



Building Blocks, Building Community:

Getting Started with Block Organizing in Milwaukee



Content

- Introduction
- What is Community Building?
- Different Types of Neighborhood Groups
- Why Start a Block Group?
- Getting Started at the Neighborhood Level
- Why have a meeting when you can have a Party?
- Fun Community Building Activities
- Keeping the momentum
- Problem Solving Strategies
- The Role of Law Enforcement

Appendix

- Block Club Interest Survey
- Block Club Meeting Flyer
- Meeting Sign-in Sheet
- Block Club Phone Tree
- Neighborhood Map
- Neighborhood Standards
- Personal Property Identification Record
- Suspect and Vehicle Description
- Useful Phone Numbers
- Useful Websites



This document is built upon research conducted on neighborhood organizing models utilized throughout the U.S. and other countries. The information was compiled by James Wankowski, Carroll University undergraduate in Criminal Justice, and intern with Safe & Sound, Inc., Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Introduction to Safe & Sound:

Safe & Sound is a community-based, anti-crime strategy designed to reduce crime and violence. It acknowledges that no one approach, by itself, would reduce crime. Safe & Sound utilizes the interdependent strategies of positive youth development at Safe Places, door-to-door neighborhood organizing through the Community Partners, and tough law enforcement through the Milwaukee High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA). This is a unique, collaborative approach to fighting crime, violence, illegal drug and alcohol sales, and other neighborhood problems in the U.S.; no other city incorporates these strategies.

Safe & Sound was established in 1998 as a pilot initiative to reduce crime, especially violent crime, in high-crime, generally low-income neighborhoods through strong public-private partnerships. The Safe & Sound Initiative is based upon the respected work of Milwaukee's Youth Crime and Violence Task Force, founded by U.S. Senator Herb Kohl, former Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist and former U.S. Attorney Thomas Schneider. The Task Force consisted of a broad coalition of neighborhood leaders, government officials, heads of youth-serving agencies, law enforcement chiefs, and business and community leaders. The thrust of the Task Force's conclusions was a need for a balanced approach between tough law enforcement and community-based prevention to achieve effective crime reduction, increased economic viability and proactive youth development.

The community organizing component is realized through the Safe & Sound Community Partners Program. The information presented here is intended to broaden the impact to those groups we currently collaborate with and other neighborhoods that seek to build community and reduce crime in their neighborhoods.

Please contact us with questions or comments:

Safe & Sound, Inc.
Community Partners Program
414-221-6701
safesound@milwaukeehidta.org

www.safesound.org

Safe & Sound, Inc.
801 W. Michigan St.
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53233



Safe & Sound Mission:

Safe & Sound develops, supports and facilitates collaborative approaches to measurably reduce violent crime by blending law enforcement, neighborhood organizing and youth development.

What is Community Building?

Community building begins with individuals that seek neighborhood change. We maintain a focus on building community and sustainability and use resident concerns with crime as community building asset, not a deficit. The concerns of residents bring people together to inspire and develop neighborhood based camaraderie and leadership. Community building is more than remediating problems such as blight and crime. It provides resources, such as employment training or social services referrals, to foster a fundamental transformation. Community building seeks to change the circumstances of individuals living high-crime/low-income neighborhoods. It is a comprehensive change inclusive of multiple sectors including social, educational, physical, and quality of life areas.

Community building is about strengthening the capacity of neighborhood residents, associations and institutions. It is focused on identify neighborhood needs and responding through ongoing outreach, meetings, activities and networking. Moreover, providing services, training, organizing functions or resources contributes to the goal of transforming the relationship between neighborhoods and the systems outside neighborhood boundaries (i.e. law enforcement, city services, youth services) This change or transformation is grounded in local neighborhood life and priorities, but incorporates the resources from outside the neighborhood.

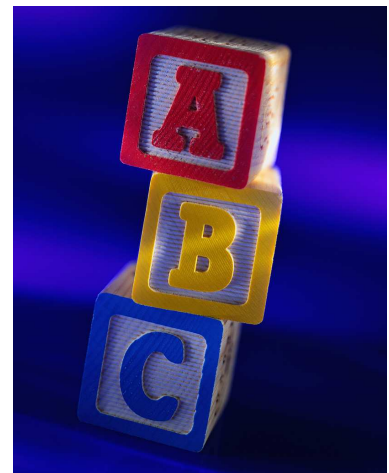
To accomplish this change, Safe & Sound focuses on bringing law enforcement, youth and residents together around neighborhood concerns while working to build capacity, collaboration, and develop crime reduction initiatives that lead to real action at the community level.

