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NEIGHBOR-HELPING-NEIGHBOR
An Older Adult Community Building Initiative

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The primary goal of NORC was to establish and implement Neighbor-Helping-Neighbor structures, by residents of Golden Lakes Village (GLV) to Age-in-Place. The NORC coordinator facilitated specific activities, identified by the residents themselves, as community-building initiatives. Facilitation included meeting with groups of residents with like-minded concerns, listening closely to issues and concerns, identifying goals and encouraging neighborliness as the basis for developing structure through problem solving. A structure was developed in which residents were assisted to organize and mobilize themselves to be able to provide support to one another. NORC has also helped the GLV community by focusing on themselves as a potentially isolated gated-community and has been successful in having residents interact with the greater Palm Beach County community. Wellness, another focus of the work done as NORC in GLV, and hurricane preparedness were also major components for implementing a structure for Aging-in-Place.

INTRODUCTION

The demographics in Palm Beach County, Florida, are staggering. The Palm Beach County Profile of 2005, projects that in 2010, there will be over 1,150,000 residents in the West Palm Beach area. Florida is a prime example both of the aging “demographic tidal wave” and the movement of the older Jewish population from northern to Sunbelt communities (Newstein & Frumer, 2006). Florida has the highest percentage of elders (17.6%) and the second highest number of elders (2.8 million), after California (Sheskin, 2001). Palm Beach County continues to struggle to keep up with the growth in the number of Jewish elders. The elder population of Palm Beach County is approximately 281,500, of whom 58 percent are Jewish. Jewish elders comprise the single largest ethnic component.

Given the skewed demographics between young and old, the number of older adults will continue to rise and they most often choose senior gated communities to call “their homes”. Many seniors in our area live in age-segregated neighborhoods and the majority of them do not have their children or grandchildren living close by, who could

offer support and care, when needed. As they age, it is not uncommon for the more frail, older adults to become increasingly isolated from their healthier neighbors. Age-segregated, senior communities have tended to focus on recreation and socialization, an important aspect of successful aging. However, this focus on “resort living” has often been to the detriment of their frail or struggling neighbors.

Generally, gated senior communities do not wish to acknowledge that “they” have needs, including social service, financial or social problems. Isolation, one of the most significant problems evident in gated communities, is linked to higher rates of disease and premature death. “Social isolation has been linked to an increased risk for morbidity, mortality, and cardiovascular disease” (Hawkey et al., 2003, Sorkin et al., 2002), and just recently, “Social isolation has been shown to increase risk for dementia and Alzheimer’s disease among older adults” (Wilson et al., 2007). The very design of gated communities may create challenges to accessing the “outside” formal and informal network of services. The service delivery “maze” can be an overwhelming experience for the most functional of older adults. For services and organizations, entry into these gated communities can be quite challenging, resulting in even greater isolation and “invisible” problems for many of their residents.

Contrary to popular belief, these gated developments, especially those built in the 1980’s, are extremely heterogeneous in their make-up. Another myth is that gated communities offer increased security. Surprisingly, although a gate does offer control, it also represents an attractive target, which may increase incidents of crime, scams and exploitation of vulnerable older adults. Communities are about sharing resources and responsibilities. However, most gated communities have outsourced everything within their gates. When built in the 1980’s, the developers did not think about providing for those who could no longer fully meet their own needs. Additionally, they made no provision for services that would enhance the independence of older individuals, as they adjust to disabilities associated with the aging process.

Behind the beautifully manicured lawns and swaying palm trees, the community, by virtue of its gated nature, unless revitalized could be likened to a potential “ghetto”. Property tax increases and exorbitant homeowner’s insurance rates now increase the financial strain upon the many low-income residents. The result is that many low-income

Jewish older residents feel “stuck” there, without supports, yet are unable to afford to relocate. They are often “invisible” to the younger, more vibrant retirees, from different cultural backgrounds, who have continued to move into the community because of its affordable housing costs. However, the majority are not invested in the community (which could also be perceived as a bedroom community), since a large proportion of younger retirees are required to find part-time work to support themselves.

NATURALLY OCCURRING RETIREMENT COMMUNITIES

Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORC) is a program of Alpert Jewish Family & Children’s Service of Palm Beach County, Inc. There are over 40 NORCs, coordinated through UJC that are federally funded programs. A NORC or Naturally Occurring Retirement Community refers to the term coined by Professor Michael Hunt of the School of Human Ecology, University of Wisconsin-Madison, who was the first to recognize, research, and publish on the NORC Aging-in-Place phenomenon.

