

Neighborhood Action Councils in South Los Angeles: Bringing Residents Together to Transform Their Community

Introduction

The South Bay Center for Community Development (SBCC) works in partnership with individuals, families, and neighborhoods throughout Los Angeles County to facilitate changes that result in personal and collective well-being and that build stronger communities. Several principles underpin all of SBCC's programs and initiatives: 1) every effort is completely resident-driven; 2) SBCC is a partner to the community not a service provider; 3) residents are encouraged and supported in discovering and using their gifts and talents; and 4) meaningful, trusting relationships are an important basis for a healthy community. Guided by values such as these, SBCC has been working with the ethnically and racially diverse communities of the Los Angeles area for over forty years.

Neighborhood Action Councils have been particularly instrumental in SBCC's community building efforts: NACs are resident-organizations based in neighborhoods that most often meet weekly. Participation in a NAC is expected to be long-term, with the group forming its own unique identity and mission. Leadership in the NAC is a shared responsibility among group members. NACs design and lead neighborhood projects focused on education, health, safety, and economic development.

SBCC has NACs spread throughout all of Los Angeles County. The focus of this inquiry was on four NACs with primarily African American membership in the South Los Angeles neighborhoods of Watts, West Athens, and Compton. Compton has the largest population, with 94,384 inhabitants¹. Watts is the second largest with 36,815 residents. It is home to several of the biggest housing projects west of the Mississippi, including Jordan Downs, Imperial Courts, and Nickerson Gardens. West Athens is a small unincorporated area with 9,101 individuals living within its boundaries.

While the African American population of Compton and Watts has declined from a majority to 39.8% in Compton and 37.1% in Watts, African Americans are still the slightly larger racial/ethnic group in West Athens at 54.3%. Crime in West Athens is a serious problem. West Athens ranks 10th in violent crime and 19th in property crime out of 209 neighborhoods tracked by the *LA Times*. Watts ranks 17th in violent crime and 75th in property crime while Compton ranks 27th in violent crime and 46th in property crime.

¹ *Los Angeles Times*' Mapping Project, <http://maps.latimes.com/neighborhoods>

The purpose of the focus groups was to determine the role of NACs in community change, the benefits of NAC participation, and critical success factors of effective NACs. While research on NACs has been undertaken in the past, this particular investigation focuses on African American NACs. The examination was undertaken as part of SBCC's commitment to continuous improvement of its programs and services in the communities it serves.

Methods

Four focus groups were held as a part of this study. Table 2 lists the number of participants, their gender, and their affiliation (Youth NAC or Adult NAC). It is notable that of the 24 participants, 70% were male and 30% female. Also noteworthy is that youth representation was much greater than adult representation. Still, the adults present in the focus groups were considered very active and long-time leaders in their NAC.

Table 2. Description of Focus Group Participants

Affiliation	Total Participants	Number of Males	Number of Females
Youth NAC	11	8	3
Youth NAC	8	7	1
Adult NAC	2	2	0
Adult NAC	3	0	3

The questions for the four focus groups were identical, with priority placed on learning about participants' views about the NACs in social change and on various processes in the functioning of NACs. Benefits of NAC participation and leadership development were secondary concerns. (They have been looked at in greater detail in other inquiries.)

Focus groups with the NACs lasted for about 45 minutes to 1 ½ hours. All focus groups were recorded with permission from participants and documented in notes. Transcriptions of recordings and meeting notes were coded and analyzed for common themes.

Findings

NACs as Agents of Change

Participants in all four focus groups would like to see change in their communities. The young people involved in NACs described a few of their desires for their neighborhoods. These are called out because their hopes represent basic needs that all youth—and even adults—deserve.

- “I would like people not to be afraid of Compton.”
- “I want others not to stereotype African Americans.”
- “I want to be free to walk around my neighborhood and not worry about gangs.”
- “I want more groups for kids to be a part of and more parks so there are fewer kids on the street.”

Many adults shared similar goals. Changing the narrative around youth in South Los Angeles and providing youth more opportunities and a better quality of life were frequently cited reasons that adults gave for engaging in activities for community improvement. One man whose children had long left his home to start lives of their own explained why he strongly feels the need to work on behalf of youth in his community.

