Women Revitalizing Communities:

Lessons from more than a decade of work with low-income women and their families in Eastern North Philadelphia

SUMMARY REPORT
WOMEN'S COMMUNITY REVITALIZATION PROJECT (WCRP) OCTOBER 2000
WCRP's Mission

The Women's Community Revitalization Project is a multi-racial community-based development organization committed to advocating for and organizing low-income women to promote their own social and economic empowerment, especially in the neighborhoods of Eastern North Philadelphia.

The organization views physical development and advocacy as equally important and complementary strategies for revitalizing the communities in which low-income women and their families live. We seek to understand the economic and social forces that affect women's lives and to respond to these forces through advocacy and specific projects. We affirm and utilize the contributions of people of different races, classes, education and backgrounds.

WCRP's Vision Statement

WCRP envisions a community where resources are available to empower all individuals to reach their highest potential.

All basic needs are provided. Decent, affordable housing, food, clothing, child care, education, health care, employment, recreation, and spiritual and cultural enrichment are abundant.

The community is built upon the idea that everyone has the opportunity and information to make informed choices and decisions.

There is hope, collective process, group action, and joy. In this place, people are safe in their homes and feel free to walk and explore in their neighborhoods.
INTRODUCTION

In 1987, the Women's Community Revitalization Project (WCRP) incorporated as Philadelphia's only women-led community development organization. Today, WCRP is nationally recognized as an innovative developer that has built 110 units of affordable housing in Philadelphia's poorest neighborhoods, and as an organization which involves low-income women and their families in the process of community building, self-empowerment and change.

Although obtaining safe, affordable housing is critical, WCRP recognizes that it is only a first step toward strengthening families and communities. In addition to developing and managing rental housing, WCRP builds childcare centers and other community facilities; provides supportive services and employment placement; advocates for a more equitable distribution of resources; and collaborates with other organizations to achieve a concentrated impact. In each area of its work, WCRP stresses the development of individual women, knowing that their growth and success will lead to stronger families and communities. The organization also facilitates collective action as a way to transform communities and build leadership.

In 1999, the Annie E. Casey Foundation approached WCRP, proposing that the organization document its work with low-income women and their families and share lessons it has learned over the years. The resulting report, Women Revitalizing Communities: Lessons from more than a decade of work with low-income women and their families in Eastern North Philadelphia, provides a detailed description of WCRP’s approach to individual, family and community development. The current shorter report provides a summary of key elements discussed in the full version. WCRP believes that the strategies outlined in these reports can be useful to other organizations committed to strengthening families who reside in poor communities.

WCRP thanks the Annie E. Casey Foundation for its support of this project and shares these two reports in the hope that like-minded organizations will be strengthened both in their belief that meaningful change in low-income communities is possible and in their capacity to be creative agents of this change.

Nancy Gonzalez,  
Former Tenant,  

I was clearing offices in a mini-mall where WCRP rented an office. I knocked on the door to ask if I could clean their office. They didn’t have money then but two or three months later they called and hired me. That was in 1991.

WCRP talked to me about the Villanueva town-houses . . . My daughters and I were living in a house infected with cockroaches and mice. It was in bad condition. Because my income is low I had a hard time finding a house or apartment that I could afford. I . . . applied for Section 8 and . . . [was] on the waiting list for more than eight years. I was looking for a better place to live. I wanted to help other women find good houses. I got involved with WCRP.

WCRP talked to me about committees. They asked me if I wanted to be on a committee and I joined the Design committee. With the help of WCRP, I learned how to be a volunteer leader in my community. I started going to the Board meetings to watch and see what they were doing. I got involved in planning Villanueva. I did door-knocking to inform the community of the new construction in their neighborhood and to let them know about WCRP’s plans for a day care facility. I organized a community clean up in the lot across from Villanueva and started a garden. I organized tenants to get WCRP to change the design of the courtyard at Villanueva so that every house had a private back yard . . .