Human + Neighborhood + Social Capital = Community Building:

An emphasis on building social capital, or strengthening what is called civic life, social fabric, sense of community and the like, is accomplished by local block watches, block clubs, landlord groups, youth leadership groups and collaborations with religious, civic, and community organizations and other organizers.

Building neighborhood capital, or improving the physical landscape of the neighborhood, can be carried out by housing improvement and blight reduction activities. Community service is a vehicle to bring residents, youth and law enforcement together to work on tangible community improvement activities that build community.

Building human capital is concerned with individuals and is carried out by direct services and specific problem resolution with law enforcement, youth development resource connections, training and networking. Problem resolution is focused on improving the outcomes for individuals and families living and working in the neighborhoods being served.



Why have a neighborhood group?

Neighborhood groups can be formed or mobilized for any number of reasons. These can be for positive reasons, such as a party or an event, or for negative issues, such as an unruly neighbor or drug activity. The following is just one example:

“While conducting door-to-door outreach several residents noted problems concerning a motel that was involved in drug-use, late night parties, and prostitution. Interestingly the business was not even open, having been shut down a year earlier. The concerns were brought to the attention of a Safe & Sound Community Partner working in the neighborhood who worked with residents to meet with the Community Prosecution Team and elected officials to address the issues and eventually have the habitually problematic business shut down. An even stronger block watch and relationship resulted from the problem.”

Different Types of Neighborhood Groups

Almost all neighborhood groups are committed to working together to watch out for one another and address quality of life issues that affect their neighborhood. They are grass roots organizations that provide a structure through which the police, city officials, and the community meet one another; building trust and recognition in a partnership to reduce crime and improve neighborhood livability. Moreover, neighborhood groups plan and participate in activities that create a sense of community among neighbors. The most common types are:

Block Watch: A block watch is basically three or more neighbors who communicate regularly to keep a “watch” over criminal, nuisance and blight issues that can destroy neighborhood safety and quality of life. Oftentimes block watch groups are informal, do not hold regular meetings and are sometimes focused on addressing long-term and serious criminal issues.

Block Club: Block Clubs work to be inclusive of everyone on the block by hold meetings and planning street events like block parties, clean-ups, neighborhood walks, etc. Typically, block clubs are highly visible and active in multiple areas of neighborhood organizing.

Neighborhood Association: Neighborhood Associations are often the result of several block watches or block clubs coming together to form an association. Associations have a higher level of organization with elected leaders, committees, fundraising and larger meetings that provide a forum for police, elected officials and city services.



Landlord Compacts: Landlords that share a geographic area, such as an apartment complex, or common concerns, such as drug and prostitution activity, have successfully banded together to share information and resources while providing an active forum for a variety of resource, political or city services professionals.

Why start a Block Group?

Each day crime and the fear of crime, threatens communities. Residents change their plans and lifestyles based on the fear of going out after dark. Parents and children are afraid to use local parks where criminals meet and businesses refuse to put shops in areas they believe are unsafe. It often seems as if nothing can be done to make neighborhoods safer places in which to live and work. A Block Club can help solve these problems. Whether you live in a high crime area or not a Block Club holds many rewards for your family and your neighborhood. Block Clubs instill a greater sense of security and reduce the fear of crime in your community. The residents that live in an area know the needs of the area better than anyone. By communicating with each other and working together as a team, your community can make a difference. Block Clubs also create a greater sense of community among neighbors first through the common goal of improving the neighborhood and second by bringing them together during Block Club meeting and events. *You and your neighbors have the power to make a difference!*

Reduce the risk of becoming a victim of crime: Participants are taught to take preventative measures to decrease the likelihood of becoming a victim of crime. Law enforcement agencies report that Block Clubs reduce the risks of home burglaries, vandalism, personal assault, and fraud.

Become better prepared to respond to suspicious activity: Communication between the neighborhood and the police department is crucial. Part of a Block Club is learning how to identify and report suspicious activity. You will also learn to provide the police with the information that they need to resolve the issue. Criminals know that if a neighborhood has a Crime Watch sign posted, the neighborhood is not an easy target. It is a notice that the neighborhood is organized and does not tolerate criminal activity in the area.

Knowing your neighbors and creating a sense of community: Block Clubs promote getting to know your neighbors and participation in Block Club events and activities. Getting to know the people that live closest to you helps create a sense of community between you and your neighbors.

Address other areas of concern within the neighborhood: Block Club participants can address other issues that concern their neighborhood or community. Areas of interest might include: recreational opportunities for children, neighborhood clean ups, fire prevention, school safety programs, noise issues, abandoned vehicles, or suspicious activity occurrences.



