

MSU Extension Publication Archive

Archive copy of publication, do not use for current recommendations. Up-to-date information about many topics can be obtained from your local Extension office.

Building Neighborhood Connections

Michigan State University Cooperative Extension Service

Web Only Extension Publications

Jeremiah Isgur; Block by Block Connections Group of Northwest Lansing Healthy Communities Initiative; Sense of Community Team, Center for Urban Affairs

September 2003

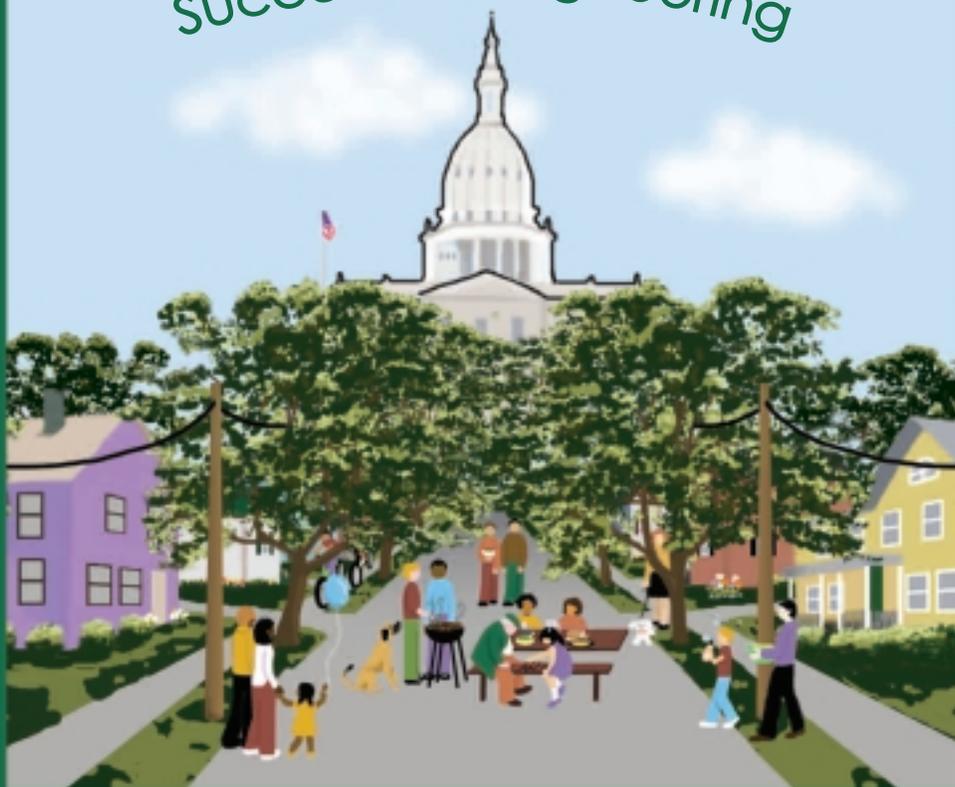
15 pages

The PDF file was provided courtesy of the Michigan State University Library

Scroll down to view the publication.

Building Neighborhood Connections

*An Introduction to
Successful Neighboring*



Making connections with your neighbors is an important part of keeping your neighborhood safe and livable. If something is not working well on your block, you and your neighbors can solve the problem together.



What will this Handbook do for you?

This is a handbook for all people. Whether you live in an older neighborhood, a new neighborhood, a suburb, a townhouse or a Victorian mansion, your neighbors are part of the fabric of your life. They are real people who eat, sleep, play with their children and mow the lawns on your block. As a group, you and your neighbors form a community. Together, you share neighborhood assets such as parks, churches, grocery stores and laundromats. And you also share concerns such as neighborhood safety or a poorly maintained lot.

Because you live there, you are a part of the community. Whether you connect with the people around you is a choice that you make.

This handbook will show you things you can do to make a connection with your neighbors and improve your neighborhood. If your block is not attractive, this handbook will show you ways to make it nicer. If your block feels dangerous, this handbook will show you ways to make it safer. If your block is already great, this handbook will show you some ways to make it even better.



This handbook will help you:

-  Make connections with your neighbors.
-  Be a better neighbor yourself.
-  Make your neighborhood a better place to live.

Remember, making connections and planning improvements with your neighbors as a group, protects your interests as well.