I joined the Board in 1992 and in 1996, I was chair of the Board for two years. I was afraid of my language but . . . eventually I started to learn and like it . . . I was hungry to learn how to be a leader and that happened. You can see people in the community getting involved with WCRP. Like me, for example . . . I’m never going to stop doing this work for the community. I’ll do it until I die.

I [want my kids] to stay free of drugs. Finish school and get a good education. To be good men and women. I make them talk about what they want to be.
Early Beginnings

The concept of forming a women-controlled community development corporation gained momentum in 1986 after an eastern North Philadelphia neighborhood coalition successfully challenged the lending practices of Fidelity Bank through the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA). The coalition’s work had resulted in a $50 million settlement, opening up new opportunities for housing and economic development work. One coalition member, the Women’s Program at the Lutheran Settlement House, helped coordinate the efforts of a group of forty women to form the Women’s Community Revitalization Project. The new organization sought to explore the opportunities offered by the CRA settlement. At the same time, WCRP was committed to providing leadership in a field traditionally dominated by men but which was attempting to address issues most often experienced by low-income women.

WCRP spent its first year assessing community need, going door-to-door, attending basic education classes, discussing ideas within support groups, and surveying women at social service sites. Through lengthy deliberation and by consensus, a decision was reached that WCRP would undertake the rehabilitation of eight row houses in order to engage low-income women in increasing housing resources for themselves and the families of other poor women.

WCRP’s entrance into the community development field was met with skepticism on the part of lenders, some funders, and many housing developers. Lenders rejected WCRP’s first round of financing applications due to the organization’s lack of experience and to the unpopularity of building rental housing. Most housing funders, both public and private, wanted to support the development of home ownership opportunities despite the overwhelming evidence gathered by WCRP that there was a pressing need in the community for affordable rental houses for low-income women. WCRP was not discouraged but instead forged ahead with its plans, eventually securing financial backing from Fidelity Bank to rehabilitate eight houses.

Primary themes in WCRP’s approach include:

*Providing concrete resources for women and their families.*

*Developing long-term relationships with tenants and other community members that support personal growth and leadership.*

*Organizing tenants, neighborhood residents and institutional allies to demand greater investment in community planning and development in neighborhoods historically viewed as marginal by power brokers.*
WCRP’s Constituents

WCRP’s constituents are very low-income women and their families.

According to the latest Census, almost 140,000 households in Philadelphia are defined as very low-income (earning less than 35% of the median income) with the majority of these being headed by single mothers. These women face tremendous barriers to economic self-sufficiency due to the lack of educational opportunities and work experience as well as the demands of single motherhood. In addition to having experienced poverty, many are affected by domestic violence, health problems or disabilities. Furthermore, the policies and systems with which their lives intersect often result in feelings of disempowerment. Welfare reform, crime, violence, neighborhood disinvestment, and the lack of constructive activities for children are but a few of the factors faced daily by WCRP’s constituents.

Much of WCRP’s work has been accomplished in eastern North Philadelphia, a dynamic neighborhood of strong networks that has been particularly affected by institutional neglect. When WCRP was formed in 1987, this neighborhood had 2740 abandoned units of housing, blocks of deserted factories, and hundreds of vacant lots. Close to 12,000 families lived in this diverse community with Latinos comprising 51%, African-Americans 30%, and whites 19% of the population. More than a third of the individuals at the time were children and teenagers. One quarter of the adults had not completed high school. Women-led households comprised 52% of all neighborhood households compared with 32% city-wide. The median household income for the area was approximately $10,000, substantially below the City median of $24,600. Almost half of all families depended on public assistance, and more than half lived with incomes below the federal poverty level.

Despite the many barriers faced by their families and communities, WCRP’s constituents remain consistently determined to build better lives for their children and the neighborhoods in which they live. Many individuals have organized self-help initiatives such as block clubs, garden groups, parent support networks, youth associations, community education and arts activities.
HOUSING DEVELOPMENT IN SUPPORT OF FAMILIES

Principles:
Commit to excellence, approaching the work comprehensively without compromising on quality.

Use every organizational opportunity to invite constituents into the decision-making process. Ownership begins with decision-making.