Getting Started at the Neighborhood Level

The best way to organize a Block Club is to build upon the existing active residents and relationships. A Block Club is a more formal invitation to 'get involved' and creates a community among neighbors. This sense of community can be created by hosting Block Club events that include activities that everyone in the neighborhood can help plan, participate in, and enjoy. If no Block or Neighborhood Watch exists a Block Club can still be formed, but the crime prevention and crime awareness aspect of a watch program and the involvement of law enforcement should be included.

Organizing the First Meeting: You can organize an informal social event at your home or local church, to get the process started. A local community organizer or Community Liaison Officer can be contacted to attend the meeting and discuss the benefits of a Block Club, information on crime occurring in your area, and useful tips to reduce crime.

Effective ways to get people to the first meeting: Reaching out to all of the neighbors is important. Distribute the flyers noting the location, time, and purpose of the meeting seven to ten days before the meeting to the neighborhood. You might also want to include the topic you will be discussing.

Door-to-Door contacts: When distributing flyers to the neighbors, try to speak to the neighbor as well. Personal contact helps to develop a sense of community and friendly relations. Although it takes more time, personal contacts allow you to learn about your neighbor's interests and ask them about concerns they would like to see discussed at the meeting. This can also be achieved by utilizing the [Block Club Interest Survey](#) that can be found in the Appendix!

Get commitments: When inviting neighbors, try to get them to commit to attending your Block Club meeting. They may be more likely to attend so as not to disappoint you.

Arrange for refreshments: Food is always a good draw. Even lemonade and cookies can go a long way towards enticing your neighbors to the meeting.

Reminder phone calls: If you have the time, give a reminder phone call to your neighbors and other invited guests the day before the meeting.



What the block meeting should include

Welcome and Sign In: Welcome everyone and let them know how long the meeting will last. Use a sign-in sheet to keep track of who is present at the meeting. A **Meeting Sign-in Sheet** can be found in the Appendix! Read aloud the agenda and items to be covered and tell residents there will be time after the meeting to ask questions. Start the meeting on time and end on time by providing an opportunity for introductions at the start of the meeting and informal discussion periods after the meeting.

"We want to promote home ownership and a healthy community. We may not have all we want, but we have what we need."

Block Club Captain

Introductions: Let residents introduce themselves by giving their names and addresses.

Discussion of Neighborhood Issues: Allow residents time to raise specific neighborhood concerns. At the first few meetings, residents might express anger and frustration over neighborhood problems and criticize law enforcement for not doing more to address their problems. As time goes on though, residents will use this time to focus on specific issues and ways to address them.

Crime Prevention Presentation: During the first meeting, the Community Liaison Officer or their representative will provide information on crime prevention topics and ways to maintain an active Block Club.

Selection of a Block Club Captain or Co-Captains: The basic structure of a Block Club involves a captain or co-captains and members. A captain can be elected by the members during the first meeting or can just be unofficially decided until a later meeting. It is recommended that the captain and co-captain are assigned for a specific period of time, such as one year, which enables transition and sharing of responsibility.

Issues for the Next Meeting: Before the meeting adjourns, plan on the issues to be discussed at the next meeting.

Date, Time and Place for Next Meeting: Members usually meet once a month or, at the least, every other month. Captains and other members involved with planning, training and meeting activities usually meet more often.

Conclusion/Refreshments and Sharing: The time after the meeting can be as important as the meeting itself. During this time, members can have the opportunity to visit and build friendships and informally brainstorm on future goals and strategies.

Strategies to deal with challenging neighbors and attitudes

In the process of inviting your neighbors to your first Block Club meeting, it might be possible that one or two of your neighbors will respond negatively to the idea. Don't be discouraged and don't take it personally! They just need a little more convincing about the benefits of neighbors coming together as a group. These are some responses that you could use to address a less than enthusiastic response to the idea of a neighborhood block club.



Their comment: “Organizing a Block Club? That’s a great idea, but it’ll never work in this neighborhood. The neighbors don’t even know each other.”

Your response: “That’s the problem and a Block Club is the solution! How can you solve problems if you don’t know your neighbors well enough to work together on issues that affect all of us in the neighborhood?”

Their comment: “I don’t want to get involved and be a nosy neighbor.”

Your response: “Many people have discovered that getting involved doesn’t mean being nosy; it means being concerned for your neighbors and your neighborhood.”

Their comment: “We don’t have any crime in our area. This is a nice, quiet neighborhood.”

Your response: “Organizing a Block Club can keep it that way. A close knit neighborhood is a safe neighborhood. It can be helpful in addressing other neighborhood concerns as well.”

