



# KITCHEN TABLE TALKS

## A REPORT TO THE COMMUNITY ON LESSONS LEARNED AND NEXT STEPS

December 2017

Take a glimpse inside residents' hearts and homes as community leaders of the Near Westside discuss their neighborhood's strengths, challenges, and their ideas for a brighter future.

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## **Kitchen Table Talks: A Report to the Community on Lessons Learned and Next Steps**

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### **Introduction:**

In 2015, following the release of a white paper titled “Take Back the Streets” (TBTS), a campaign of the same name was launched in the Near Westside neighborhood of Syracuse, New York. The campaign was developed by three collaborating agencies: the Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion, the Near Westside Initiative, and the Near Westside Peacemaking Project (a project of the Center for Court Innovation). The goal of the campaign was to improve health and safety in the Near Westside neighborhood. The campaign had three primary objectives for its first year: (1) enhance collaboration among service providers, (2) activate under-used public spaces with family-friendly activities, and (3) strengthen relationships between service providers and residents. The work of Take Back the Streets fell under the auspices of the Healthy Neighborhood Initiative, a grant to the Lerner Center from the New York State Health Foundation from 2015-2017.

In 2016, the TBTS campaign formed a service provider collaborative with over 20 participating neighborhood agencies and hosted 50 family-friendly events. The TBTS campaign identified Kitchen Table Talks (KTTs) as a promising community outreach tool that could effectively strengthen relationships with residents and identify neighborhood needs.

### **Project Description:**

KTTs are informal dinners held in the homes of residents that include a facilitated conversation about neighborhood strengths and concerns. The model was used by the Gifford Foundation (a local philanthropic organization) in 2009 for work done in the Southside of Syracuse. In 2016, the Lerner Center, the Near Westside Initiative, the Near Westside Peacemaking Project, and the Gifford Foundation committed to facilitate ten KTTs. Eight KTTs were completed in 2016 and two in early 2017. 94 residents and five staff from the collaborating agencies participated.

The first ten KTTs led to three major achievements:

1. Defining Community Engagement - Service providers shifted the way they conduct outreach and measure community engagement.
2. Mobilizing Residents - The creation of a resident-led Community Impact Team (CIT) mobilized residents to organize and lead community projects addressing health and safety concerns.

3. Expanding to Greater Community - Service providers engaged outside agencies and neighborhoods to learn about the KTT model as a means of community outreach and resident engagement.

Data was collected at each KTT, and the objectives, methods, findings, outcomes, lessons learned, and next steps are summarized in this report.

### **Project Objectives:**

The purpose of KTTs is to build lasting, trusting relationships between service providers and residents through meaningful community engagement. The following objectives were identified:

- Invite service providers to meet and engage with residents outside of their offices
- Provide residents with opportunities to strengthen their relationships with neighbors
- Identify the needs and interests of the community
- Identify community leaders and potential participants for a resident leadership training
- Solicit creative solutions to pressing issues
- Determine the most effective methods for communicating with residents
- Collect data to inform future KTTs, the *Take Back the Streets* campaign, and other community engagement strategies

### **Methods:**

#### **A. Identification and selection of resident host:**

In eight cases, a facilitator identified the host, typically a resident he/she previously knew through community activities. In two cases, residents who had heard about the project reached out to facilitators and requested to host. Once a potential host was identified, facilitators explained the process and purpose of KTTs.

The host selected the date and time, and was given printed invitations to distribute to 10-12 neighbors. The host chose a local restaurant to cater the food, which was paid for by the Lerner Center. Drinks and paper products were provided. The Gifford Foundation paid each host a \$50 stipend as a token of appreciation for her time, efforts, and hospitality. Two staff attended each KTT to facilitate the discussion, take notes, and collect participants' contact information.

#### **B. The KTT**

At each KTT, facilitators arrived early to help set up while the host greeted guests. Following the meal, facilitators began with a round of introductions, explanation of project goals, and a short overview of the mission of each facilitator's agency. Sometimes facilitators led an icebreaker, depending on how well participants knew each other. Facilitators then led a discussion drawing from the six questions below.