Design projects that are responsive to constituent-identified needs. Incorporate constituent experience of "what works" and "what doesn't work" in implementation.

Meet the needs of the lowest income families.

Although low-income women and their families lack a range of resources, WCRP recognizes that stable housing can provide a base from which personal and family development can more easily take place. With worries about housing resolved, women can more easily take other steps to improve their financial situation, address family issues, and get involved in community activities.

WCRP's approach to housing development is unique and multi-faceted. Involvement by tenants and prospective tenants in project design decisions guarantees that each unit will meet real needs as experienced by those who will live there. The size of units and quality of design are not compromised by the affordability of the project. As a result, these homes are places where families can thrive.

It's an overwhelming feeling to be able to call someplace your home. When I think of a home I think of a place where joy is abundant and laughter is contagious. The neighborhood I came from is not a home. I considered it a prison. No matter how we tried to create that loving atmosphere inside it was always interrupted by gun-shots, breaking glass or the thumps of bodies being beaten over and over again. We became prisoners of our house.

Our house was overcrowded. There were five people in one room . . . Just getting a house (through WCRP) was a miracle to us.

Where I was I didn't feel like I wanted to get a job because I was worried that my kids wouldn't be safe. Now I'm not worried about that. I just started working . . . It's not that (WCRP) gave me a job. The job was always there. Being in this housing has given me the confidence and assurance that my children were safe so I could go back to work. To me, it's important to live somewhere safe. Your home is where you grow and if you feel afraid, you can't do that. Once you feel safe, you want to expand your horizons . . .

We got our house in May 1999 . . . WCRP has gone from being a name to me being a member of WCRP's advocacy committee and now a member of the Board. We wanted to start an after school program on one of the sites. At a tenant meeting, everyone had the same kind of need for their kids. Myself and two other parents thought we would start it, planned it and then children started signing up. It started with only three women.

WCRP is not just involved in housing . . . It takes more to better a person than just live in a house. WCRP has resources to help a person be stronger, capable of being self-reliant. It's like a caring family. They have your needs, your desires, wants in mind. They really get involved with you. It's a warm environment . . . you feel good inviting them into your home.
Pivotal project decisions for Adolfina Villanueva, WCRP's first new construction development included:

- Developing the units as townhouses rather than as a block of traditional, low-cost apartment buildings.

- Including a central, secure courtyard as the heart of the development where children can play safely. Each unit has a front door on the street and a back door onto the courtyard.

- Locating the kitchens in the back of the house with windows facing the courtyard so that mothers can watch children play while cooking in the kitchen.

- Installing washers and dryers in each unit so that mothers can be at home with their children while doing laundry.

Substandard housing quality and problems of affordability affect more than 100,000 of the poorest families in Philadelphia. With its first project, WCRP established the practice of subsidizing rents to the greatest extent possible by using its developers’ fees to create an internal subsidy pool. This innovative approach allows WCRP's already modest rents to start as low as $150 per month. The subsidy initiative has enabled the organization to implement its commitment to serving those with the greatest need. No one is turned away based on income.

WCRP Housing Development

- Renovation of 8 scattered-site single family row houses, 1989
  Cost: $260,000

- Adolfina Villanueva Townhouses, Phase 1, 1992
  24 two-, three- and four-bedroom townhouses.
  Cost: $2,500,000

- Adolfina Villanueva Townhouses, Phase 2, 1995
  30 two-, three-, and four-bedroom townhouses.
  Cost: $3,900,000

- Johnnie Tillmon Townhouses, 1997
  23 two- and three-bedroom townhouses.
  Cost: $3,200,000

- Lillia E. Crippen Townhouses, Phase 1, 1999
  26 two-, three- and four-bedroom townhouses.
  Cost: $4,600,000

In Pre-Development 2000
More than 50 affordable units of rental housing for very low-income families in Philadelphia and in Bucks County.
FACILITIES DEVELOPMENT IN SUPPORT OF FAMILIES

Principle:
Use collaborative alliances to achieve impact, strengthen community networks, and build greater power.