Most groups are for adults in the community, but the community is the kids. They are the future of the community. That is what made me join the group. If we don't do something for the kids, then who will? Too many kids don't really have anything to do. I want to see kids happy and then I am happy. We used to have lots of programs that kept kids occupied. I want to bring that back.

Respondents saw joining Neighborhood Action Councils as a significant way to bring about change. NACs unite individuals with diverse interests and abilities to collaboratively make a difference in their neighborhoods. NACs design and undertake projects to benefit the community, and in so doing, learn about themselves, each other, and their communities. The following quote captures well the essence of NACs as a potential change agent.

My view of the community constantly expands since I have been in my NAC. I am inspired by the potential in the community. We don't always realize all the gifts and talents in the community until we are part of a group like this. We see the different gifts that people bring to the table. Sometimes, until people join a NAC, they don't even realize the many gifts they have. I feel better about my community since I have been in my NAC. Then, I love to be in a position to serve my community. The NAC gives me that chance. It is so rewarding to see that we can have an impact on families. With our events we have helped teach community members and connect them to resources. We had done an event on gardening and healthy eating. It is so wonderful to hear about families changing their habits. It might not seem like a lot but every little bit helps.

Positive Outcomes for Individuals and the Community

Focus group members shared examples of NAC projects that they felt had a particularly strong impact on their communities. One NAC had put on a science fair for youth at their housing project. The NAC members wanted the event to offer youth a perspective of science that they don't normally get at school, and to help youth see that science is part of and impacts their daily life. One organizer explained the value of such efforts in this way:

NAC projects like the science fair are important because they help educate the community. We tried to take it a step beyond school and make it fun and interactive. It wasn't just about book knowledge but hands on so they could experience it.

The event was hosted in partnership with other organizations in Watts and brought together youth from neighboring housing projects as well. Both of these points are particularly important. It is by working with other groups and agencies in the community that NACs can have even greater impact. Members from all four NACs that were the focus of this investigation reported collaborating with other entities in the community.

Then, the fact that youth from different housing projects are starting to come together for events is very promising. Youth are being taught early to accept individuals from other places and to work together. Indeed, this lesson is one that NAC members very much hoped the youth would learn, as can be seen in this remark by one host of the science fair:

We really wanted youth from different places to participate in the science fair. We wanted them to see that we are all one community. It's not just my neighborhood and your neighborhood. Various neighborhoods can come together to be a community. We don't need to be separate. We can join to be one.

Another NAC held an event at a local park for fathers. The NAC was motivated by the fact that there are not many programs for single fathers. Fathers had the chance to hear motivational speakers, connect with other fathers, give voice to their experiences, and obtain free legal advice about child custody, among other opportunities. Over 90 men attended. Outreach to fathers is often a challenge for community-based organizations. The fact that the NAC was able to bring together such a large number of fathers is a testament to the need for such events and for the ability of NAC members to discern needs of their community.

A different NAC produced an event focused on getting youth ready for a career. Youth learned how to dress appropriately for a job interview and how to carry themselves in an interview. Bank representatives were also invited by the NAC and helped young people open a checking account.

A final example comes from one of the youth NACs. At the time of the focus group, the NAC was working on an event that would bring together sports and entrepreneurship. Youth would have the possibility to engage in activities like baseball, basketball, and dodge ball while

also hearing from speakers who would talk about different ways individuals can begin small money-making ventures.

Events like these have many benefits for all involved. Event organizers develop various skills related to project planning and management, public speaking, and leadership. Participants take away numerous benefits, depending on the focus of the event. And overall, the events are a way to build relationships among community residents. For this reason, some NAC members see regular events as particularly important for creating a supportive community culture. *“We’d like to have events every three months,”* admitted one person. *“We used to have carnivals here (in the housing project). We don’t have that any more. We want to get back to where we once were.”*

Even youth see the great value of events in bringing the community together and helping to change perspectives. One young man offered this observation:

People like what we’re doing. The food and games catch their attention. They see something positive and cheerful. They want to get into it. They bring their families. Events help the community become more united and friendlier.