1. What would you say is one of the biggest benefits of living in this neighborhood?  
What's the best part or one thing you like about the Westside?
2. What are some changes or improvements you'd like to see?
3. What motivates you to get involved/participate in your neighborhood?

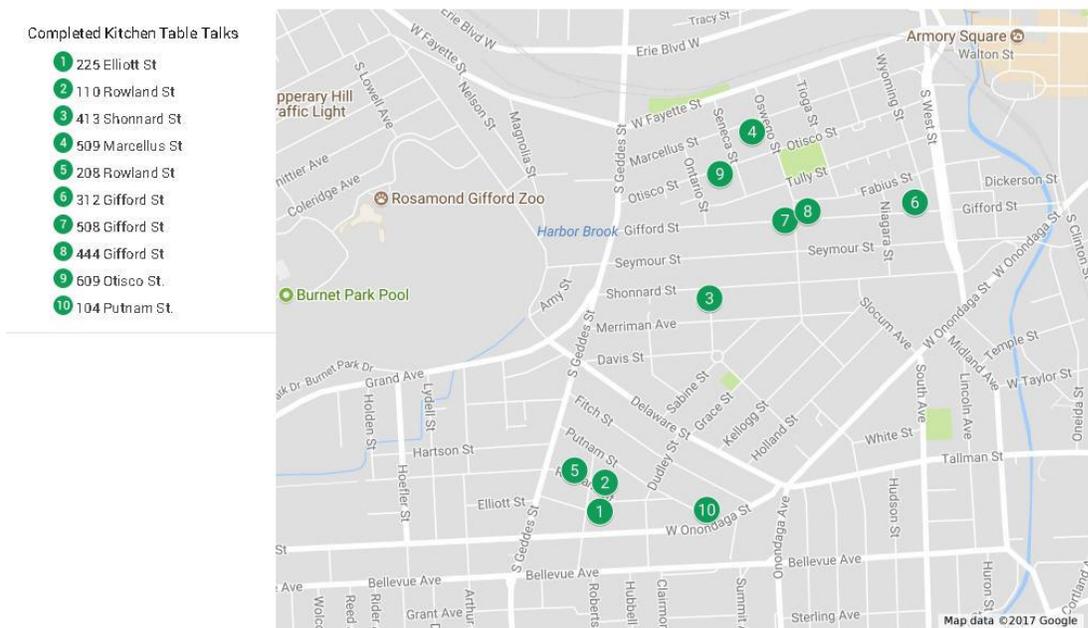
4. What is the best way that you find out about events going on in the neighborhood (i.e. social media, flyers, NWSI newsletter, word of mouth, etc.)?
5. Do you have kids? Where do they go to school? Are you involved in their schooling? In what ways are you involved? Are there barriers to being involved in your children's schooling?
6. If you could solve one issue, either in the neighborhood or the city, what's the issue and what would your solution be?

Facilitators asked follow-up questions for clarity. A rigid structure was not followed. Participants were free to skip questions, and not all participants answered each question.

### C. Data collection and compilation

At each KTT, a sign-in sheet was used to collect participant information including: name, address, phone number, email, and if the participant was interested in getting more involved in neighborhood activities. Afterwards, notes were typed and shared with staff from collaborating agencies, and participant information was entered into a master spreadsheet. The location of the KTT was entered into a map.

## Kitchen Table Talks - Locations



### Participant Demographics:

Participants were not asked to identify their race, age, or gender. Below are some general approximations based on the facilitators' subjective observations of the visual appearances, names, spoken languages, and commentary of the participants.

Approximately half of the participants were Latino and half were non-Latino. When appropriate, the discussion was held in Spanish, or in a mix of Spanish and English. Spanish-speaking facilitators were assigned to attend those KTTs where the host anticipated a large number of Spanish-speaking guests.