Enjoying Your Corner of the World

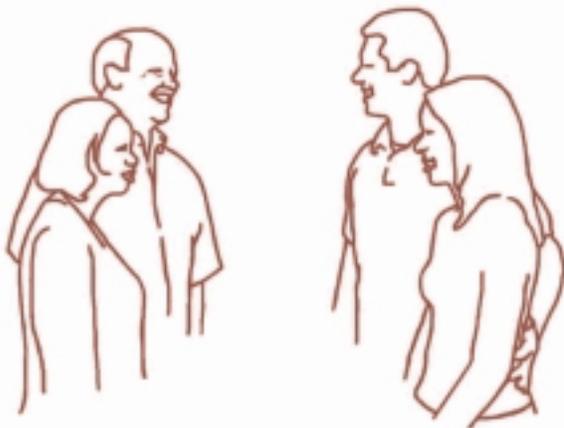


Why is Being a Good Neighbor Important?

Where neighbors share a sense of community, residents are more likely to feel safe and secure and have a lower fear of crime than where there is no sense of community. People living in connected neighborhoods feel healthier and are happier about their lives and are more likely to vote and recycle and to help others by volunteering and donating blood. For these reasons and many more, being a good neighbor and connecting with others on your block not only makes the neighborhood better but also helps you personally.



Neighborliness is not a special talent — it is a decision! Anyone can be a good neighbor — it just takes a little initiative, and the rewards make it worthwhile. Neighborhoods with a higher sense of community enjoy a higher quality of life. So do it for yourself and your family.



Wouldn't it be great if you knew all, or even some, of your neighbors a little better?



Getting to Know Your Neighbors

Finding the courage to make new connections is not easy for everyone. But you and your neighbors will discover that it becomes easier after the first step.



Try the following:

- 🍁 Find an excuse to walk around the block with your pet or children to make yourself visible.
- 🍁 Say hello to everyone you meet on your block.
- 🍁 Give your neighbors a compliment: "Your lawn/garden looks nice."
- 🍁 Take your backyard project to the front yard. Work on your bike or lawnmower on your porch or sidewalk. That way you can say "hi" to neighbors.
- 🍁 If you've lived on your block for some time, take the first step toward newcomers. Take new neighbors a plant or small gift, bake them some cookies or help them unload their car, and welcome them to the neighborhood.



Building Trust through Group Activities

So, you have just made a connection with your neighbors. That's a good first step. Now you can strengthen your relationships and build trust with your neighbors through group activities. You don't have to become friends overnight, but through activities together, you can learn to trust each other. Over time you might become friends or just stay friendly neighbors, but either way you can feel better knowing who is living around you.

Try some of the following ideas:

- Put up a neighborhood bulletin board or an electronic one on the Internet.
- Organize a welcome wagon for new neighbors.
- Have a neighborhood yard sale. Your neighbors are sure to come, and you might even sell a few things.
- Organize a block party.
- Research the history of the neighborhood.



- Create a neighborhood map and share it with the rest of your block.
- Do face painting for the kids.
- Help a neighbor prepare for severe weather or a blackout.
- Get a few neighbors together to plant flowers in a median or clean up a park.

Being a Helpful Neighbor



Tips for Connecting With Children and Elderly Neighbors

If some of your neighbors are children or elderly persons, it is important for them to feel involved in the neighborhood as well. They benefit greatly from feeling safe, secure and connected to those around them.



Keep these ideas in mind when you are thinking about your neighborhood:

- ❁ During hot or cold spells, check in on community elders to make sure they are safe and comfortable. Sadly, a few elderly people die every year during heat or cold waves because no one bothered to check on them.
- ❁ Mow the yard, rake the leaves or clean the gutters of an elderly neighbor. Many of them are unable to do it themselves and can't afford to pay someone to do it for them. Besides, it will make the neighborhood nicer for you, too.
- ❁ Plant a small garden for an elderly neighbor or even just a potted tomato plant. Have neighborhood children help you.
- ❁ Help neighborhood children create a lemonade stand.
- ❁ If you have a neighborhood newsletter, let children be summer reporters on fun things happening from their point of view. They can draw pictures or take photographs, too.



Neighborhood Cleanup

If a block or corner looks clean, safe and well cared for, it sends a message of unity to strangers and among neighbors. It can reduce crime, help children feel safe and secure, and improve neighborhood appeal and housing values.

