



## **The Assisting Neighborhood Improvement Through Action (A.N.I.T.A.) Project**

by

### **Healthy Communities Immersion Team 2022**

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### **Introduction**

Health of a community is more than the mental and physical condition of individuals. Health involves access to medical services, healthy food, housing, economic opportunity, transportation, and open spaces for recreation. Wellness encompasses safe neighborhoods, environmental quality, and sustainable practices. Each of these components are interrelated and require connection to establish a foundation for a healthy community. Our project focuses on how that connection is established or enhanced through a community block-by-block approach.

### **Process**

Initially, our process for exploring the “healthy communities” immersion topic felt ambiguous and open-ended. During our early exploration, we conducted interviews with regional experts in this subject area; we hoped that these interviews would guide us in brainstorming ideas that we could expand further. While our LMR teammates expressed passion and interest for various areas of this topic, our group struggled to determine a direction to focus our efforts. During a seminar day in early 2022, our teammate Anita shared her story with connecting individuals on her block in her local Brookland Park community. Many of our group members empathized with this experience and the shared benefits in connecting with neighbors.

Anita currently serves as a “block captain” in her community. Upon moving to the Brookland Park neighborhood in the early 2000s, Anita observed the mistrust and lack of cohesion among her neighbors, particularly for those new to the area. Anita sought to bridge this gap and start a conversation with her neighbors by reviving a tradition she started with her own family when she lived in the Fulton Bottom neighborhood—passing out Christmas cards. At Christmas time, she wrote out cards for each address on the block and signed them, “from your neighbor” at her address. This simple act sparked connections that have blossomed over the years into a more structured civic presence. Fellow Brookland Park resident and Executive Director of Embrace Communities, Wendy McCaig, met Anita through these means and sought to assist her with expanding this approach to other communities.

Our group was eager to explore this topic further and conducted an interview with Wendy to gain more insight into her work and the benefits of neighborhood connection. Anita provided us with additional stories and history of her experience in her neighborhood and invited us to attend the North Central Civic Association monthly meeting in March 2022. To better understand the community impact of connection, Anita also encouraged the team to practice her family's holiday card tradition, which multiple team members did with great success in fostering relationships in their neighborhoods.

## **Findings**

Anita's approach is part of a growing movement known as asset-based community development (ABCD). The ABCD strategy focuses on existing community strengths, often beginning with an individual, to encourage stronger, more resilient communities. Our research confirmed the benefit of the ABCD approach. Considered "citizen-led," this approach is driven by the community, creating social networks that provide support, trust, and information. Unlike more traditional approaches such as problem-focused or needs-based, ABCD inspires community-level organizing and action. This engagement is linked to the promotion of healthy communities.

Wendy McCaig explained more about the impact an individual could have on their community during our interview. Wendy noted that the ABCD Institute has identified seven community functions: health, education, security, economy, ecology, children, and care. She emphasized that trust within a community is entirely dependent on the DNA of that specific community, making it crucial to begin with community listening and allow the shape of the development efforts in that community to emerge. Wendy's organization, Embrace Richmond, has established a framework to activate and improve the potential of communities founded on four principles that ungird five capacity building processes: listening, local leader development, team building, partnership development, and the storytelling process.

## **Recommendations and Call to Action**

Based on the work of Anita and Wendy in their North Central Richmond community, our team encourages individuals to utilize the ABCD strategy in their own neighborhood. The approach is resident-driven; the leaders identified as "block captains" must be bold, consistent, and have a strong desire for change in their neighborhood. They must also understand the realistic expectations of their community as well as the inherent challenges in the neighborhood. Many of these qualities are inherent in leaders who participate in LMR, making this a perfect venue to start a movement. In order to support leaders interested in bringing this approach to their neighborhoods, we developed a website, [www.theanitaprojectlmr2022.wordpress.com](http://www.theanitaprojectlmr2022.wordpress.com), with tools and resources to help individuals get started.

Establishing connections at the block and neighborhood levels will foster a healthy community, which would only grow stronger if this approach expands throughout metro Richmond, statewide, and beyond. The experience of Anita and the approach taken by the North Central Civic Association can serve as a template for other neighborhoods, cities, and regions. In conclusion, our findings recommend the ABCD strategy to engage residents to participate, engage, and own their community experiences, building and sustaining healthy communities for all.

## Interviews

- **Dr. Danny Avula**, Deputy Director, Henrico County and Richmond City Health Districts
- **Julie Scott Bilodeau**, CEO, Cross Over Ministry
- **Dr. Gabriella Caldwell-Miller**, Division Director, Behavioral Health and Wellness Hanover County
- **Albert Walker**, Director of Health Equity & Community Building, Richmond Memorial Health Foundation
- **Wendy McCaig**, Executive Director, Embrace Communities
- **Anita L. Johnson**, Community Leader
- **Michael Lease**, Battery Park resident

## Resources

- Richmond Guide to Neighborhood Organization, City of Richmond – Department of Planning and Development Review (Jan. 2013), *available at* <https://www.rva.gov/sites/default/files/Planning/PDFDocuments/UsefulLinks/RichmondsGuideNeighborhoodOrganization.pdf>.
- *What is a Healthy Community? Building Healthy Communities in Southern Nevada*, The Lincy Institute at UNLV (Jan. 2012), *available at* <https://www.unlv.edu/sites/default/files/24/Health-Community-January2012.pdf>.
- Healthy Community Design: Making The Healthy Choice The Easy Choice, Healthy Franklin County (Feb. 8, 2018), *available at* <https://www.healthyfranklincounty.org/healthy-community-design-making-healthy-choice-easy-choice>.
- Casseti, V., Powell, K., Barnes, A., & Sanders, T. (2019). A systematic scoping review of asset-based approaches to promote health in communities: Development of a framework. *Global Health Promotion*, 27(3), 15–23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1757975919848925>.
- Gilster, M. E. (2012). Comparing neighborhood-focused activism and volunteerism: Psychological well-being and social connectedness. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 40(7), 769–784. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.20528>.

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- Social Determinants of Health. Let's Get Healthy California. (2020, January 19). Retrieved January 6, 2022, from <https://letsgethealthy.ca.gov/sdoh/#>.