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# Neighboring Impact on Children and Families & Sustainability Factors

An Executive Summary of Findings from a Summative Evaluation  
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## Introduction

Points of Light Institute and HandsOn Network have embraced Neighboring as a grant making strategy to strengthen families since 1996. Through Neighboring, natural neighbor-to-neighbor helping that strengthens children, families, and communities is encouraged and supported. This helping does not replace the assistance provided by traditional volunteers. Instead, Neighboring underscores that help need not come from outside a community, but from within.

Neighboring had the promise to build community and to strengthen families yet not much was known about it, except through anecdotal evidence. In 2009, with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Points of Light Institute and HandsOn Network conducted a summative evaluation of five former sub-grantees. This briefing details the findings of the study based on evidence from 20 focus groups with 155 subjects during visits to each site.<sup>1</sup>

## Findings

Neighboring helps children and youth succeed by providing opportunities, resources, and role models necessary to become successful adults.

**Neighboring generates opportunities.** Through programs that nurture through neighborhood-based caring connections, opportunities for children and youth expand. Some opportunities are formal. One leadership training program strengthens nonprofit boards, providing for institutional changes that affect children and families: “[Graduates] help make sure agencies serve clients...They have the life experience to make decisions about people.” Other Neighboring opportunities are not bound by the walls of an agency. When the doors close at a community center, the children, as a group, move onto a neighborhood staff person’s home: “It is extended community.”

Neighbors helping neighborhood children by...

- Serving as tutors, mentors, and readers.
- Providing meals, books, and child care assistance.
- Assembling and donating small gifts.
- Conducting workshops on healthy lifestyles and community issues.
- Ensuring safe spaces for children to freely play and grow.

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<sup>1</sup> For the full report including discussion on method, contact [evaluation@handsonnetwork.org](mailto:evaluation@handsonnetwork.org).



**Neighboring links resources and children.** Resources travel by way of parents and guardians, with benefits spilling over to children. Child welfare agencies are invited to a block party to provide information and referral services to attendees, for instance. Tax assistance programs such as VITA and EITC are especially strong producers of external benefits from parents to children. Respondents noted, “Parents who get the income tax credit have more resources to support their children,” and “This frees up money to assist with things they need at home.”

**Neighboring creates role models for children.** Children “see caring and kindness modeled” when neighbors provide service; but more importantly, when volunteers are people to whom children relate, the notion of “helping ourselves” becomes more possible, imbuing self-reliance. Parents become role models when they take an active role in their children’s lives, respondents stressed. Parenting classes and parental involvement opportunities are common occurrences. As with all Neighboring programs, the recipients of service (children) are also empowered to be service providers. Through their Neighboring experiences, children “gain a sense of pride,” “feel part of something bigger,” and become role models for their friends.

**Neighboring changes the lines of accountability.** The accountability to children in Neighboring is different than a traditional social service model. Parents and neighbors have a personal stake, the data indicate. “These are OUR children,” one volunteer noted, and then went on to say, “I love being around the people who helped my family grow up.” This sense of responsibility to children of the neighborhood is unwavering and transcends institutional boundaries.

**Neighboring helps to improve the quality of the places in which the nation’s most vulnerable children and families live.**

**Neighboring gives power.** When individuals shape the community agenda, both the desire to engage and self-efficacy are heightened. This resident involvement is “a long process” that often requires “time to educate people” to show them “they have power and they have a voice;” yet on all accounts, the dialogue indicates that benefits of capturing and using resident voice outweigh the costs. As one grantee stated, “When you spend that much time, there is a lot more buy-in. Things are more vetted out...They have a stake in it now.”

**Neighboring connects neighbors.** “We have open gym, but that is not going to change lives. It is the people who meet there that does,” was an example one volunteer used to illustrate that “programs are ways to create connections and relationships,” or the “things really valued in the neighborhood.” So while the programs are important, it is the “sense of family” and “camaraderie” cited by so many that speak to why a neighborhood approach works. By joining people in collective action, Neighboring helps people realize “they are not



alone” and that their neighbors “care” and “want success for everybody.” In this, they see “potential.”

**Neighboring supplies leaders.** As one longtime community activist said, “We don’t want to call on the same people all time... [this program] brings new people...it is extremely important that [minorities] are represented and that we create a long line of future leaders.” Additionally, youth obtain leadership skills early on, as one Neighboring volunteer noted, “This taught me a lot about leadership roles and life lessons that I wouldn't have learned if I wasn't involved so early. It helped me stayed focus on doing the best I can for everyone around me and myself.”

Neighboring does not only count people who self-select as leaders. In fact, numerous respondents referenced certain community members who unconsciously grew into

Neighbors helping neighbors to indirectly impact workforce participation in...

- Computer, including social media
- Cultural
- Customer service
- Disaster preparedness
- Event planning
- Fundraising experience
- Leadership
- Management
- Medical (first aid, CPR)
- Organizational
- Personal responsibility
- Time management
- Training and presenting
- Tutoring and teaching
- Volunteer recruitment

leadership roles. “Sometimes people don't know that they started something and that they are the leader,” one respondent explained. Another resident volunteer helps to “break the ice” when volunteer groups arrive at seniors’ homes for painting and yard work.