Their comment: “We will always have crime in our neighborhood. There is nothing we can do about it.”

Your response: “We will always have crime but a Block Club brings people together so that we don’t feel alone when bad things happen. Together we can work on these problems and together we share our concerns as one voice with the police or elected officials.”

Their comment:

“I just don’t have time to be involved.”

Your response:

“We do not need to meet very often...just once a month...in order to be effective as a group. These meetings will only last 1 to 1½ hours.”

“We were asked to step outside of our comfort zones to raise awareness of the community and we’re making a difference.”

Pedro, Safe Place Participant



Maintaining the momentum

Once a Block Club has been established the most difficult aspect becomes maintaining the effectiveness and overall participation of members. The upkeep of a successful Block Club requires the efforts of everyone in the neighborhood. Each member has a role they play as a part of the club.

Responsibilities of a Block Club Member

- ✓ Be the eyes and ears of law enforcement and be able to react to activity and suspicious persons without confrontation.
- ✓ Teamwork. Work together with your neighbors to solve problems.
- ✓ Practice personal safety and security. This can be done by locking windows and doors, leaving a porch light on, or making sure someone is watching your house when you are out of town.
- ✓ Attend Block Club meetings and events on a regular basis to stay up to date on what is happening in the community and participate in block club events and activities.

Responsibility of a Block Club Captain/Co-Captains

- ✓ The Block Club Captain is the club's link to law enforcement. They are responsible for coordinating information with the police and the Community Liaison Officer as well as information to be distributed to the club members.
- ✓ Developing a phone tree and a neighborhood map as well as organizing and planning future meetings. This may include getting a speaker to attend a meeting and give a presentation on a topic pertinent to your community.
- ✓ Oversee the planning of Block Club events.
- ✓ Encourage all neighbors to be alert in the neighborhood and report suspicious behavior.

Why have a meeting when you can have a PARTY?

The Eight Parts for a Party

Too often we spend time planning and not enough time just trying out new ideas. Also, we don't give ourselves credit for short term, but important accomplishments. Lastly, this needs to be fun and something that you are interested in doing. The following is a quick and easy planning process that really works.

1. Establish an original goal for having a block club or being a neighborhood volunteer
2. Think about the initiatives that are already underway
3. Choose which were/are successful
4. Focus on a specific project that will build on these previous accomplishments
5. Accommodate for your own individual interest
6. Brainstorm ways to utilize people and community assets not yet fully involved
7. Set a short timeline of 2-3 weeks
8. Considering your time period, decide on and accomplish an attainable or acceptable level of success

Developed by Jeff Bercovitz

Safe & Sound Tool Box

The appendix contains several resources that can be used by your Block Club including phone tree and neighborhood map templates, interest surveys, vehicle and suspect identification, property identification, and useful phone numbers and websites.

Telephone Tree

- ✓ A telephone tree is a list of the phone numbers of your neighbors. This list can be used to notify neighbors of upcoming meetings or social gatherings or to spread the word about any crime problems in the neighborhood. One neighbor agrees to be on the top of the list (typically the Block Captain) and telephone two other neighbors.



Those two neighbors then each telephone two more and so on. While it is not a perfect system (i.e. some people may not be home, etc.) it can be surprisingly effective. A **Phone Tree** can be found in the Appendix!

Neighborhood Map

- ✓ Many neighborhoods create block maps that list the address and name and contact information (phone number, email, etc.) of each resident of the neighborhood. A **Neighborhood Map** can be found in the Appendix! Make sure you get your neighbor's permission before placing their name and address on the map. Make sure everyone in the neighborhood gets a copy of the finished map. Try to keep the map updated by displaying it at each neighborhood gathering or Block Club meeting and routinely ask for updates.

Block Club Events

- ✓ The key to keeping a Block Club active is maintaining people's interest over time. The goal of a Block Club is to create a sense of community within a neighborhood, where people care for and about each other. To this end you must see the Block Club not just as a safety meeting but as a place to build long term relationships and encourage a stronger community. Block Clubs can be a lot more than just a meeting. Think of having a neighborhood clean-up, a Halloween Party, a Summer Block Party, or sponsor a National Night Out event.



Fun community building activities

Safe & Sound Community Partners organize numerous events and meetings with residents each year. They strive to include youth and law enforcement at each gathering.