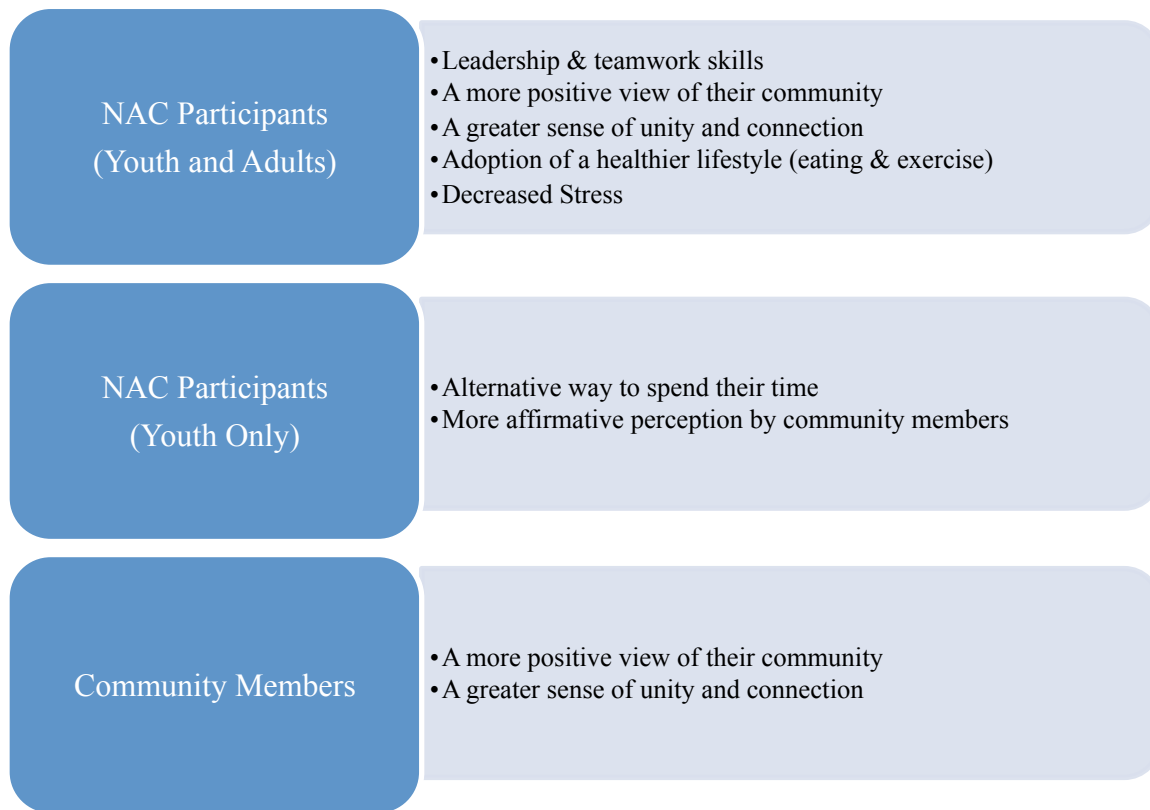
Another young person explained that since being in the NAC and putting on events, his view of the community has changed.

I used to view Compton as an insecure place. My mom would tell me to be home early. I now see it as a safer place. Doing events has really gotten people around me friendlier. Also, before, I’d just mind my own business. Now, I know more people and want to be more involved with them.

A more positive view of their community and a greater sense of unity and connection are two benefits of Neighborhood Action Councils². Additional benefits are listed in Figure 1.

² Community Connection Groups have similar benefits as NACs. Benefits of CCGs were discussed in the two focus groups with African American community members, but not in great depth. It is for this reason that a separate table of CCG benefits is not included.

Figure 1. Benefits of NAC Participation



Leadership and teamwork skills were particularly called out by youth. The statement below by a youth NAC member powerfully describes the importance of such skills.

We are learning stuff that will help us in the long-run and in our future. We are learning about leadership and being part of a team. That is a big thing that we need in the community—to know how to work better as a whole. We learn to respect each other and always be there for each other.

Youth and adults described various leadership skills that they have developed during their involvement with their NAC. These include the following:

- Planning,
- Making decisions as a group,
- Understanding different personalities,
- Listening,
- How to talk to different people,
- How to gain trust and respect of others,
- Public speaking,
- Assertiveness, and
- Motivating others.