**Neighboring helps to provide low-income workers with the support they need to get and keep good jobs, and build assets and savings.**

**Neighboring puts money into the pockets of low-income workers.** Through tax assistance programs, low-income people receive real resources. Resident volunteers involved in tax preparation tended to view it as not just a service, but a “re-education” in how people think about getting their taxes done. “The [for-profit] places make taxes seem like a mystery. Demystifying things for people is really important...when people realize they can do something, it

is empowering.”

**Neighboring builds financial skills and knowledge.** Through the same tax programs mentioned above, resident volunteers gain knowledge of taxes that affect their own lives. Sub-grantees supported classes, workshops, and experiential learning sessions often led by resident volunteers and even resident staff members on topics such as budgeting, business planning, managing money, opening savings accounts, and filing taxes.



**Neighboring helps to promote workforce participation through job creation and skill development.**

**Neighboring indirectly affects workforce participation.** Respondents alluded to life skills that they gained, or helped others gain, that are thought to have a *indirect* impact on family economic security. As a staff member said, “the one thing that we want [people] to realize: a lot of things are transferable. Skills are transferable; attitudes are transferable; behaviors [are transferable].” Beneficiary knowledge changes through more traditional areas of education are also impacted by resident volunteers. One site serves a majority of resident clients at an “education level that is more about survival” and focus on building basic reading, language, and math skills. There are also instances when resident volunteers are offered employment as a result of their volunteering, especially volunteer tax preparers.

### **Sustainability**

As a system, it is critical to sustain Neighboring. It grows roots where Points of Light Institute and HandsOn Network affiliates traditionally have no or little presence, coexisting alongside typical volunteer engagement. It is a natural extension of the Points of Light Institute and HandsOn Network call to inspire, equip, and mobilize people to take action that changes the world. More than that, Neighboring will occur, supported or not. Here are some factors evaluators identified that help make Neighboring a lasting initiative at the studied sites.

**Change perceptions and systems.** Neighboring requires organizational representatives to think differently about volunteer management. Some sub-grantees provide training to “create ‘a-ha’ moments when people realize clients can volunteer.” Another site enables volunteers to report “informal hours,” “expanding the concept of volunteering” to include “mowing the lawn for the neighbor who can’t do it for herself.”

Outside of Neighboring, it is common to assume that volunteer programs are low- or no-cost, and this supposition may be magnified when resident volunteers are the subject (e.g., reduced recruitment, screening, orienting). One staff member articulated this notion: “Just because the work source is free in time, it is [true] that we still have to support them” including training, scheduling, and supporting, not to mention co-creating and co-implementing.

**Define service area.** Programs that best use Neighboring strategies face the reality of constraints and make hard decisions based on these facts. One volunteer-run program that provides holiday gifts to children stopped vetting donations. The process was hindering the amount of people who could be served and the burden could be placed on the recipient agency. Others never intend to move outside of a neighborhood – depth is the objective over



breadth. The point of these examples is not to argue quality over quantity but to underscore the importance of defining the service area Neighboring intends to reach.

**Identify leaders.** The most successful Neighboring initiatives *always* made mention one or two people who grew into positions of leadership. In jargon, these natural leaders are key to building trust, ensuring representation and participation, and bridging institutions and individuals. In life, these people are friends and neighbors. People feel compelled to help friends and neighbors, evidence indicates.

**Increase accessibility.** Perhaps it is obvious that Neighboring should take place in neighborhoods. Yet, the sheer number of times respondents mentioned the benefits of location makes it worth mentioning. This place-based approach reduces the need for transportation and keeps people in their physical comfort zone, while sometimes taking them out of their emotional one to ask for services.

**Take time to build trust.** Neighboring is time intensive. It requires time to understand the helping culture of a community. “You can’t just tell people what to do. You have to involve them.” It requires time to connect with the right people in the right way. “People don’t trust people they don’t know. It is all about relationships.” It requires time to change the mentality that “we are riding in on our white horses to save the day...and then when the sun goes down, we’re gone.” These are themes emphasized again and again by staff.

**Transfer ownership.** Organizations often begin as the lead, with the ultimate objective of transitioning ownership to neighborhood-based stakeholders. One example that speaks to the successful transfer is an interfaith program started by one sub-grantee in which they went from leader to facilitator: “We were instrumental in the first couple of years and now serve as a resource for them....We spent a lot of time with them....They are taking ownership of it...and now have committees and subcommittees...and even some funding.”

### **Conclusion**

Evidence acquired through this study indicates that the five sub-grantees applied Neighboring strategies according to their local vision of Neighboring. Given the license to locally define Neighboring fidelity, as understood by Points Of Light Institute as the authentic engagement of residents using an assets based approach, varied greatly by site. Some sites seem to have lost touch with their Neighboring roots, neglecting to infuse resident voice and deploying traditional volunteers as the bulk of power. Group thinking by some sites suggests that Neighboring is a program rather than an ‘attitude’ or a ‘philosophy.’ This tunnel vision unnecessarily limits what Neighboring is and how it can be used, confining it to a particular program or project. Other sub-grantees embrace Neighboring to its fullest and changed mindsets and systems to allow Neighboring to become part of the everyday course of action.



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That said, all sub-grantees contributed to realization of family strengthening outcomes. They worked to co-create ground-up programming that builds stronger, closer-knit communities with the under-served and under-resources residents of those communities. This finding may suggest that Neighboring can be a powerful tool even in the face of varied quality.