WCRP believes that family well-being can be promoted by pairing decent affordable housing with other resources, including supportive services. Child care, for instance, is an integral component of making greater economic opportunities available to women. During WCRP's early organizing stage, the need for more child care facilities was identified by low-income parents as being of high priority. Although WCRP had never built a child care facility, its experience in the development process and its commitment to developing new resources for constituents led the organization to undertake the development of a child care center on site at its first large-scale housing development.

A major element in planning this project was selecting a quality child care provider who would both participate in the design phase and operate the center once completed. After much research, WCRP entered into a letter of intent with the Philadelphia Parent Child Center, which agreed to operate a child care program using Head Start and Title XX subsidies in the facility to be developed by WCRP. This was the beginning of a multi-year process that resulted in the creation of the Adolfoina Villanueva Child Development Center, which houses child care and education programs serving 72 low-income children.

This model of building facilities has gained WCRP recognition in the development field and has led a number of providers of human services to seek out the organization as a consultant to the development of their own community facilities. In 2000, WCRP worked with seven social service and education providers to accomplish this goal.
WCRP's role in recent facilities development projects:

**Congreso de Latinos Unidos**: Project manager for a $6 million facility rehabilitation project to provide a new headquarters for the largest Latino social services organization in Philadelphia.

**People's Emergency Center**: Advisor for a child care center integrated with an employment training program for women in transitional housing; facilitator in selecting a child care provider to operate the center.

**Norris Square Civic Association**: Project manager for renovation of a 29,600 square foot industrial structure to house a day care center serving 200 children from the Latino community.

**Crime Prevention Association's R.W. Brown Community Center**: Project manager for a $2 million facilities expansion project.

**School District of Philadelphia**: Consultant to identify and recommend prospective sites for the District's Head Start centers.

**Delaware Valley Community Health's Maria de los Santos Health Center**: Project manager for construction of a new $6 million health center.

**LULAC's Martana Bracetti Academy Charter School**: Project manager of renovation project to provide short-term space for a new charter school.
SUPPORTIVE SERVICES:
Supporting Women and their Families through Resources and Relationships

Principles:
Respect the strength of families who have survived economic and domestic trauma.

Start where a person is. Support a mother’s basic need to feel her family is safe, and then, when she is ready, provide support for her self-determined goals.

Appreciate and encourage the unique interests, talents, and experience of each woman.

Remain flexible and available.

Operate with consciousness that external power dynamics are inextricably linked with self-acceptance and self-worth.

Build real relationships and celebrate accomplishments, large and small.

Early on in its work, WCRP recognized that tenants of its housing developments would best be supported in their efforts to develop their capacities and become financially secure if services were offered to help them navigate and gain access to the complex array of resources and institutions in Philadelphia. The organization has developed a model in which its supportive services staff act as resource broker, focusing on maximizing utilization of existing resources rather than creating new services. WCRP seeks to demystify the systems and processes which often stand in the way of resources getting to the very individuals for whom they are intended. Every avenue is tried, and even then, “no” is not an acceptable answer.

Originally, supportive services were provided to tenants through contracts with community agencies specializing in case management. In 1996, the organization brought these services in-house, first hiring a full-time Supportive Services Coordinator and subsequently four additional staff members. This move has allowed WCRP’s supportive service team to develop long-term trusting relationships with tenants in which there is time to understand and build upon the unique strengths and needs of each woman and her family.

The recognition and affirmation of the individual in each person is part of what contributes to the success of WCRP’s supportive services program, enabling the organization to support the differing paths women follow in achieving their personal, financial, and family goals. In some cases, a woman
must confront past or current trauma before she can think about getting a job or earning a degree. In others, finding steady, sustaining employment can be the catalyst to making other individual and family-strengthening changes. And for yet other women, getting involved in community activities or taking a leadership role in a campaign to confront larger injustices may be a first step toward building the confidence to confront the challenges she faces at home.

As a staff, WCRP attempts to convey to each person that they can use their own energy to move forward. WCRP's role is to support that self-determination. Whatever path is chosen, follow-up is critical and is considered to be the core of the work with supportive services participants. This means reaching out, calling frequently, and building relationships that are attentive to the details of participants' lives. WCRP recognizes that there are many people whose lives will only change when they feel a close working connection in which staff and program participants fight side-by-side.