Two further benefits highlighted by youth included having an alternative way to spend their time and being perceived more positively by the people around them. *“Groups like the NACs keep kids off the street and from stealing and being part of violence,”* remarked one young NAC member. Another called out the importance of positive role models like their NAC’s organizer: *“Youth need people like (our organizer). Too many don’t have a role model and that is why they are on the streets and in gangs.”*

The safe and encouraging environment offered by the NAC allows participating youth to explore and develop their potential and counter the negative image that too many in the community have of them. *“The community looks at us differently now,”* explained contentedly one person. *“They see that the youth are stepping up and trying to make a difference for the younger generation. Adults now look at us more positively.”*

These adults in some cases include their parents. A young man noted that, *“Our parents hear about the negative also. Negative is what everyone mainly hears. It is good for our parents to hear about youth doing positive things. My parents love that I am part of the NAC.”*

Several youth shared the affirmative reactions that their parents have had to their NAC participation. Many parents are pleased that their children are in a safe place and doing something positive for themselves and their community. In some cases, youth reported having richer conversations with their parents since being in the NAC. The reasons for this were not explored in the focus groups, but it could be that youth have more to share with their parents or that there is less tension between parents and children as parent anxiety about their children’s whereabouts and actions decrease.

A final category of benefits related to emotional and physical well-being. Both youth and adults talked about this. Decreased stress was one positive outcome. Relationships among NAC members contributed to this stress relief. Individuals feel supported by their NAC colleagues and comfortable sharing their concerns. The positive work of the NAC also lifts the spirits of participants and gets their mind off of their difficulties for some time. Then, since many NACs make healthy living a focus of their events, several NAC members have begun adopting healthier ways of eating and moving—with three indicating substantial weight loss since they joined their NAC.

Success Factors for Effective NACs

For any community group convened by an organization to work well together, certain elements have to coalesce. Focus group participants offered the following factors as being critically important for developing effective and sustainable NACs.

Figure 2. Success Factors for an Effective Community Group

Agency	Organizer	Members
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aim is help to people help themselves 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • True interest in community demonstrated through words and actions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commitment • Relationships • Accountability

Respondents had much to say about the agency and about the organizer. Fewer comments were made about the role of members.

The respect that SBCC shows to the community is tremendously valued by residents. SBCC honors the interests and needs of community members, and supports them in meeting their goals. This was echoed by both youth and adults as critically important. When youth were asked what made the NAC different from other groups in the community like the Boys and Girls Club, they answered that the NAC serves as their own space, and that they get to make decisions about what they do in that space. The organizer is there to assist as needed and share ideas, but the NAC is first and foremost their space. A young man described the self-determination the NAC offers in this way:

In the NAC, we get to come up with our ideas. We do our own planning. We don't have adults doing it for us. We get to be ourselves, not like at school and in other places. (Our organizer) might share with us things that we don't know about, but he lets us be us and helps us out where we need it. He always inspires us to do better.

For adults also, receiving support so they themselves can advocate for community change mattered very much. One man considered “teaching others to fish” to be the most transformative aspect of a NAC. His reflection is as follows:

What is the most catalytic about a NAC? They (SBCC) taught us to think of things for ourselves that we can do for the community. We design our own projects for the community. They got us thinking about how we can make changes. Then, they taught us how to plan events and how to write grant proposals. They are teaching us a lot. They are teaching us how to help ourselves. From here we can turn around and also teach

others in the community how to help themselves. You appreciate things a whole lot more if you do it yourself. It's very different if I give you a dollar, or if you put your work into that dollar.

In a different focus group, a similar idea surfaced. A woman made the following distinction between SBCC's approach to working with the community, and that of other organizations.

SBCC didn't come into our community and say, "you need to do this and that." Instead, it is the community saying what they would like to focus on. This is something different. It's not something that many in the community have experienced. We are used to people coming in with a survey. They do the survey and then don't come back again. Now, we have a consistent thing in the community. (The organization) is really here. We are building positive relationships and writing lots of empowering stories together.

Someone else added that the different approaches influence how people feel about themselves and their community, and affect sustainability of change efforts.

Sometimes outside organizations come into a community and say, "we know what you need better than you do and we know how to fix you." That's a bad feeling when someone comes in to try to fix you instead of helping us to come up with solutions. It also won't last too long. If you come in and give us something, we will do it for a while and when you leave, we'll go back to doing the same thing we did before. If it comes from the community, then we gave birth to it and we have to nurture it and help develop it to grow. It is our baby.

