-of-war. Acquiring new investments, new services and a renewed sense of community requires more than a few stalwart individuals. To win the battle requires that the community pull together against very powerful opposing forces.

Nevertheless, those who wish to create housing or economic development often neglect or avoid any process that is designed to unify a

neighborhood. Instead, these organizations work with people and institutions outside the community — with only nominal support from people within the community.

However, in a growing number of cases that attitude appears to be changing. For example, in Massachusetts:

- Two local community development corporations are conducting neighborhood planning exercises with a twist. Fitchburg/Leominster's Twin Cities CDC and East Boston's Neighborhood of Affordable Housing are using the traditional planning process to create a vision within their communities for future neighborhood CDC development projects. What's new is that they are also using the process to recruit community leaders and to identify potential issues around which to organize issue campaigns.

- In Dorchester, the Dorchester Bay Economic Development Corporation, which has developed 500 units of affordable housing, has organized residents into award-winning crime watches that have significantly reduced criminal activity in its neighborhood.
- The Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation (JPND) has created a partnership with City Life/Vida Urbana. City Life is organizing tenants and neighbors to take control of run-down buildings from absentee landlords and turn them over to JPND for redevelopment. JPND continues to organize the residents during and after the development process.
- The Allston-Brighton and Fenway CDCs have joined in a citywide coalition to protect low-income, elderly tenants from losing their housing due to the end of rent stabilization in Boston.
- The Coalition for a Better Acre is organizing low-income, Latino and Cambodian residents to fight for welfare rights and city funding for affordable housing.

The reason that some people think that community development and community organizing shouldn't be combined is that they interfere with one another.

Robert Fisher, author of *Let the People Decide: Neighborhood Organizing in America*, says "Some organizers fear that CDC efforts deflate and divert social movements, that they are a trend away from social change."

Randy Stoecker, an academic at the University of Toledo who writes extensively about organizing, echoes that fear: "It is unlikely the CDC is the best vehicle for con-

*The Coalition for a Better Acre, in Boston, organizes in a culturally diverse community, uniting residents around common needs and concerns.*



**T**o integrate community organizing into its members' activities, the Massachusetts Association of CDCs and the Neighborhood Development Support Collaborative have launched the \$1.5 million Ricanne Hadrian Initiative for Community Organizing (RHICO). Named after the late organizer and MACDC deputy director who spearheaded the creation of the program, RHICO provides funding, training and technical assistance to CDCs to improve their community organizing practices and to raise the community organizing standards in the CDC field.

RHICO is based on lessons learned from the collective experiences of Massachusetts CDCs. In order to receive assistance, participants must adhere to the following principles:

■ Organizing must be woven throughout CDCs' work at all levels – not merely added as a separate pro-

- gram. This requires organizational transformation.
- CDCs must increase resident involvement and be willing to confront the challenges this poses.
  - CDCs must balance organizing and development — not let one task consistently outweigh the other.
  - All staff must take responsibility for integrating and carrying out both functions.
  - CDCs' actions should match their priorities. If a CDC makes organizing and housing equal priorities, comparable resources should be devoted to each.

For more information about the Massachusetts Association of CDCs or the Ricanne Hadrian Initiative, call or write Lee Winkelman; MACDC; 99 Chauncy Street, 5th Floor; Boston, MA 02111, or call (617) 426-0303. E-Mail: [Leew@gbls.org](mailto:Leew@gbls.org).

ducting community organizing. Constrained by their funding, CDCs cannot take the risks necessary to produce empowering community organizing.... Organizing takes a back seat to development when financial or political pressures bear down.... The problem is that CDCs are really not, nor can they be, about empowerment."

While the tensions between organizing residents and developing housing are real, more and more practitioners are demonstrating that the results of the combination are worth the headaches. On the one hand, high resident involvement ensures that development meets community needs. Resident involvement creates a force within the CDC that can counter the pressure of funders and outside agencies, which sometimes leads organizations away from the interests and needs of the community. Additionally, mobilizing residents in campaigns for affordable housing can help CDCs gain land, resources and governmental permits.

On the other hand, development can strengthen community organizing. When residents feel ownership of the development process, the affordable units, playgrounds and other results are concrete reminders of residents' power. Combining organizing with development allows residents to work proactively to implement their own vision for their neighborhood.

Moreover, in too many neighborhoods, if the CDC does not organize, no one else will.

Brien O'Toole, from the Non-Profit Affordable Housing Network of New Jersey's Community Building Support Initiative, sums it up this way: "Effective orga-

nizing and grassroots planning initiatives lead to both an empowered community and an empowered CDC." But only if the accompanying tensions are understood and managed.

One affordable housing developer disputes the view of critics who argue that development organizations' dependence on government and bank funding can prevent them from using confrontational tactics. Debra Fox has worked with CDCs as a project manager and a consultant for 18 years, helping them develop affordable housing. She questions the ability of CDCs to effectively revitalize neighborhoods without community organizing.

"Development is a very political process," says Fox. "You can either grease your way through with money or with people. Private developers have money they can contribute to politicians' campaigns to get what they want. CDCs have a lot of people that they can mobilize instead. People power is a great equalizer."

It should not be a surprise that some community-based developers have at times been able to combine confrontation and cooperation. Business and government elites are often at loggerheads on one issue, but then work together on another issue. The trick is clear-headed analysis and strategic sophistication. CDCs must be realistic about the limits of their own power and the extent of the power of their targets. There is too much at stake to undertake moral or symbolic actions without a pragmatic assessment of the repercussions.

CDCs must also balance the different

demands of the development process (which is product-oriented, with a rigid timeline and few short-term victories) with organizing (which is process-oriented, with a need for short-term victories and patient, long-term leadership development). To be successful, CDC development staff must leave development decisions to community residents, even though doing so flies in the face of their professional training, the continued oversight of funders and intermediaries and the judgment of their peers.

Community development organizations in Massachusetts and across the country are making new gains as they face the challenges of combining organizing and development. Coalition for a Better Acre has nurtured the first Cambodian community leaders in Lowell. Thanks to the organizing efforts of Twin Cities CDC, African-American, white and Latino residents are working together for the first time in Leominster to improve youth services and create affordable housing. Resident involvement has shaped the development done by Jamaica Plain NDC leading to housing that better meets the needs of the community.

As CDCs struggle with how best to manage the tensions between organizing and development, a new practice is emerging that promises new hope for low-income neighborhoods and increased effectiveness for community-development organizations. ■

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*Lee Winkelman is the organizing director for the Massachusetts Association of Community Development Corporations.*