In Palm Beach County, Alpert Jewish Family & Children’s Service developed and implemented a NORC program at Golden Lakes Village. A Neighbor-Helping-Neighbor approach to community building initiatives, implemented by AJFCS, has assisted Golden Lakes Village in a self evaluation of the strengths and needs of their community. Golden Lakes Village, located in the heart of West Palm Beach, is a development of close to 2,300 units (semi-detached single homes and primarily two-story duplexes) that was established in the early 1970s. Over 60% of its seniors are on fixed incomes and, although many of them own their own homes that they purchased many years ago, they now have little to no savings or disposable income. Property could be purchased for under \$50,000 in the 1990s. It is a diverse community (although the majority of residents are from the northern states, and at least 50% are Jewish). As residents have Aged-in-Place and the original cohort is fast becoming older; in their mid 80s to early 90s, there has been a greater diversity in age, ethnicity and socio-economic backgrounds, since younger retirees, who still need to work, continue to buy property in the development. These changes in the demographics have challenged all aspects of the community. The diverse population groups do not naturally interact with one another as a collaborative and supportive community.

NORC at Golden Lakes Village is a *Community Building Initiative*, designed to build the community's capacity to effect positive change in community conditions through the integration and connection of the community's social, human, physical, political and economic resources through a planned and participatory process in order to meet the community priorities and visionary desired goals towards a long term view.

The primary role of the NORC Coordinator has been to encourage the community building initiative by providing input, identifying stakeholders, defining priorities and the implementation of plans. During the *Involvement Phase*, the NORC Coordinator utilized diverse strategies to understand the interrelationships among the various groups of residents, associations and demonstrated respect for the community through her attempts to establish trust with as many community collaborators as possible. The *Planning Phase* incorporated the identification of goals and intended outcomes which include stakeholders, in determining the type of involvement and participation residents would have in achieving identified activities that are planned.

NORC ACTIVITIES AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

This paper will highlight the efforts and outcomes of the NORC at Golden Lakes Village in West Palm Beach, Florida. Four major areas were developed for the Neighbor-Helping-Neighbor community building initiatives:

- Hurricanes
- Wellness
- Volunteer Corps
- Neighborliness

A. Hurricane season

Following hurricane Wilma, a Hurricane Task Force was instrumental in sending a hurricane survey to 2,300 residents of Golden Lakes Village to determine their status regarding preparation needs, evacuation plans, medical needs, transportation needs, and safe room availability. 10% of the residents responded. This survey, even for those snow birds who filled it out, provided a stimulus to the residents during the non-hurricane season to plan ahead.

Prior to the next hurricane season another survey was sent by NORC to the residents, asking some of the same questions, but also asking additional ones,

regarding location of condo, whether in a multi-story unit, preparations for medical supplies and specifically oxygen, mobility needs, and whether they were willing to be on a NORC-sponsored hurricane task force. The response was an additional 5%. The purpose of this second survey was two-fold: 1) to alert the all-year residents to early preparations, and 2) to include aspects of Neighborliness and Volunteering, by starting a task force. Finally, because of hurricane Wilma, it was deemed necessary to re-do the survey since many units have been and are being sold. Outcomes include:

- Resident Directors, or Condo Representatives, have been made aware of the need to check on their unit owners, and determine their needs.
- A NORC coordinated hurricane task force between the two sections of Golden Lakes Village has been organized with 18 volunteers has already met and its members are planning on going door to door if need be, or calling near by unit owners.
- Generators for the clubhouses were considered by the Condo Associations
- Individual social and civic clubs were encouraged to call their members to remind them to prepare.
- The NORC coordinator arranged for Red Cross speakers to address the residents twice to respond to residents' questions.
- The task force developed and distributed a NORC Emergency Numbers List for Palm Beach County, which has also been aired on the Golden Lakes Village in-house TV channel.
- The NORC coordinator prepared a hurricane tips column which is distributed for the 2,300 residents in addition to the monthly NORC column. This column is divided into sections on Home, Medications, Food and Water, Supplies, and Important Papers. The residents continue to be reminded by newsletter and the volunteers of the task force, that 'special needs' shelters need to be applied for six weeks prior to a disaster.
- In addition, at a Democratic Club political meeting, the NORC coordinator met briefly with the state representative, state senator, and county commissioner about post-hurricane contact for Golden Lakes Village. As a result, the state representative gave her cell phone number; the County Commissioner was in

touch regarding the creating of CERT (Community Emergency Response Training), and the state senator is well aware of the residents' needs.