These last two quotes draw attention to the fact that many communities in South LA have had difficult experiences with organizations that purport to "help." The assistance is often seen as coming with a cost—with greater benefit going to the organization than to the community, and with autonomy of residents diminished or lost. The example below of such "assistance" was provided by one focus group participant.

One time the Los Angeles Police Department tried to get involved with our group. They really wanted to take over the group and run it their way—and take credit for themselves. But we want credit to go to the community. The community is doing it and should get recognition. Outside groups can help, but helping is not the same thing as running. They need to help us help ourselves. If we give others the job then we are not helping ourselves. We also got the sense that the police weren't here only for us. They came with the mentality of "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours." We said we don't need your help if that is how you are going to be. We want people to come to the community and be involved for the community, not for themselves.

The representative sent by an organization to work with the community also matters very much and can influence the effectiveness of the group. A few characteristics considered important in organizers include the following:

- Organizers must demonstrate they are serious about working with the community. They shouldn't just go to a community and talk. They must "walk the talk."
- Organizers should foster an encouraging atmosphere among residents.
- Organizers should provide information on community resources and on issues of concern to the community, e.g. expungements and DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals).
- Organizers should serve as a "critical friend" or "coach," helping residents to build on their ideas for community change.
- Organizers should be accessible, and reach out regularly to residents.
- Organizers should develop a one-to-one relationship with each resident, creating a sense of trust.

In terms of members, focus group respondents felt that the size of a group was less important than the commitment of participants. If members are dedicated and accountable to the group, then good things can be accomplished even if the group is small. One woman offered this explanation: *"When individuals have a commitment and feel ownership for something, they will have much pride and will want to see it successful. Then, when they experience success, this will foster other behaviors and they will want to do something even better next time."* Another NAC member pointed out that when the group feels like a family, they will support each other in carrying out projects despite facing challenges. His reflection is as follows:

We know there will be ups and downs. Our main thing is to stay focused and keep pushing ahead. I believe there is no obstacle we can't get around. If the burden is too heavy on my shoulders, I have another member who can help with the load. When we distribute the load, it will be lighter. We are a group, but more importantly, we are like a family. If the load is heavy for one person, the next one can pick it up. This has helped our NAC stay strong. We encourage one another to hang in there.

New Planning Process

SBCC introduced a new planning process for NACs in the last two years. The new method has fewer steps than the previous one. Adults and youth both were very pleased with the alterations to the process. *"The change has been good,"* recognized a participant. *"Before, there was much repetition. Now much of that has been cut out. It is not as long. The process is much more streamlined."*

One benefit mentioned is that the onboarding of new members is made easier and shorter. In the past, it could take a long time for individuals new to a NAC to learn the planning process and to learn about the project. There was much repetition as new members caught up to veteran members. As a result, some longer-term members got discouraged and left the NAC. Greater retention of members is thus another benefit. Not only will members be less frustrated by the time it takes to onboard new members, but they will be less irritated by the length of the planning process. The longer process seemed cumbersome to some and affected their creativity and motivation. It led to the departure of some members. The shorter process has re-energized groups.

Then, another benefit is that with decreased paperwork, members are more enthusiastic and more willing to take on positions. A leader shared the challenge she used to have in recruiting others for certain roles. She explained that, “

Before, I used to have to do so much work. Many in my group didn't like to take on positions because of the paperwork. I would force them to help me, but it was just a title. I'd have to do much of the paperwork. Now, members are more willing to take positions.

The youth were also eager to point out that the shorter process allows them to do events faster, and as a result, they can hold even more events in the community. Also, they felt that the new process works much better with young people.

Conclusion

These four focus groups strongly validated the use of Neighborhood Action Councils as a way to meaningfully engage residents in community building. In South Los Angeles, where residents face multiple challenges daily that affect their health and well being, the NACs offer an opportunity to focus on the talents and gifts of residents that can be used to bring about positive change in the community. The voices of youth in these focus groups were particularly striking, and youth were adamant that the NACs mattered a lot in their lives. Through the NACs they can find themselves, find new friends, and find ways to make a difference in their communities.