

## Block Challenge Grant Program Builds Neighborhoods, and Neighbors

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Invest DSM  
Des Moines, IA

*Invest DSM hoped to help 50 households when the Block Challenge Grant Program began in March 2020. Six months and 240 homes later, the true need for the program was clear.*

The Block Challenge Grant Program acts as a matching grant, offering a dollar-to-dollar match to participating property owners. The grant amount per household was capped at \$1,000 for teams of at least five households, and \$2,500 for teams of 10 or more households. Team members had to be geographically concentrated and had to establish teams themselves and apply as a group. This helped to build relationships in the community, plus the physical closeness of projects resulted in a visible impact. Neighbors could see the improvement to the block and experienced the value of working together.



Before 

After 



Although interested households had to apply as a team, they did not need to cooperate in terms of work to be done; each household could pick the size and scope of their own project. Individual households could spend as much as they wanted but could only receive up to the matched amount their team was eligible for. Both homeowners and landlords were eligible, they just had to be current on taxes or lease obligations. The program had no income restrictions, but all work needed to be external and visible to the public. “Basically,” said Executive Director Amber Lynch, “if I stand outside the home, on the street, and can see most of the work being done, we’re good to go.”

Projects needed to cause a physical improvement to the building so items like lawn furniture were not eligible for matching funds, but roofs and windows were. Households could do projects on their own (unless the work required a licensed contractor) or hire a contractor of their choosing. Staff members reviewed and approved team applications as a whole so households could coordinate work parties or collaborate with contractors if needed. In some cases, staff asked for different materials to ensure high quality results. Teams had 60 days to complete projects once the application was approved.

### Application and Program Process

The team application process was short and simple and included policies and project requirements. All households had to include a contact name, address, email and skills or resources they could share. Invest DSM provided an outline for the scope of work including a space for 'before' photos. Below are the basic steps in the Block Challenge Grant Program:

1. Apply as a team
2. Provide individual scopes with a 'before' photo and bid (if applicable)
3. Review of scopes, and approval, by Invest DSM
4. Complete work
5. Provide 'after' photos; submit invoices, receipts and reimbursement form
6. Celebrate!



Before 



After 

### Program Outcomes, Challenges and Solutions

Invest DSM's Block Challenge Grant Program was wildly successful in its first year with 16 teams participating, one at the \$1,000 level and 15 at the \$2,500 level. The total number of participating households was 240 and the average investment per property was \$4,576. Overall, the program prompted nearly \$1.1 million of investment in 2020. This included significant private investment; for every dollar Invest DSM contributed, property owners invested \$1.51.



Before 



After 

### Program Benefits and Future Planning

There are many benefits to this type of project. It creates new networks and connections in the neighborhood, improves homes and beautifies the neighborhood. In instances involving rentals, it strengthened relationships between landlords and tenants. The program built a sense of pride and possibility. It motivated others to get involved and participate. It extended support to neighbors and created a resource for mutual aid – if someone has a problem, they now have options for support. The program created a foundation for future relationships. By requiring households to work in teams, it built social cohesion and visible impact. Invest DSM plans to offer this program annually, each spring. Applications will be released in February and accepted in March so work can begin in April. Project deadlines will be August.

Invest DSM did not invent this strategy – it was built upon other similar programs in [Oswego](#) and [Jamestown](#), (NY) – but added their own twist. At the end of it all, the degree of pride that residents felt about their property and the neighborhood was huge. The program did more than rehabilitate properties, it connected neighbors and refreshed entire blocks.



### Additional Grant Option

Households participating in the 2020 Block Challenge were also offered a holiday grant to receive Holiday lights for decorating.

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| <b>Learn more</b>  | Visit: <a href="#">Block Challenge Grant Program</a> and see program guidelines, application form, and the scope of work form.  |
| <b>In the News</b> | <a href="#">Have you seen the “I’m Invested” yard signs popping up around Des Moines?</a><br>By City Councilman Carl Voss<br><br><a href="#">Nearly \$1.1 million invested in Des Moines neighborhoods through new program</a><br>By Kathy A Bolten, Business Record, November 16, 2020 |