In the past two years, WCRP has expanded the scope of its supportive services work to include other members of the community. The organization provides job placement and employment-focused case management services to 400 unemployed and under-employed low-income Philadelphians. It also holds contracts for supportive services at two housing developments owned by outside organizations.

Walking down 5th Street with my daughter Donna who said "it looks like they are making offices. Let's go see what's inside." Estella was the first person I saw. She greeted me with open arms. She introduced me to Maria and Nora. They were all family...The way they opened the doors to me is the way I knew it would be good. Before this, I had been afraid of going to anybody [about the domestic abuse].

They started to talk to me about housing. I needed to separate from my children's father. Finally, I bought my own house through the support of WCRP. I was able to leave my children's father....

My daughter was going through depression from 7th grade. [She] didn't want to go to school or anything...she stayed at the homes of WCRP staff and board members for a while and then became active with leadership development at WCRP and is currently involved with other community work. She'll be graduating from college soon.
Welfare Reform and the Community-Based Employment Initiative

As state and federal welfare reform legislation began to take shape in 1996, WCRP turned much of its attention to identifying ways to respond to these potentially devastating changes. At first, WCRP activated community opposition to the impending reform by conducting public education and voter registration campaigns, organizing busloads of people to rally in Washington, DC and sending delegations to meet with policymakers in Philadelphia and the state capital.

When welfare reform policy went into effect despite these efforts, WCRP continued to organize community members, shifting its focus to education and advocacy around welfare rights and benefits. The organization published and widely distributed Spanish and English editions of its handbook entitled Knowing Your Rights: A Guide to the New Rules for Public Assistance in Pennsylvania. Staff also contacted individual families receiving cash welfare benefits to help them prepare for the impending changes.

In addition WCRP was deeply immersed in strategic planning around possible programmatic approaches to support low-income communities in responding to the government's mandate that welfare recipients not only work but become financially self-sufficient in five years. The organization decided to provide direct assistance to individuals and families in the form of a community-based employment initiative.

In considering a model for this project, the organization planned to build on the work it was already doing with tenants since these efforts clearly were making a difference in their economic security. This meant maintaining an emphasis both on securing resources and on building and sustaining relationships. WCRP explored models by which it could extend its services to larger communities as well as approach the transition from welfare to family-supporting work in a more deliberate manner. A compatible approach was found in the work done by Project Match, a Chicago-based voluntary welfare-to-work program. Project Match's experience affirmed WCRP's observations that the road to financial security is rarely linear, but rather marked by setbacks, failures, and incremental progress over a period of years.

The structure adopted for WCRP's community-based employment initiative accommodates this reality by offering individualized employment services, making assistance available to people as they move from step to step, and committing to follow-up with participants over the long term. This structure includes assessment, individual and group job readiness training, job matching, referrals to education and training programs, and case management and retention services for a period of at least two years. The Employment Initiative is among the few programs with a long-term commitment to participants regardless of the rate at which they are progressing.
BUILDING COMMUNITY, BROADENING LEADERSHIP

Principles:
Build a community where members can be seen, heard, and share their gifts.

Confront inequity by building alternatives together.

Take risks and share power. Organizations, like people, learn through mistakes as well as successes.

Create a path for constructive organizational learning. Build in a regular and widely participatory internal process to assess, plan and evaluate.

Be patient and consistent. Change that endures is pursued at a manageable pace and is often incremental in nature.

Encourage and support the different ways in which women develop and demonstrate their leadership.

WCRP understands that the lives of low-income women can be dramatically and positively changed when they have opportunities for leadership. WCRP's own board structure is founded on this premise and provides a welcoming place where tenants and community members gain the skills necessary to shape organizational initiatives that directly affect the quality of their lives. Many tenants who are Board or committee members report the tremendous impact their participation in these activities has had on their ability to move forward in other areas of their lives; sometimes resulting in having the confidence to return to school, to get a job or a better job, to speak out on a range of community issues or simply to find the voice they didn't realize was missing.