Getting your neighbors together for a cleanup day moves you and them beyond personal boundaries to work together for the betterment of what you share.

Try these ideas:

- 🍁 Ask a neighbor to get together to discuss a cleanup project on your block. Ask him/her to bring another neighbor. Now you have a team!
- 🍁 Empty lots attract crime and pests. Get a team to clean up litter and mow the weeds.
- 🍁 Rake the extra leaves in untended areas and remove stray litter.
- 🍁 Get neighborhood kids to help you clean up a park. Provide them with gloves and garbage bags and watch them go to work.
- 🍁 Contact the city to discuss graffiti removal, abandoned cars, tree trimming or other tough jobs.



**Build community pride
by cleaning up as a team.**



Neighborhood Beautification

Now that your block is clean, why not make it beautiful? There are many small things you can do to improve your house and yard. If all of your neighbors do a few small things, the results will be huge.

Planting flowers and gardens, repairing porches and repainting window frames can make a big difference in how you and others view your neighborhood.



You could:

- Have a block flower-planting day. Put flowers in porch planters at every house, plant flowers in medians or vacant areas.
- You could even select a shrub or flower for all the houses on the block as a show of unity. Or celebrate special occasions such as the Fourth of July with red, white and blue potted flowers.
- Share extra paint with neighbors and help them repaint the trim on the front side of their houses.

In the summer months, gardens flourish. Many urban gardeners trade tools, ideas, plants or seeds. You probably know someone who has extra tomatoes, beans or flowers from their garden every year. Sharing the bounty is fun for all ages.

Visualize Your Block

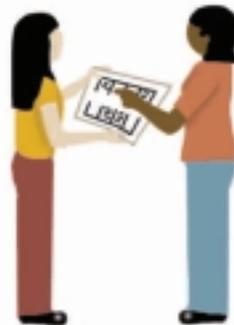


The Neighborhood Map

A neighborhood phone list is a great thing to have on hand. A neighborhood map takes this idea a step further. This important tool is a simple sketch of your block with the names of your neighbors and their children, phone numbers and other important information to be used in emergencies or for planning neighborhood events.

There are many ways to create a neighborhood map. You can start by simply drawing your block with houses as squares along the line of the street. Look at our example map for ideas.

Ask your neighbors for help filling in the empty boxes on your map as you are creating it. Offer them a copy, too.



Label each house with:

- Names of neighbors and their children and pets.
- Addresses and day and evening phone numbers.
- Note neighbors who work at home or stay at home during the day.

Visualize Your Block



Making Your Neighborhood Map



Here's an example map to give you ideas.

If You Have Children

Children can draw these maps for fun, to help them better understand whom they can contact in an emergency, or just to get a better sense of community and place.



Let them be creative in using colors and symbols for the things they see around your block.

Getting Together to Share Ideas



Your Neighborhood Association

Your neighborhood may already have a neighborhood association. You can check with your local neighborhood council. If it's active, join it. If not, think about creating one. You can start with just a few people and grow from there. The resources on the back cover of this booklet can give you more information about working with existing neighborhood associations or about starting a new one in your neighborhood.

Neighborhood associations are powerful tools for dealing with your local government on matters of safety, zoning and local regulations. In addition, a neighborhood association can help you plan group activities such as community picnics or block parties.

Here are some ideas that neighborhood associations have used to build community:

-  Organize a neighborhood cleanup. Contact the city for information about a special trash pickup.
-  Plan a community picnic or potluck to which every family brings a dish. You could even have a chili cook-off or pie contest.



-  Have games, raffles and music that everyone can enjoy.
-  Start a neighborhood newsletter.

Creating a Safe Environment Together



Neighborhood Watch

All across the country, Neighborhood Watch organizations help people work together to lower crime in their neighborhoods.

A Neighborhood Watch can also get involved in community cleanup and beautification projects.

Start by contacting your police or sheriff's office and the National Crime Prevention Council. They can provide information on crime patterns, safety tips and crime prevention techniques, as well as Neighborhood Watch signs and window decals.



When neighbors are away, be sure to keep an eye on their house and help keep it safe by making it look lived in.

- Make sure footpaths look used.
- Ask neighbors going on vacation if you can collect their mail and newspapers, and make sure fliers are out of sight.
- Put stray lids back on garbage cans and put them away after trash day.
- Leave your porch light on at night for the benefit of all your neighbors.



