

EAST DECATUR COMMUNITY IMPACT PROJECT

By Community Action Partnership of North Alabama

Region 4A • Decatur, Alabama
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Economic Development • Housing • Public Safety

INITIATIVE OVERVIEW

The focus of the East Decatur Community Impact Project is on improving neighborhood conditions within a targeted geographic area through community building and engagement activities centered around health, safety, stabilization, and revitalization. Since 2014, Community Action Partnership of North Alabama has supported improvement efforts in East Decatur, leveraging available funds and relationships with multiple partners.

Notable improvements include the establishment of a new park, new sidewalks, street and alley lighting, and health- and safety-related Home Repair Grants to homeowners with lower incomes. Activities include annual block makeovers, block parties, community clean-ups, and a community newsletter that informs residents about services, grants, community meetings, opportunities, and other events in the area.

LOCAL NEED ADDRESSED

The Community Needs & Resource Assessment (CNRA) surveys partners and community members in 3 counties within the agency's core CSBG service area, as well as 15 other counties where other programs and services are provided. Community Action Partnership of North Alabama also conducted a targeted survey of East Decatur residents in 2014, 2017, and 2020 in order to gain neighborhood-level data on physical and social conditions within the project area. Results from the 2017 CNRA indicated that Housing/Home Repairs and a related category, Utility Costs, were critical ongoing needs for



individuals, families, and communities. Results from the resident survey showed that housing was the top issue for respondents in the target area. Other high-rated needs included infrastructure repairs and updates, like streetlights and sidewalks, crime management, and a need for communal and green spaces like parks. Threats to health and safety was a common theme of concern. The 2020 CNRA surveys supported these findings.

ROLE OF CSBG FUNDS

CSBG funds have been used to support staffing and salaries for employees involved in planning and implementing specific activities and events. For example, CSBG helps cover administrative costs related to the Home Repair Grant program, of which weatherization services are a critical component, and the annual Block Makeover, a week-long effort that

involves multiple households and dozens of volunteers. CSBG funds also support CNRA planning and implementation, energy assistance, and homeownership programs that include the target area.

TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACT

Many neighborhoods in the target area have experienced historic disinvestment, resulting in substandard housing and infrastructure, as well as high crime and civic disengagement. Since the inception of the project in 2014, Community Action Partnership of North Alabama has led and supported a number of efforts to improve the physical and social environments of East Decatur. Some of the more salient changes include improved housing, as well as additional sidewalks, streetlights, and a new park.

The home repair and weatherization program resulted in not only 17 individuals and families of low-to-moderate income enjoying stabilized housing conditions, lower utility costs, and improved home values, it also safeguarded home values for their neighbors, in turn supporting additional investment by nearby property owners.

57 households across seven blocks, along with hundreds of volunteers, have participated in the annual Block Makeovers that we have planned, organized, and coordinated since 2015. Block Makeovers, Block Parties, and Community Clean-ups bring neighbors together to improve their blocks, boosting curb appeal, engagement, and morale.

Resident participants in the 207 Block Makeover were so empowered by their efforts to make change that they formed a group and advocated for the city to turn a vacant lot on their block into a new park. Inspired by their enthusiasm, the agency sponsored the architectural plans for what is now a newly established park that provides green space for neighbors to gather.

Another area of change is improved infrastructure. Residents advocated for additional lighting through their city council representative, local police chief,

and utility company. In order to support community engagement, Community Action Partnership of Northern Alabama sponsored individuals to attend a national leadership conference, which resulted in the award of a grant to support additional lighting. These efforts brought about improved street and alley lighting that helps residents feel safer and less likely to be targeted by crime and petty theft. Additionally, new sidewalk additions make the community a safer place for pedestrians, which include many children, given the two schools located within the target area.

There is still work to be done to truly transform the East Decatur Community as a whole, but this project has made impactful change, one block at a time.

EVIDENCE-BASED OUTCOMES

Since 2014, the East Decatur Community Impact Project has collected data every 3 years on the physical and social conditions of the neighborhood. As part of the final report after each year of data collection, the agency reports quantitative and qualitative data from surveys and observations. Physical conditions include the rate of houses in good repair in a sample of about 100 blocks, the condition of roads, sidewalks, and streetlights, the presence of litter, types of repair needs found in a sample of about 100 homes, and the conditions of vacant homes and lots.

Social conditions include measures of resident confidence in their safety, indicators of "neighborliness," ratings of local services like police, ambulance, and firefighting services; and whether residents perceive their neighborhood as improving or declining. In our 2020 survey, questions about housing needs were added in order to better understand and plan future activities.

In addition, community engagement and feedback through newsletters, surveys, and meetings contribute to the development of a locally driven stabilization and revitalization plan based on major areas of focus, available funds, and partners. Using the initiative's design, other communities could create a similar program quite easily.

EQUITY LENS

By focusing concentrated efforts in this geographic area, targeted support is made available to individuals and families disproportionately affected by the inter-generational causes and consequences of poverty, which in turn are spurred by historic injustices and a lack of investment.

The target area is home to a fairly diverse population compared to the area at large. According to 2010 Census data, about 23% of the target area identifies as Black/African-American, which is about twice that of Morgan County, overall. Approximately 20% of the target area residents identify as Latino/Hispanic, compared to about 8% for Morgan county overall. Census block data further identified that a subsection within the target area has a 40% Latino/Hispanic population.

In addition, the area has quite high rates of poverty, disability, lack of access to health insurance, and households that are overly financially burdened with housing costs. Community Action Partnership of North Alabama has incorporated specific outreach to Spanish-speaking community members by providing communication materials, such as the community newsletter, surveys, and flyers, in both English and Spanish.

CUSTOMER VOICE

Every three years the agency surveys residents in the target area. Respondents are invited to participate via Every Door Direct Mail postcards and newsletters as well as social media posts and flyers at local businesses. Feedback from these surveys help guide future activities by defining specific areas of need. In addition, community meetings are held to discuss current issues, plan activities and events, and meet with local leaders, departments, and organizations, such as the city council representative, the city community development department, the city police department, and the utility company.

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