More than 40 women actively and consistently participate in WCRP's governing structure. The Board of Directors and Advisory Committee meet together at least once a month and use a process of consensus to make decisions. Most members also meet in smaller committees in order to have more extensive discussion and prepare recommendations prior to board decisions. Whenever possible,
Making Active Participation in WCRP’s Board and Committees Possible

On-site child care with a paid child care worker in a dedicated child care space.

Transportation for everyone who needs it.

Dinner for participants and their children.

Celebrations of events in leaders’ lives or of organizational changes.

Spanish-English translation at meetings and of materials, including an orientation packet for each member.

Meeting facilitation that maximizes participation.

Customized training that develops meaningful and needed capacities.

Inclusive decision-making process that uses modified consensus.

I first heard about WCRP through a girlfriend who lived in Villanova. I became involved with WCRP in 1994, when I called them about housing. I put in an application and went through the process and was selected. I was interested in WCRP because they helped women with families and because of their involvement with the community.

I needed everything. After I had four children, I needed job skills, I needed everything to get me back on track again. [WCRP] took time to get to know me and my needs. If WCRP cannot find what is being asked for, they do further research to try and get the answer.

I was active on the Supportive Services committee and I attended Board meetings. The interactions with those committees helped me build up my self esteem and prepared me to go and look for employment. The involvement with Supportive Services and the Board helped me to want to become more involved in the community. I am starting to be more involved with children. I am running for Vice President of the committee for the community playground to get things started for the children.

‘There is hope, collective process, group action, and joy. In this place, people are safe in their homes and feel free to walk and explore in their neighborhoods.’ [Quoting WCRP’s Vision Statement.] This is what WCRP gave me. They gave me that particular outlook.

In 1995, WCRP was awarded a grant to develop a community garden next to one of its housing developments. Since then, the organization’s Greening and Open Space Initiative has been responsible for developing over 50 gardens and sponsoring more than 20 stewardship projects, involving hundreds of participants. The impact of greening has been dramatic on the environment and on community members who have been rewarded with appreciation and pride for the difference that they have made in their neighborhood. The greening program has allowed WCRP to expand its role in providing concrete resources to address environmental issues which, next to housing, has been identified by residents as the most serious problem affecting the community’s quality of life. It has also provided fertile ground for leadership to take root.
The Lillia Crippen After-School Achievers

The model for WCRP's tenant leadership approach is constantly evolving. Most recently, it has taken new shape in the context of a demonstration project run by a small group of tenants in one of WCRP's housing developments, the Lillia E. Crippen Townhomes. When planning this project, WCRP's advocacy staff first surveyed Crippen tenants individually to determine what they considered to be the most pressing issues facing their immediate community and what they would be interested in doing about them. Several tenants were then brought together around their common interest in addressing the lack of constructive activities for children living in their development.

With support from staff, these same women began to articulate a vision for how they might personally engage in addressing this problem. A small working group was formed to assess the level of need and to plan a pilot project to provide after school activities for Crippen children ages 5 to 12. Experts from child care and related organizations were invited by parent leaders to train them in the essentials of program start-up. A short term (2-month) program was implemented after which this same group of mothers regrouped to evaluate how well it had met community need and how the program might be improved as well as to identify the skills they would need to acquire in order to better lead it in the future. This evaluation and planning process began in late Spring 2000 and will continue throughout the summer in anticipation of continuing a modified program in the Fall.

The group recently received a grant to support its enrichment activities from a small grants program funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. For project leaders, this meant attending a workshop to learn how to apply and subsequently writing a grant proposal.