B. Wellness

- NORC had instituted Wellness programs that have been ongoing. Over 2,523 residents of both Phase A & Phase B participated in the NORC Wellness programs.
- Blood Pressure screening: Total 214 residents served.
- Water Aerobics: Total: 364 residents served.
- Yoga: Total: 199 residents served.
- Pilates: Total: 856 residents served.
- Aerobics: Total: 761 residents served.
- Swimming Lessons began January 2006: Total: 64 residents served.
- Sit and Be Fit program began June 2006: Total: 23 residents served.
- Defibrillator training on June 20th was held. 10 people participated.
- Speakers were set up for Fire Safety at the Phase A Board meeting.
- An Open Health Forum by a pro-bono doctor was arranged so that residents could ask any medical questions that they might have had. Over 35 people attended each month.
- Weekly bereavement support group was available for those who need; 5-8 attended weekly support groups.
- Since March 2006, at least 32 residents with personal concerns had received help from AJFCS or a sister agency as referrals from the NORC program.

C. Through participation in NORC activities, residents recognized that volunteering as a community-building initiative for Golden Lakes Village was crucial.

- The individual clubs addressed communication, with the goal of encouraging their already existing phone contacts to include outreach efforts and assistance to those who might have needs.
- Residents created a task force and, with the assistance of the NORC coordinator, were instrumental in having the Wachovia Bank establish on-site banking for the residents of GLV.

- A volunteer task force was implemented by residents who recruited other residents as a means to formalize outreach efforts by the residents to others. This will include phone check-ins as well as emergency transportation.
- A volunteer hurricane task force has been initiated and was formally supported by the Home Owners Associations.
- A writer's club was formed to encourage creativity and support for residents with like-interests.
- Volunteers requested NORC's assistance to establish a connection with the local Pet shelter where residents obtained volunteer positions as greeters. This achieved two goals: volunteering and a wellness aspect for seniors to relate to cats and dogs.
- A Baby Boomers' Club and a Couples Club were initiated by residents, facilitated by the NORC coordinator.

D. Volunteerism

Through participation in NORC activities, residents focused on community-building and neighborliness as a crucial part of Golden Lakes Village initiatives. To that end, since March, residents, in partnership with the NORC coordinator, addressed the following existing civic and community clubs with the GLV community:

- Men's Club
- Two Women's Clubs
- Singles' Club
- Hadassah
- ORT
- Latin American Club
- Italian American Club
- the Secretary of the Ramallah Club
- Open Forum of all residents of one of the Phases
- monthly meetings of Communications Committee
- Homeowners' and Condo Board of Directors meetings
- The Democratic Club to speak about hurricane help

- The NORC coordinator was asked by the Communications Committee of Phase B to present a communications workshop for volunteers. The Resident Directors were specifically invited to attend, which was the first time a collaborative effort was implemented as a community-building initiative.

At all events, the NORC coordinator had stressed the need for community building, resulting in additional initiatives:

- one condo planned a pizza party for its unit owners to get to know each other and have since planned to invite the unit owners of a neighboring condo to a get-together.
- Another condo planned a get-together within its multi-story building.
- One of the social clubs planned to create more of a cohesive, neighborly feeling with its neighbors.

E. Future Plans

- Nutrition speaker – a request has been made for a nutritionist to come and speak regarding meals for the elderly.
- Transportation needs – at night (within the community and outside). This is an aspect that NORC needs to help the Golden Lakes Village residents in the near future. While NORC arranged for daily bussing to daytime locations for both phases, internal bussing, especially at night, is needed more and more as the residents grow older. The NORC coordinator has begun meeting with younger residents to create a 'Circle of Friends' group to fill this need and to check on older residents, but hurricane considerations at the present time have front-burner priority. One stumbling block is the fear of liability by the residents.
- Transportation to JCC activities and programs and other activities in the larger community will be needed, not just the grocery store.
- Alzheimer's speaker: The request has been made for a speaker to come and talk about Alzheimer's to the residents in the fall.
- A caregiver speaker has been requested. This will also be geared to men who are unused to caregiving on a long term basis.

CONCLUSION

Community development with older adults in their neighborhoods is an integral part of implementing initiatives that reflect the structure and elements that are identified by residents who live in gated-communities. When seniors themselves select priority issues, develop a work plan and take action, the professionals who work with them and are able to support and facilitate their investment or ownership in their communities. The most challenging aspect of a Neighbor-Helping-Neighbor approach to community building is the efforts to engage the older adults. This fundamental requirement can be even more difficult if there is more than one identified community within the gated-development and each has their own homeowners or condo association. By building the capacity of residents to help one another, the NORC program has ensured some continuity and sustainability of the social capital that has been harnessed in the Golden Lakes Village gated-community. The success of the NORC program is in large part due to the professional's support at critically needed times during the initiative building process.

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