

Case Study: Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative

What drives the remarkable scale of change here? Resident voices determine how their dream of an urban village unfolds. And at the center of this renaissance have been young people who, nurtured by adults who believe in them, have contributed guts, ambition and sincerity to building their community.

—“Essential Partners,” report for the Annie E. Casey Foundation

Since 1985, the residents of the Dudley Street neighborhood have been working together to revitalize their community. Located less than two miles from downtown Boston, Massachusetts, the Dudley Street neighborhood suffered from arson, illegal dumping, lack of investing, neglect, and illegal practices by banks and other lending institutions of denying loans or restricting the number of loans for certain areas of a community (called “redlining”).

Although one of the poorest neighborhoods in Boston (the per capita income is half that of the city of Boston), the Dudley Street neighborhood is rich in ethnic diversity. Community members are African American, Latino, Cape Verdean, and Caucasian. Those residents decided to take matters into their own hands, forming the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI). DSNI is a nonprofit community-based planning and organizing entity that works to implement resident-driven plans for revitalizing the area. Since its formation in the mid-1980s, DSNI has grown into a collaborative effort of more than 2,700 resident members, businesses, nonprofit organizations, and religious institutions that are concerned with revitalizing this culturally diverse neighborhood of 24,000 people and rediscovering its character and affordability.

DSNI’s major accomplishment has been—and continues to be—organizing and empowering the residents of the Dudley Street neighborhood

to create a shared vision of that area. The residents make this vision a reality by creating strategic partnerships with individuals and organizations in the private, government, and nonprofit sectors. For example, in 1986, DSNI’s first community-wide campaign, “Don’t Dump on Us,” was victorious in getting the city to clean up vacant lots and to tow abandoned cars. In 1987, that same campaign was successful in closing illegal trash transfer stations and restoring commuter rail service. And in 1991, the “Dudley Pride” campaign kicked off with trash barrels placed along Dudley Street.

The youth in the community are just as involved in the revitalization process as the adults, working with other community members to reestablish their neighborhood’s character. In 1990, architects and planners worked with more than 40 youths to plan and design community centers. In 1993, the community’s youths designed and painted Unity Mural. And in 1994, the Youth Landscape Training Project upgraded lots on Dennis Street.

The DSNI continues to grow and have an impact on the community. The membership has grown to 3,670. Many of the children who were residents of the area when DSNI started are now the leaders of the organization today. More than 600 of the 1300 vacant lots have been rehabilitated for homes, gardens, parks, and playgrounds. The Vine Street Community Center was constructed and recently opened serving the community in a variety of ways. In 2004, *Celebrate Boston* held the kickoff event to the Democratic National Convention at the DSNI offices to recognize the innovative achievements of the organization.

Sources:

- Benfield, Terris, and Vorsanger 2001, 34–40 (A).
- “Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative,” 2004 (E).
- DSNI Historic Timeline,” 2002 (E)
- The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, 2004 (E)