

# LIVABLE NEIGHBORHOOD PROGRAM

## *Introduction*

### A KIND OF MAGIC

This program uses the mysterious power of numbers. It's a power that could reverse the leverage of most of society's challenges. By harnessing this power we can make our lives better. No matter where we live. No matter what our circumstances.

If you think about it, community "social problems" are caused by a lot of little causes. These causes add up to big effects that are too large for us to manage alone. After all, what can we do about giant issues like air pollution, illegal drugs, earthquakes and hurricanes, the welfare of children, the general health of the environment? By ourselves, not much. When we work together, however, things change. The greater our cooperation, the greater the impact of our efforts. This is a formula for taking the leverage away from problems and giving it to people, one neighborhood at a time.

### A TALE OF TWO NEIGHBORHOODS

Pretend for a moment that you've been house hunting. After much searching you've narrowed your choices to two different houses in two different neighborhoods. Let's say the houses are so similar you can't choose between them based on the usual considerations—size, condition, yard, location, etc. Six of one, half-dozen of the other.

Also assume that the neighborhoods would be identical, except for one thing. One of the neighborhoods—let's call it "Neighborhood A"—has a certain appeal you can't quite put your finger on. It's just a little neater, seems to have a few more trees, somehow gives off a "cared-for" feeling. And those times you drove through it... was it just your imagination, or did there seem to be an unusual amount of visiting going on among neighbors? Let's say your curiosity got the better of you. What if, in your attempt to understand the elusive difference between these two neighborhoods, you introduced yourself to a few of the residents of both places. And what if you learned from the residents of "Neighborhood A" that they participated in a program which makes theirs an unusually nice place to live? Just a really pleasant and secure setting. And not for material reasons, either. What if you discovered that the secret of "Neighborhood A" was a sort of invisible infrastructure, a web of rich and helpful relationships? All other things being equal, which neighborhood do you suppose you'll choose?

## WHAT IS THE LIVABLE NEIGHBORHOOD PROGRAM?

This program is based on a state-of-the-art understanding of what it takes to change individual and group behavior. The secret: clear incentive, immediate reward. The process uses a proven methodology that incorporates a highly structured format linking grassroots effort with government services and business and civic leadership. It's easy to implement. It's enjoyable to take part in. Neighborhoods that follow the simple instructions will make themselves:

- Safer
- Healthier
- Quieter
- Prettier
- Friendlier
- More entertaining
- More economical
- Better places to raise kids
- Kinder to the environment

## BENEFITS AND BENEFICIARIES: PARTNERS, PARTNERS EVERYWHERE

It's hard to imagine a more classic example of win/win possibilities than the Livable Neighborhood Program. Ask yourself, "Who doesn't benefit from livable neighborhoods?" and it's hard to come up with an answer. Ask, "Who does?" and the answer looks like this:

- Residents of all ages, of course
- Property owners
- Developers (livable neighborhoods are easier to market)
- Realtors (homes in livable neighborhoods are easier to sell)
- Businesses (livable neighborhoods house secure customers and happy workers)
- Chambers of commerce and economic development councils (companies like to locate in livable areas)
- Schools (livable neighborhoods make for happier students)
- Places of worship (livable neighborhoods inspire devotion)
- Police (livable neighborhoods have less crime)
- Government (livable neighborhoods are easier to serve)
- Posterity (livable neighborhoods pass on priceless gifts)



## WHERE LIVABLE NEIGHBORHOODS COME FROM, REALLY...

It is the premise of this program that livable neighborhoods come from... well, from we the people. The kind of neighborhood we all want to live in has an endless number of potential supporters and partners, because everyone benefits from them. But the primary responsibility for creating them rests with neighbors. It's important to understand this, because these days those on the front lines of neighborhood development stress that one of the biggest obstacles is epidemic "entitlement mentality." We've become a society that expects government to take care of everything. When it comes to building strong neighborhoods, that's a little like expecting government to exercise for us, or eat healthy food for us.

Too often, neighborhoods wait for the appropriate government agency to show up and fix what ails them. Meanwhile, government at every level is being stressed because we the people demand that more be done with less. The backbone of the Livable Neighborhoods program is a detailed menu of actions that everyone can take in any neighborhood setting—urban, suburban or rural. Its purpose is to help citizens take the steps they can on their own while at the same time interacting with local government as efficiently as possible. It is designed so that any level of activity will produce benefits, but also so that success snowballs. Clearly, the ideal situation combines energetic grassroots initiative with strong partnerships with government, businesses and community service organizations.

The program is also designed to take advantage of the natural process of social change. Research shows that breakthrough ideas at first tend to be picked up by only about 15 percent of the population. These "early adopters" blaze a trail that is soon recognized as beneficial by the next 35 percent of the public. Sociologists call this second group the "early majority." Once these two leadership groups show the way, the "late majority," another 35 percent of the population, follows. For a variety of reasons, sometimes as much as 15 percent of the public never goes along with useful change, but that's okay. As long as what most of society is doing makes sense, the majority carries the day.

## AND WHO NEEDS LIVABLE NEIGHBORHOODS, ANYWAY?

The problem is, many traits of modern neighborhoods don't make sense anymore. It's not just that there are too many problems. It's that too many opportunities are being missed.

While the Livable Neighborhood Program is intended to help communities fix what's broken at the grassroots level, more than that it's meant to help neighbors create and act on their own visions of how they can transform their neighborhood into the kind of place they'd like it to be.

A generation ago, only impoverished neighborhoods in the grip of urban decay—the “Hell’s Kitchens” of the world—were considered troubled. These days it is understood that no geographic or socioeconomic setting is immune from challenges. Sociologists tell us that modern lifestyles carry burdens of isolation that cost us dearly. The loss of “social capital”—which basically translates into networks of helpful relationships and good will with those around us—can be more than unfortunate. It can be toxic. Nowhere is this more true than in the neighborhoods we call home.

In the aftermath of the April 1999 shooting that left 15 students dead at Littleton, Colorado’s Columbine High School, New York writer Lakis Polycarpou laid part of the blame for the tragedy on the emotionally barren life in Littleton. Polycarpou graduated from Columbine High in the early ‘90s, and in a May 10, 1999 Washington Post opinion piece he faulted the media for failing to probe the social roots of such terrible violence. He wrote:

“We are unlikely to hear much of that kind of analysis, because it would indict something much deeper than action movies or the gun culture. It would blame suburban society and the inherent alienation in places like Littleton, where culture and community are either a function of monotonous consumption or dispensable altogether...

“I always pictured community as something that happened anywhere but in a place like the Littleton area. We never knew our neighbors, except in passing; we certainly never had a social connection to them. Children rarely played outside on the street... As far as I know, no one in my family ever joined a ‘neighborhood community’ anything in the area. There was no pool, no ice rink, no town square in the area around Columbine. Neighbors moved into homes and then moved out, and it was often some time before you realized the people next door were new...

“My neighborhood was the apotheosis of a bedroom community, where shiny new automobiles slipped quietly in and out of their automatic-door garages and there was never any need to step past your mailbox.”

Clearly, that is not the description of a livable neighborhood. As you’ll see, the step-by-step recommendations set forth in this program will not only create specific tangible results of a kind most people would prefer, they will make such profound disconnection with neighbors impossible.

