

THE PHILADELPHIA TRIBUNE

Hope for improved streets

“Livable Neighborhoods” reaches out to community

Improving quality of life in Phila.

By Darren Williams
Tribune Staff Writer

Friday, April 2, 2004

On many occasions, you've heard Philadelphia Mayor John Street talk about programs in his administration that provide a service to the city, such as Operation Safe Streets, the Neighborhood Transformation Initiative, the Police Athletic League (PAL), and grassroots programs like Habitat for Humanity.

But what about the Livable Neighborhoods Program? Have you heard of it? Many Philadelphia residents, and even some city employees, have not.

Many city residents are unaware of the dangers of lead paint, or how to make their homes safer and more energy efficient, or the importance of keeping rain gutters clean or how to seal up a vacant house. But that's just the beginning.

The Livable Neighborhood Program helps Philadelphia residents improve their quality of life by putting them in touch with the right people and programs.

It helps common people accomplish a wide variety of home and community projects, including how to safely and efficiently use electricity, plan a block party, insulate windows and doors, have a block-wide yard sale or clean up after dogs.



Larry Watkins, left, and Wilbur Lawton clean a West Philadelphia lot. PHOTO BY ABDUL R. SULAYMAN/TRIBUNE STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

State Sen. Shirley Kitchen said Livable Neighborhoods was created three years ago, as part of the Empowerment Institute and the Green Communities grant, a \$30,000 award established by Ed Rendell, who was mayor at the time.

Programs Manager Jonathan Rubin, who resides in the Nicetown section, has been working with Livable Neighborhoods for a year and a half. He said he remembers when the program was introduced to his community, by an activist named Angela Patterson.

“My background is actually in construction, but I came to the first meeting on the block.” Rubin said. “We were asked a lot of questions about how we want our block to look. Today, we call that the ‘visionary process.’ ”

The Livable Neighborhoods Workbook is divided into five topics: neighborhood health and safety, greening and beautification, energy efficiency, resource sharing and community building. There are 52 different projects to choose from.

You and your neighbors form a team of 10 to 12 people to engage in the "visionary process."

Once the group identifies neighborhood trouble spots or concerns, they will receive a workbook and meet seven times over four months, taking actions to improve the livability of the block.

Some projects will be finished in the recommended time frame of the workbook and others will extend into the future. Rubin said community groups usually have about 10 to 12 members. He has seen groups with only five members and groups with as many as 25 people.

"I've found that people enjoy the individual attention they get and the attention their block receives," Rubin said. "We eliminate the 'You have to be a block captain to be head of a group' idea. Anyone can lead a group."

Townwatch is a big idea, a lot of people want to be involved in that."

Rubin said he remembers seeing people pour motor oil and antifreeze into storm drains on his block, which pollutes rivers and streams and kills the area's marine life. Also, some of the storm drains were becoming clogged up with trash, causing large pools of water to form.

The standing water is a breeding ground for mosquitoes but the problem has been addressed, Rubin said. Last year, Rubin's block was visited by city officials who gave away smoke detectors, bath mats, night-lights and gunlocks. Officials also conducted free carbon monoxide tests.

Nicetown is part of the 8th Council District, represented by City Councilwoman Donna Reed Miller, who said she was born and raised in Germantown. Though Livable Neighborhoods is not operating in her Germantown area. Miller says her constituents in Nicetown keep her well informed.

"I think people are beginning to understand that neighborhood change means they have to be directly involved," Miller said. "People don't feel threatened by this program."

In the workbook, there is a seven-paragraph introduction by Philadelphia Mayor John F. Street. Here are some of his comments about the program: "This program celebrates neighborhoods. Transformation is not merely about building new houses and offices, because those structures will crumble and fall if not maintained."

"The Livable Neighborhood program serves to enlighten citizens on how to better maintain their homes and neighborhood blocks to improve the quality of life."

But last week, mayoral spokeswoman Christine Otto said state and federal funding for Livable Neighborhoods has been cut from the state's budget, forcing the city to fund it.

A program that benefits neighborhoods, a program that many residents have yet to learn about, has already lost a lot of its funding.

"At this point, in focusing on our core mission our department's made the decision that we cannot fund it," Otto said.

So what's going to happen to Livable Neighborhoods? John Hadalski, management services administrator in the City Managing Directors office, said, "We're not really sure yet. We have filed budget requests with other city departments, asking them to pick up the slack in funding, but it has not been worked out yet."

Hadalski said other large city departments would have to include additional funding in their budget requests to help keep Livable Neighborhoods alive.

Hadalski was asked if Livable Neighborhoods is duplicating Mayor Street's NTI program.

"That is correct, there is some replication of services. They could be merged, but the difficult part is still the funding. The city has a large budget deficit this year," he said.

Rubin said the difference between NTI and Livable Neighborhoods is that NTI "is about bricks and mortar, building and demolition. Livable ... is investing in the people. ...This is just as important.

If you'd like to know more about Livable Neighborhoods, call (215) 324-9001, or your City Council representative.