The women involved in this project agree on how powerful they have felt in bringing their vision to life and in acquiring new assessment, planning, grant-writing and evaluation skills. They express a sense of accomplishment in having taken initiative, run a program, met with experts, identified problems, and handled the challenges of group process. They experienced personal change and were role models for other women and girls. Their example has inspired other groups of tenants to recognize that they too can develop the skills needed to make meaningful change in their communities.
Collective Action on Darien Street

The residents of the 2800 blocks of 8th and 9th Street are mostly homeowners. There are relatively few vacant buildings on their block. However, their backyards face a block of Darien Street where only a handful of rowhouses remain standing. Rarely can a car drive down this block without being stuck behind drug traffic. Most residents are not willing to risk walking there. Drugs are sold openly in the street and garbage is dumped illegally on abutting vacant land and into the backyards of homeowners on 8th and 9th streets. Some residents report dodging bullets that fly through their kitchen windows.

About two years ago, WCRP began meeting with three neighborhood families to strategize for clean-up and stewardship of the vacant Darien Street lots. The group grew to include more than 10 families who wanted to reclaim these lots (owned by a combination of the City and absent private owners) from drug dealers. It was decided that acquiring and fencing the lots would be the first step in managing the space. With considerable safety risks, complex local politics, and the sheer magnitude of the problem, progress on this project was slow, but WCRP and the residents of 8th and 9th Streets finally realized the fruits of their labor in the summer of 1999. After meetings, calls, and correspondence with many neighbors, city agencies and officials, 10 families reclaimed the lots from the drug dealers and applied for urban garden agreements. Fences were installed and neighbors report that they have a greater feeling of safety in their homes and yards.

The success of efforts on Darien Street is due not only to the commitment of WCRP and neighborhood residents but to the fact that all of the lots were treated as one project in which no individual could be singled out by drug dealers. A group process was used both to gain control of the lots and to plan how the individual backyards would be used. This effective community-building approach has helped homeowners sustain their efforts and build on the excitement generated by their initial victory.

Although the success of this project has been tangible, there is still a great deal of work to do. A few families who have been involved in these efforts from the beginning are still unable to get specific lots cleared for fencing because of the high level of trash and drug activity. Others need materials to transform the plans for their back-yard gardens into reality.
LESSONS LEARNED

In the past 13 years, WCRP has grown in its ability to create opportunities and develop resources that support women and their families as they make change, be it personal, family or community change. The organization's willingness to continuously evaluate itself and to adjust its approach has enabled it to learn from its mistakes and to take risks. Its belief in relationships and in the potential within each individual has contributed to an ever-widening circle of women committed to giving back to their communities.

Notes to Other Organizations

To CDC's: Use comprehensive approaches that build community; think as much about individuals as about building structures.

To Women's Organizations: Become proficient with financial investments. These are powerful tools to use to further the independence of women developing leadership and holding power.

To Social Service Providers: View people as unique individuals with talent, dignity, and strength. Avoid “one size fits all” program designs.

To Low-Income Parent Organizing Groups: Confront injustices and build alternatives. Seek and develop formal membership in decision-making bodies that control community resources.

To Grantmakers: Believe in the potential of people to create better communities. Support the true capacity-building that can be achieved by learning from both success and mistakes. Remember, change often takes decades, not months.
Acknowledgements

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Contributing Voices

*Interview Participants*

*Respondents to Documentation Project Questionnaire*
Haydee Amill-Cruz, Syreeta Bennett, Lucy Betancourt, Karen Donnally, Irene Dougherty, Carrie DuPree, Dana Hanchin, Carolyn Haynes, Catherine McClellan, Staci Moore, Neva Pryor, Nancy Santiago, and Claire Yoo.

*Comments Shared as Part of Public Presentations*
Marilyn Ascencio, Beatriz Rivas, Isabel Vazquez, and Helen White.

Document Project Team

*Interviewers*
Haydee Amill-Cruz, Karen Donnally, Carolyn Haynes, Danita Pegrem-Robinson, Jaime Pullen, and Claire Yoo.

*Writers*
Full length report: Jaime Pullen
Summary report: Carolyn Haynes

*Draft Report Readers:*
Carol Burbank, Karen Donnally, Nora Lichtash, Beatriz Rivas, Bill Thomas, and Claire Yoo.

*Design:*
AWeight inc.

*Photographer:*
Olga Lopez, staff file

*Project Coordination and Production:*
Carolyn Haynes

*Project Consultant:*
Jaime Pullen
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