There were more female than male participants at each KTT, and all ten hosts were women. Participant ages ranged from teenagers to late 70's, though most fell within the 20's – 40's range. Small children in attendance were not counted in the total number of participants. At every KTT, at least two participants were blood related. Nine of the ten hosts were renters; only one host was the owner of her home.

### **Key Findings:**

Questions focused on the strengths and needs of the Near Westside neighborhood, what motivates people to be involved in the community, and how people access and share information about events and services in the neighborhood. Responses varied slightly from one KTT to another, but there was significant overlap, especially in regard to community needs and challenges. Common responses are bulleted here:

#### **Strengths of the Neighborhood**

- Tightknit community where people know one another
- Proximity to family who also live in the neighborhood or nearby
- Diversity of residents and, in particular, a large Spanish-speaking population
- Lots of neighborhood resources like parks and services
- Activities, especially for youth, and especially during summer

#### **Needs/Challenges of the Neighborhood**

- Safety
- Neighbor conflicts
- Infrastructure (streetlights, trash, potholes, broken sidewalks)
- Absentee landlords or unresponsive landlords
- Abandoned/vacant houses
- Trash in the streets
- Drug use and drug dealing
- Violence (fighting, gun violence)
- Truancy, teenagers in the streets
- High unemployment rates
- Poorly funded schools, dilapidated school buildings, burnt out school staff, lots of distractions for students (like fights), and students disrespecting teachers
- Neglect/abuse by law enforcement, slow response time

#### **Motivating Factors**

- Concern for the youth/children and wanting them to have a bright future
- A desire to feel more connected and to belong to a community
- Opportunities to build skills or receive crucial services
- Food, stipends, gift cards, and freebies
- Respect and being seen as a leader

### **Communication Methods**

- Word of mouth is still best
- Most residents use Facebook
- People rely on flyers to get information re: events; no one complained about flyering
- Those engaged in services at one agency tend to find out about other services in the community

### **What Wasn't Discussed**

Census data shows that 52% of residents in the Near Westside neighborhood are living in poverty, though poverty was rarely mentioned. Instead, conversations focused on symptoms of poverty and racism: child abuse/neglect, elder abuse, sexual assault, teen pregnancy, lack of access to quality healthcare, absence of financial institutions, lack of accountability of elected officials, etc. Moving forward, facilitators will coordinate KTTs to explore some of these challenges by modifying the list of questions.

### **Outcomes:**

#### **Service Provider Responsivity**

Since September of 2015, the *Take Back the Streets* service provider collaborative meets monthly to discuss shared goals, plan collaborative events, and brainstorm about community challenges. Facilitators shared updates from KTTs at monthly meetings, and a one-page overview on the KTTs project was created and distributed, which identified community challenges and resident ideas for addressing them (attached at the end).

The KTTs inspired and informed the overarching goals for the second year of the TBTS campaign. Goals for 2017 focused on **(1)** community-based conflict resolution (Peacemaking) **(2)** resident engagement and leadership development opportunities and **(3)** increased collaboration among service providers. The new focus on creating resident leadership development within the neighborhood marked a significant change in the goals of the TBTS campaign and the role played by service providers.

Furthermore, several ideas suggested by residents at KTTs led to new projects and events. For example, the Lerner Center, Missio Church, the Near Westside Initiative, and the Near Westside Peacemaking Project organized a Streetlight Mapping project in 2016 to respond to resident reports that broken streetlights on their blocks were creating dimly lit areas where criminal activity was taking place. Agencies and resident volunteers mapped the streetlights throughout the neighborhood and identified broken lights. This information was turned over to National Grid, the local electrical company, who fixed the broken lights.

Lastly, this report will be disseminated to service providers and other key stakeholders in an effort to continue to use data from KTTs to inform neighborhood programming and outreach strategies and to help service providers better connect to residents and respond more effectively to neighborhood needs.

