



Profile: Amy Sanchez

City of Joliet, Will County

The problem

Amy Sanchez has always played an active role in her community, and when she read about the Quality of Life plan for the 4th and 5th districts of Joliet, she learned that she and her fellow Collins Street neighbors do not have access to the same quality of life as other districts in Joliet. She had enrolled her children in an after-school program at the Unity Community Development Center (CDC), and began to research all that the CDC does. She found that there were neighborhood councils in other districts, but not for her district. She inquired with Unity about the lack of representation and they said that they needed someone to take the lead.

The solution

Amy decided that she needed to step up to the plate and develop the neighborhood council for the Collins Street area. While the neighborhood is predominantly Latino, she wanted the group to be inclusive and representative of all groups. There were only 5 neighbors that came out for the first meeting group, but the group has grown to over 75 people. They now have a Board and have successfully helped the community shape its character and chose the types of development that would best benefit the residents of the 4th and 5th districts.

The process

Before starting the council, Amy wanted to be sure that the other residents would be supportive of her efforts, and that she would have participation in the council. She first went to different community leaders to ask for their opinions on associations and whether or not they would support her efforts. One issue that was at first contentious was that she did not want the neighborhood council to be based on race. This proved to be a bigger hurdle than she had imagined; some people wanted the group to be more political and take a stance on immigration and the rights of Latinos. She stressed the need to be inclusive and said that the council would be able to direct residents to resources about their rights and about immigration issues without taking a political stand.

The first council meeting of five took place in a pavilion in a local park in October of 2010. Collins Street resident Raffael Gomez brought up the recent water rate hikes, for which he had single-handedly collected over 300 signatures of concerned residents. With so many people coming together on an issue, the water rate increase was the perfect first project for the Neighborhood Council to tackle. They agreed to act as a liaison to the City to address the neighborhood concerns. In January, they set up a meeting with the director of the water department for the City of Joliet, Jim Eggan. The City took the opportunity to educate the residents on how to read their bill and the residents learned that getting the attention of City officials was not so difficult.

In the early months, they developed their mission statement: “To bring together a changing community with an economically diverse population by spurring development of affordable residential housing, creating vibrant and healthy commercial corridors, increase of jobs, better education, increase transportation, enhanced recreation and improving the delivery of existing services to under-served populations.” The mission statement ties back to Sanchez’s initial motivation for creating the council: improving the community’s access to quality of life indicators.

Another initial effort was to organize a city-wide cleanup, involving other neighborhood councils and volunteers. The publicity garnered and tangible improvements in the community helped to solidify the council’s role and gain respect

Overview

Amy Sanchez is showing the residents of the Collins Street neighborhood of Joliet just how much of a difference one person can make. She formed the Collins Street neighborhood council in 2010 to improve the quality of life for the area. The council has brought people together and stood up for the community on important issues.

CMAP Resources

- [Human Relations Strategy Report](#)
- [Chicago Community Trust Strategy Papers](#)

GO TO 2040 emphasizes effective, collaborative approaches to common problems.



Amy Sanchez was featured in the [Chicago Sun Times](#) for her community activism, and for being an advocate of reducing gun violence after surviving a gunshot wound to the head when she was nine years old. (photo: Matt Marton)

For more information

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from the residents. They have also stood up against the opening of a pawn shop that was slated to go in next to a local high school. They followed the zoning board meetings, petitioned the school, and informed neighbors of the potential development. It proved to be one of their biggest challenges, but they were successful and the pawn shop did not open by the high school. This victory helped to lay the foundation for what type of businesses they want to attract in their community; they can live without additional liquor stores or pawn shops.

Sanchez's council has also addressed traffic problems around a school, and initiated significant playground improvements through the City. The council now has a Community Committee, an Education Committee, and a Crime Prevention group. The Community Committee connects with community centers, organizations, and local churches to address the needs and concerns of the residents and to open a line of communication between the council and the residents. The Education Committee works directly with the principals of the Parks Elementary School, the Sanchez Elementary School, and Gompers Junior High school as well as the Parent Teacher Organization to ensure that children are active and accessing available resources. The Crime Prevention group is forming a Neighborhood Watch and working with the Joliet Police Department. They also plan to coordinate 911 Education classes in English and Spanish.

Additionally, Sanchez is working to engage the Collins Street residents in the CMAP Local Technical Assistance project to plan for the redevelopment of the Joliet prison site. She wants to make sure that the new development will help the local small businesses, and she wants the residents to be active participants in the plan development.

Community considerations

As mentioned before, there were some residents that wanted the neighborhood council to be more political and focus on Latino issues. Sanchez held strong in her focus of inclusiveness and her council is the first one that does not focus on race. People have seen that she is genuine in this mission and it has helped to build bridges between the Latino and non-Latino residents; they respect the Collins Street council.

Outcomes

The effort that Amy Sanchez put into developing the neighborhood council has really paid off. At their peak levels, the council has had between 75 and 100 participants. They have gained respect from local businesses, churches, and parents. Most importantly, they have given a voice to the residents to help them improve their quality of life. With the water rate increase, residents learned that the bill was mostly excess sewage and waste removal fees and not actual consumption; City staff learned that residents were genuinely struggling to adjust to a drastic increase over a short time. Working with the local Park District, they were able to remove dangerous and faulty equipment, replace basketball nets and soccer posts. Simple upgrades have increased family participation in the park.

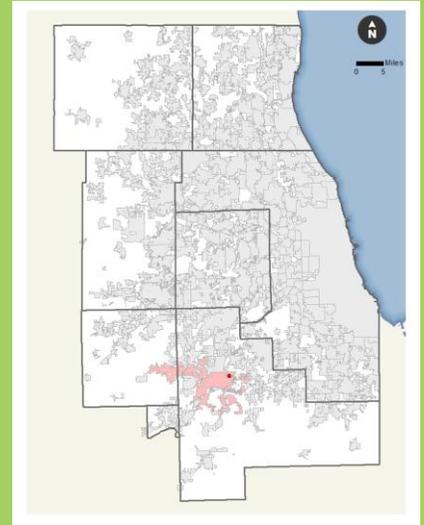
Lessons learned

Sanchez says that the biggest lesson she has learned is the importance of consistency. Some residents are tired of believing in the spirit of community and unified efforts; they have been let down or do not feel included. Showing consistency has paid off in earning the trust of residents. Collectively gathering opinions and facts about topics allows their council board to make good decisions for the community as a whole. One person can make the difference in starting the process, but the collaborative efforts are what make progress a success.

Contact Lindsay Banks (lbanks@cmapp.illinois.gov) to submit a case study.

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Location Map:



Additional Resources

- [Neighborhood Organizations in Joliet: Unity CDC](#)
- [Sample "How to Start a Neighborhood Council"](#)
- [CMAP's Get Involved campaign](#)



Sanchez worked as a police cadet in the late 1990s.



Amy Sanchez (photo: Matt Marton, Chicago Sun Times)