Small Acts that Go a Long Way

Here are a few enjoyable things you can do to make your neighborhood friendly and cheerful. Be creative, and enjoy life!

- 🍁 Leave a holiday treat as a surprise to brighten a neighbor's day.
- 🍁 Leave cut flowers in a jar on the sidewalk with a "take one" sign.
- 🍁 Visit a farmer's market and bring fresh produce to a homebound neighbor.
- 🍁 Ask a longtime resident to share some stories of your block.
- 🍁 Invite an elderly neighbor to an event he/she would enjoy.
- 🍁 Hire a neighborhood teen to help you with some yard work or to clean an elderly neighbor's windows.
- 🍁 Invite a neighbor to your front porch for some iced tea.
- 🍁 Give your neighborhood newsletter editor a tip for the next issue, or write an article yourself.

Just get involved with your neighbors and your neighborhood and see how quickly others join. Everyone wants a better neighborhood. And it's easy. Just take it one step at a time.



Acknowledgements

This handbook is the result of input from many individuals and groups. The idea for the handbook came from the Block by Block Connection Group of the Northwest Lansing Healthy Communities Initiative. The following individuals served on the Block by Block Connection Group and/or contributed ideas for community building used in this handbook:

Millie Caesar	Kate Koskinen
Annalie Campos	Richard Miller
Karen Degerstrom	Leela Madhava Rau
Martha Eveleth	Cheryl Risner
Margaret Groves	Rosemary Sandefer
Mary Hauser	John Schweitzer
Patricia Hemingway	Anne Smiley
Diane Holley	Junko Takada
Ron Holley	Casey Wells
Priscilla Holmes	Ron Whitmore
Lucy Hunley	Donna Wynant



Additional ideas for community building came from various editions of Front Steps, published by the Evergreen State Society.

Early versions of the handbook were written by:

Annalie Campos
Priscilla Holmes
Deanna Rivers-Rozdilsky
Erin Schwartz



Final copy was written by: Jeremiah Isgur
Art work, graphics and layout by: Julie Reynolds

The Sense of Community Team of the Center for Urban Affairs at Michigan State University coordinated the development and production of this handbook.

Neighborhood Resources

For neighborhood-based information and resources, contact:

Allen Neighborhood Center at (517) 485-7630,
ancjoan@aol.com,
www.allenneighborhoodcenter.org

Baker Donora Focus Center at (517) 485-0907

North Network Center at (517) 346-5794

South Network Center at (517) 272-7492

Wexford Network Center at (517) 882-2306

These organizations work to strengthen overall community health:

Eastside Neighborhood Summit/
Allen Neighborhood Center at (517) 485-7630,
ancjoan@aol.com,
www.allenneighborhoodcenter.org

Northwest Lansing Healthy
Communities Initiative at (517) 483-4499,
info@nwlhci.org, www.nwlhci.org

South Lansing Healthy Communities
Initiative at (517) 487-6828

To organize or strengthen a neighborhood association in Lansing, contact:

Lansing Neighborhood Council
at (517) 372-6290

Citywide resources available to neighborhoods:

Community/ Landlord Organizer
at (517) 272-7488

Community Services of the Lansing
Police Department at (517) 483-4469

Mayor's Neighborhood Advisory Board
Grants at (517) 483-4141,
www.mayor.cityoflansingmi.com/NAB/

Statewide resources for neighborhoods:

Neighborhood Associations of Michigan
at (517) 353-8610

Sense of Community Team at
Michigan State University at (517) 353-9144,
socomm@msu.edu,
www.msu.edu/user/socomm

Contact Us

John Schweitzer
Sense of Community Project Team
Center for Urban Affairs
Michigan State University
(517) 353-9144
socomm@msu.edu



We're on the web at:
www.msu.edu/user/socomm

**MICHIGAN STATE
UNIVERSITY
EXTENSION**

MSU is an affirmative-action equal-opportunity institution. Michigan State University Extension programs and materials are open to all without regard to race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, marital status, or family status. Issued in furtherance of Extension work in agriculture and home economics, acts of May 8 and June 20, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Margaret A. Bethel, Extension director, Michigan State University, E. Lansing, MI 48824. This information is for educational purposes only. Reference to commercial products or trade names does not imply endorsement by MSU Extension or bias against those not mentioned. This bulletin becomes public property upon publication and may be printed verbatim with credit to MSU. Reprinting cannot be used to endorse or advertise a commercial product or company.