#### **Community Impact Team**

In 2017, the Near Westside Peacemaking Project called together resident leaders to form a Community Impact Team (CIT). Many of those resident leaders had been identified through KTTs. The CIT works alongside the service provider collaborative to plan and implement resident-led projects

under the *Take Back the Streets* umbrella. Resident-led projects involve residents at every stage of planning and implementation, including formulating an idea, articulating objectives, coordinating logistics, implementing the project, and evaluating outcomes.

The CIT meets twice monthly at the Peacemaking Center, located at 601 Tully Street. As of October 2017, the CIT has a dozen core members who attend meetings, and dozens more who assist with community events and projects on an ad hoc basis. The CIT has planned and implemented several community projects including a series of free outdoor Movie Nights, the installation of Painted Tire Gardens, the distribution of Community Benches to parks and bus stops, and ongoing projects around elder abuse, food access, and early childhood education.

The creation of the CIT marks a significant shift in the role that resident leaders play in organized neighborhood activities. Prior to the KTTs and the CIT, residents played a passive role; they occasionally attended events or responded to surveys, but rarely participated in the planning and implementation. With the formation of a CIT, residents are now at the forefront of conversations on neighborhood issues and they frequently participate in decision-making processes that directly affect their community.

### **Replication of the KTT Model**

Communities seeking new, effective ways to engage residents in community revitalization efforts have expressed interest in using KTTs as an outreach strategy. Organizers from Chicago, Detroit, Atlanta, and New York City have reached out to learn more about KTTs and their role in increasing community participation. As TBTS leaders speak at conferences and to media outlets, word spreads about the usefulness of the KTT model and the success of the TBTS campaign, bringing positive attention and potential resources to Syracuse.

### **Lessons Learned:**

During the last two years of implementation, a number of lessons have been learned from the KTTs.

#### **1. Peacemaking is a key part of community engagement and resident leadership development.**

Peacemaking is community-based conflict resolution learned from Native American communities that helps community members heal damaged relationships so they can move forward in a positive direction. Peacemaking relies on community volunteers who receive extensive training to become peacemakers, and these volunteers see themselves as leaders due to the responsibility and respect they gain. As learned through KTTs, violence and conflict is a major challenge in the Near Westside neighborhood. Peacemaking has become a key component of the *Take Back the Streets* campaign because peacemaking:

- a. Offers a shared language through which residents and service providers can communicate about neighborhood safety and wellbeing,
- b. Creates a sense of shared values among community members from different backgrounds, enabling them to work together across differences toward common goals,
- c. Builds skills among residents to de-escalate tense situations when conflict arises, promoting peace at the ground level of the community, and
- d. Supports resident leadership development by offering trained volunteers the opportunity to work directly with justice-involved community members and their families.

In April of 2017, the Near Westside Peacemaking Project became the lead coordinating agency of the Healthy Neighborhood Initiative and the *Take Back the Streets* campaign. Community-based conflict resolution via peacemaking was added to the campaign goals.

## **2. KTTs are an important tool for identifying and recruiting community leaders.**

Participating in a KTT motivated residents to become more involved in community activities. Approximately 20% of adults who participated in a KTT have since become more involved in the *Take Back the Streets* campaign. For example, two participants became Peacemakers, five attended a 4-day resident leadership training in March 2017, eight became members of the Community Impact Team, and 15 have attended a TBTS event or helped with a community project since participating in a KTT. Several children whose parent attended a KTT became involved in a neighborhood project. Specifically, three children from two different families helped plan and coordinate the Westside Talent Show, and one competed in the show.

## **3. People want to see change in the neighborhood, and they want to do it alongside people they care about.**

Residents are motivated to participate in community projects that allow them to see an impact on their own block or when the initiative directly affects their life. For instance, if a project leads to an improvement in quality of life or a positive outcome for themselves or someone close to them (friends, family, children), residents are more likely to support the project in some way. The proximity of impact, whether geographically or in terms of relationships, is one of the most significant factors residents consider when deciding whether to participate in neighborhood projects and programs. Residents also report being more likely to participate in an event or activity if their friends are going to be in attendance.

