

Building Community Leaders with Training and Fun, Targeted Programs

BEST Neighborhoods Division

City of Plano, TX



The Neighborhood Leadership Academy is a year-long educational initiative hosted by the city of Plano, Texas that provides free support and training to neighborhood groups wanting to grow and create positive impact in their communities. Each year, four or five groups – including homeowner’s associations¹, neighborhood associations, or crime watch groups – apply to participate in the Academy to set goals, outline visions, create mission statements, and plan specific neighborhood building activities. The Academy helps groups identify assets and gaps, create marketing plans, build organizing strategies, and roll out engagement activities. Through the Academy,

participating groups make plans to take action and develop new ways to create connections.

During its first year, the Academy took place in a live setting and the pre-meeting ‘dinner hour’ helped build relationships among group members. This was harder to accomplish in 2020 when everything went virtual, but residents still came up with creative ways to connect and were still able to gather ideas, get advice from the city’s neighborhood planner, and develop projects to complete in their communities. To participate in the Academy, groups need to have at least four active members and two who are willing to attend all meetings and workshops.

Asset Mapping Tool

One class through the Leadership Academy focuses on asset mapping, an activity that helps residents define and build upon community assets. Once assets are mapped in the neighborhood, the group brainstorms ways to utilize them. This helps community leaders focus on targeted activities to meet community needs, and pair them with existing assets which may be individual residents, businesses, physical spaces,

Defining Community Assets

The term “assets” usually comes up in the financial world and refers to cash, property, equipment, intellectual property, or things of value. In the ABCD model a community asset refers to:

Categories of Community Assets

Individuals	People are your first and best assets! (Include elderly, youth, disabled, abled, etc.) Gifts of head – things you know about Gifts of the hands – things you know how to do Gifts of the heart – things you care deeply about
Physical Spaces	A school, hospital, place of worship, library, recreation center, social club. It could be a town landmark or symbol. Or it might be a public place that already belongs to the community – a park, a wetland, or other open space.
Community Services	A service that makes life better for some or all community members – public transportation, early childhood education center, community recycling facilities, cultural organization.
Businesses	Organizations that provide jobs and support the local economy. Businesses that provide essential services, i.e. grocers, medical care, pharmacies, etc. Businesses that could be interested in supporting your group’s mission.
Institutions	Federal, state, local governments. Include regional and international organizations, and other entities charged with improving the public good.

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Finding and Utilizing Community Assets
Neighborhood Leadership Academy

¹ Homeowners Associations, or HOAs, are very common in western states, incorporated into the development of a subdivision of homes. They play the role of a neighborhood association where they exist, in addition to running the business of collecting HOA monthly fees to maintain common areas such as landscaping, pools and even streets and sidewalks, managing those finances, monitoring rules and regulations instituted to maintain property values, and often working with a paid property manager.

community services, or other institutions. By developing an asset inventory, residents know what is available to start with and what can be built upon. The “*Finding and Utilizing Community Assets*” workbook includes strategies for marketing, recruitment and record keeping (available upon request).

Plano’s BEST Neighborhoods Division

The Neighborhood Leadership Academy is part of Plano’s [BEST Neighborhoods Division](#), which identifies neighborhoods that want to be BEST: Beautiful, Engaged, Safe and Thriving. To be successful, neighborhoods need individuals who are willing to be involved, plus a funding stream and leadership strategies. Attention and awareness to neighborhood strengths and needs is important, plus innovative ways to connect and engage with diverse populations. It is also important think outside the box and be willing to try something new. Additional activities provided through Plano’s BEST Neighborhoods Division are listed below.



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Additional Activities through the BEST Neighborhood Division

<p>HOA Legal Clinic</p>	<p>In 2021, the City of Plano, in partnership with the cities of Garland and Rowlett, is holding a virtual legal clinic to provide HOA boards with the tools they need to manage their HOA. Speakers include attorneys, banking associates and community managers. Attendees receive a wealth of information by networking with other community leaders and learning from subject experts.</p>
<p>Neighbors Connect – BEST Break</p>	<p>These one-hour sessions take place twice a month on Zoom and focus on various topics led by local experts. Neighborhood leaders and residents attend, and the goal is to help neighbors connect and stay informed on local happenings, resources, and strategies. Here is one example from 2020: a resident passed out fliers along her street and invited neighbors to eat dinner on their front lawns, all on the same date and time. Families and neighbors came out to eat – together but separate – then walked around and visited, safely socially distanced. This gave residents an opportunity to connect and socialize.</p>
<p>Love Where You Live</p>	<p>This revitalization program takes place in specific neighborhoods in Plano and focuses on transforming the community through education and engagement, plus physical improvements and home repairs. Through this program, the city works with neighborhood residents each month to discuss topics of interest such as senior services, job placement strategies or recycling policies. The program also plans two community service days where hundreds of volunteers do community improvement and home repair projects. This program also helps neighbors organize and connect.</p>
<p>Mini Grant Program</p>	<p>Plano offers a mini grant program of up to \$500 for residents to create neighborhood initiatives that improve communication and collaboration. Examples include starting up a neighborhood website, neighborhood marketing package or neighborhood history projects. Neighborhood groups may apply two times a year for funding.</p>
<p>Plano’s Fittest Neighborhood</p>	<p>In November 2020, the city of Plano created a fitness challenge between neighborhoods to keep people connected and active. Individuals signed up to participate within their neighborhood and logged in to track their activities each day. Neighborhood tallies were shared, and the most active neighborhood was awarded a street sign, gym bag, trophies, and bragging rights. There were also first, second and third place awards for participating men and women.</p>
<p>Pop Up Party Trailer</p>	<p>The pop-up party trailer is free to neighborhood groups and provides everything (except food) needed for a block party such orange cones, tables and chairs, yard games, lighting, picnic tables, children’s tables, umbrellas, garbage cans and so on. The city drops the trailer at the location on Friday and picks it back up on Monday. To reserve the trailer, neighborhood groups register online.</p>



NEW! Pop Up Theater	A pop-up theater is in development that includes everything needed to host an outdoor movie including a screen, DVD player, speakers, cords, and microphones. Interested neighborhood groups can reserve a theater box for pick up. Neighborhood volunteers set up and break down and return the equipment at the end of the event. Groups need to provide their own movie and pay the licensing fee to show the movie. On the night of the event, the entire neighborhood is invited to bring a lawn chair and snacks!
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