- Movie or card party night
- Cookie exchange
- Kids parties or activities
- Cookbooks for fundraising
- Create a neighborhood newsletter
- Citizen patrols on Halloween
- Physical security improvements
- Neighborhood rummage sales
- Specially designed outreach to address a crime issue and measure community response
- ‘Senior Assist’ initiatives such as brush cutting or graffiti removal
- Snow shoveling for those who cannot do their own
- Exchange of services-babysitting, fix-ups, snow shoveling, etc.
- Guest speakers-police officer, locksmith, council member, etc.
- ‘Lights On’ porch light or safe passage initiatives
- Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design Surveys: landscaping or exterior home improvement
- Neighborhood flower planting or vacant lot improvement
- Garage numbering or sewer ‘no dumping’ stenciling projects
- Cleanups that include not only debris but graffiti, alleys, leaf raking, lawn mowing etc
- Walking Block Meetings or a “Walk Against Violence”
- Landlord meeting
- Block Parties!

Building a garden or building a community?

On Saturday May 22nd residents from the 2900 block of 24th street joined the 24th street block watch group, the Dominican Center and students from Milwaukee School of Engineering (MSOE) to construct six raised bed gardens. The project was a successful community collaborative between residents, block watches, the Dominican Center, Urban Ecology Center in Washington Park, MSOE and Safe & Sound Community Partners.

The project began in early February at a block watch meeting at the Dominican Center. Members of the 2900 block of 24th street block watch brainstormed ideas to engage new residents who moved to the block in the last year. The idea of a community garden immediately took root with the members of the block watch and the Dominican Center staff. The group was excited about the project but never having constructed a community garden before needed some technical assistance.



On Saturday when the ground was broken residents, block watchers, the Dominican Center, MSOE and Safe & Sound Community Partners and Community Prosecution Unit Coordinator Kati Tillema were all present to lend a hand. Sergeant Williams of Milwaukee Police District 5 helped transport wheel barrels, shovels, rakes and other tools from the Urban Ecology Center (UEC) in Washington Park. The UEC allows community groups to use their garden tools free of charge assisting a number of garden projects throughout Milwaukee. Members of the 2900 block watch and the Dominican Center will continue to work on the garden in the coming weeks and encourage new residents on the block to volunteer for the garden and block watch helping keep their block healthy, safe and clean.

Problem Solving Strategies

The practice of solving neighborhood issues and concerns is the responsibility of all involved within the Block Club. No one person should take it upon himself/herself to resolve all issues all the time. This is a team concept, use the entire team. The following are useful steps that could assist in resolving a problem.

1. Identify concerns
2. Prioritize
3. Recognize underlying causes
4. Create a plan
5. Act upon decisions
6. Evaluate results

The Role of Law Enforcement

With training and guidance from law enforcement, a Block Club can be transformed from a group of isolated individuals into a united and committed team working on safety concerns in their neighborhood and community. The officer assigned to the neighborhood plays an essential role in the creation and development of effective Block Clubs. They are trained to serve as the vital communication link between the law enforcement agency and the citizens.

Training

An important role of the officer is to help educate and train residents in crime prevention and offer training on topics of interest to members and their specific neighborhood. Some topics may include personal safety, residential safety, and problem solving.



Your Community Prosecution Unit

Houses where chronic nuisance activities occur drain city resources, are blight on the community, and discourage emotional and economical investment in neighborhoods.

When a property is identified as a nuisance, the CPU's coordinated effort results in traditional and non-traditional measures to abate the nuisance and enhance the quality of life in a neighborhood.

- Common CPU Team nuisance activities include loitering, drug activity, loud music, graffiti, prostitution, and gang activity.
- Partners in the units include: law enforcement, Safe & Sound, Dept. of Corrections, public and private organizations, community and faith-based organizations, and the community as a whole.
- The team applies a coordinated approach and services to address the problems including: landlord meetings; police visits; city inspections; resident mobilization.
- CPU Teams exist in the police districts across the city of Milwaukee.



Support

The officers contribute constructive support and motivate members as they form their club. Later, they work with members by answering questions and offering information on ways to mobilize with other community groups to achieve lasting results. Members utilize the support of the officer beyond the initial meetings as they tackle group goals.

“Community engagement is fundamental to our mission...Cops count, but cops and the community win.”

Chief Edward Flynn

Guidance

The officers guide members as they set up their clubs and during meetings they can help members focus discussions on specific ways to solve neighborhood problems and use each member's skills and talents to achieve set goals.

Leadership

The police officer acts as an advisor contributing both technical expertise and their experiences in the field to encourage active participation from members. The challenge is to help members gain enough momentum so that they can eventually function on their own as a community.



Safe & Sound, Inc.
Community Partners Program
414-221-6701
safesound@milwaukeehidta.org

www.safesound.org

Safe & Sound, Inc.
801 W. Michigan St.
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53233