Contrarily, it became evident through KTTs that residents are less likely to attend events where there will be people they know but with whom they do not socialize. Residents hinted at rifts among neighbors or families from different blocks, and some expressed an isolationist mentality. Several preferred to socialize only with family members or a tight circle of friends (and no one else) in order “to avoid problems.” This sentiment may present a barrier to uniting neighbors around a common goal. However, the desire to create a safer community for the youth was a universal motivator among KTT participants and, in many cases, the only one that seemed to trump other divisions.

## **4. Resident involvement at every stage creates buy-in and improves turn out.**

Residents reported that they are more likely to attend and participate in community events and activities when they are personally involved in the planning and implementation. For instance, those who provided feedback about when to hold Movie Nights and what movie to show were more likely to help distribute flyers and attend the event. As often as possible, service providers should make an effort to include residents in planning and promoting community events. Allowing residents to make decisions about event details leads to a sense of control, ownership, and community empowerment.

## **5. Follow through is important; updates on progress create trust and maintain interest.**

KTT participants appreciated hearing updates on issues they highlighted during KTTs, especially when their feedback led to a new project. In some cases, residents had noticed changes on their block

and expressed a sense of pride and accomplishment in having contributed to a conversation that led to changes in the neighborhood. For example, residents from a KTT on Rowland St. had discussed the problem of trash on their block. When trashcans were installed at the corner of Elliott and Rowland St., participants reached out to thank facilitators and reported that the solution has reduced the amount of trash on their street. Plans to update residents on progress should be built into timelines for any service provider-led initiatives in the neighborhood.

#### **6. Some people like meetings, others do not.**

At KTTs, some residents expressed interest in attending community meetings and other public forums to discuss challenges and brainstorm solutions to neighborhood problems. Others were less interested in attending meetings and instead preferred to assist community revitalization efforts in other ways, including: attending community events, helping with hands-on projects, flyering, providing input to service providers on a one-on-one basis, spreading information via word of mouth, promoting projects on social media, or volunteering to take photos at events.

Service providers can maximize impact and promote inclusion by offering residents frequent and varied opportunities to participate in community activities. Residents are much more willing to help when the activity aligns with their interests and skills and when it doesn't conflict with other obligations, values, or allegiances.

#### **Next Steps:**

The Kitchen Table Talks project was a collaboration between the Near Westside Peacemaking Project, the Lerner Center, the Gifford Foundation, and the Near Westside Initiative. It serves as a successful example of collaboration among service providers, local funders, an educational institution, and residents. Residents at KTTs said they enjoyed participating and they suggested that more KTTs be done. Partners and residents alike found the model to be easily adaptable to participants of all cultures, backgrounds, and ages. Due to the success of this collaboration, the KTT model has been solidified as a key outreach tool for *Take Back the Streets*. Additionally, the Near Westside Peacemaking Project has partnered with two local organizations to continue to facilitate KTTs around specific community issues.

The Near Westside Peacemaking Project and Early Childhood Alliance will collaborate with the Community Impact Team to organize three KTTs around the topic of early childhood brain development and the "Talking Is Teaching: Talk, Read, Sing" campaign. Talking Is Teaching is a national campaign recently launched in Onondaga County about the importance of talking to babies from birth in order to promote healthy brain development and prepare youth for school.

The Near Westside Peacemaking Project is also teaming up with Vera House, a local domestic violence and sexual assault service provider, and the Community Impact Team to hold KTTs on the subject of elder abuse, with a focus on reaching the Latino community. Elder advocates attend the KTTs, alongside Peacemaking staff and CIT leaders, to spread awareness about the issue and discuss ways to link victims to services.

Lastly, the Near Westside Peacemaking Project will seek additional funding to continue to hold KTTs around focused issues. If requested, Peacemaking Project staff will provide technical assistance to agencies looking to implement KTTs in other neighborhoods in Syracuse or in other cities, depending on funding/availability.