## RESOURCE: Developing a Targeted Block Challenge – Tips for Success

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| Have Flexible Timelines              | Invest DSM gave teams 60 days to complete all projects and, although it is important to provide a timeframe, they found flexibility with timelines was critical. Some households had issues getting supplies quickly, and others had weather-related delays. A 90-day timeframe may be more realistic.   |
| Build Flexible Use of Funds          | Although homeowners must start with a clear project scope, they sometimes need to change or expand based on issues or findings once work begins.   |
| Be Flexible with Team Size           | Some blocks wanted to apply for the \$2,500 grant but had trouble assembling a ten-household team. Since it was not from lack of effort, Invest DSM allowed smaller teams to apply for the larger grant as well and realized a need for flexibility with team size. Eventually, Invest DSM allowed a range of seven to 10 households for the \$2,500 grant, and a range of three to five households for the \$1,000 grant. This helped the program gain traction in more distressed neighborhoods. |
| Cap the Team Size                    | Some neighborhoods may want to include more than 10 households for logistical and management purposes, but do not allow teams to become too large. For example, one neighborhood had close to 30 households that wanted to participate, which posed a challenge when it came to managing logistics, collaborating and sticking to work timelines.  |
| Suggest Quality of Work Standards    | Provide suggestions on quality standards and improvements that will uplift the neighborhood. Share ideas about good, solid projects, best materials, and most valuable design changes. Provide a list of trusted and qualified contractors and invite participants to create their own contractor lists as well. One team put together a list of contractors that neighbors had used previously and shared that list with everyone in the group.   |
| Encourage Collaboration              | Some contractors do not want to take on small jobs but may be willing if a group hires a contractor for multiple projects in one area. For example, one contractor was not interested in doing one small concrete job but was willing to do five driveways in the same area. Collaboration can increase contractor interest.   |
| Encourage Sharing of Resources       | During the application process, ask households to share how they can help others. Ask if they have tools to lend, or skills and resources to offer. This can help build cooperative and long-lasting relationships.  |
| Include a Celebration                | Celebrations were difficult in 2020 because of the pandemic but neighborhoods still had small events including block parties with masks and social distancing and neighborhood walking tours to show the work being done.  |
| Offer Regular Communications         | Create a newsletter or regular communication strategy to keep groups informed of neighborhood news and progress. Also, provide ideas for neighbors to stay connected. Some teams created Facebook groups to continue sharing information while others directed participants to neighborhood associations. Establishing new methods to stay connected is a valuable outcome of the program.   |
| Provide Guidelines for Reimbursement | Invest DSM provided only basic guidance about receipts, which became problematic when some households submitted receipts that included other purchases as well. This meant staff had to do tax calculations for accurate reimbursement, which was time consuming. Limit the number of receipts and advise participants to only turn in receipts with items related to the project.   |

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| Create a Process for Reimbursement                 | Create a quick and efficient process for reimbursement, so households do not have to wait. When households submit receipts, Invest DSM staff verify costs, purchases, and project completion, then enter the data into QuickBooks and cut checks. A quick reimbursement is important to families and builds trust.   |
| Create a Clear Workflow                            | Before teams can start a project, require that they meet as a team to discuss work plans then require a second meeting with staff to discuss program guidelines, rules, and strategy. Invest DSM created a google doc for each team so they could pose questions and resolve some of those questions before meeting. Invest DSM also created a Dropbox folder for each team with a reimbursement form, sample scopes of work, and program guidelines. Here, teams could upload before and after photos, proposals for planned work, receipts, and bids or quotes.                                |
| Build a Good Outreach Plan                         | In a perfect world, Invest DSM would have knocked on every door in the neighborhood and talked to every family. However, the pandemic made this impossible. Staff therefore left large post-it notes on every door with information about the project. From there, interested households reached out and shared information with neighbors. Staff helped teams create personalized fliers and emails specific to their block. They included information on the project and a direct invitation like: "I want to do this, can you join me?" All fliers identified a block leader for the project. |
| Appoint Dedicated Staff                            | Invest DSM had two staff members that helped teams organize and manage projects. They also helped facilitate meetings for participants, which were originally going to be in person, but had to convert to online. Invest DSM provided unlimited Zoom access so teams did not have to purchase accounts.   |
| Build a Marketing Strategy                         | Invest DSM planted yard signs at each project with the logo and the phrase "I'm invested in my community." The only problem was Invest DSM did not have enough; they ordered 150 and 240 households participated. However, it was impactful to see streets lined with yard signs.  |
| Have a Solid Process for Choosing the Service Area | The City of Des Moines picked eligible neighborhoods and mainly focused on middle markets that had capacity but also vulnerabilities. The goal was to help keep those areas strong with targeted resources. Although some middle neighborhoods in Des Moines have momentum, they also have many properties needing work. Consider supporting neighborhoods with anchor institutions that you want to protect.  |
| Provide Work Guidelines                            | Invest DSM did not allow funds to be used for non-permanent items such as lawn furniture or wind chimes, though semi-permanent items like flower planters or privacy fences were allowed. Make sure work keeps with the character of the neighborhood. For example, colors should be appropriate and limited to two color choices, so they fit in the neighborhood.  |
| Identify Flexible Financing                        | Substantial funding from the city of Des Moines came from a local sales tax of 1%, and support from the County came from casino revenue and sales tax. It is difficult to project how many households may be served with funds available because it depends on individual project costs. If possible, use unrestricted funds that are flexible.  |
| Anticipate Repeat Customers                        | Have a protocol for those who want to apply a second or third time. Some households will need more than one round of support.  |