

“Neighborhood Stewards” Gather Data and Build Community in Youngstown

Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation
Youngstown, OH

After years of trying different methods to connect with residents to gather input and feedback, YNDC decided to take efforts to the next level by employing longtime residents as Neighborhood Stewards to interact with the community. They believe that meeting people where they are was the best and most effective method of reaching residents, which for YNDC means knocking on doors and getting to know people. YNDC’s Neighborhood Stewards are paid to do exactly that. Using REGRID, a web-based, user-friendly data mapping and survey tool, YNDC’s Neighborhood Stewards travel door-to-door in their own neighborhoods and collect detailed feedback from residents about how the neighborhood is doing and what they feel are important priorities for improving the area. YNDC uses this feedback to inform and evaluate its programs and services at the neighborhood level. They also collect contact information from residents who want to get more involved in activities to improve their neighborhood. Neighborhood Stewards are an important part of an overall neighborhood revitalization or stabilization strategy and are essentially the impetus for prioritizing projects and getting work going.

Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation (YNDC) supports neighborhood associations throughout the city of Youngstown, Ohio. The agency formed in 2009 as part of a public-private partnership to build citywide capacity for neighborhood revitalization. All YNDC programs and services are driven by resident priorities. Initiatives include home repair, vacant property acquisition and rehabilitation, commercial development, basic neighborhood cleanup, and organizing around neighborhood issues. Over the years, YNDC has leveraged over \$70 million in direct reinvestment in Youngstown’s neighborhoods.

REGRID YNDC2 - 2021 Idora Plan Update Survey - Find an address, place, parcel # or lat/l

CURRENTLY VIEWING: US > OHIO > MAHONING COUNTY > YOUNGSTOWN

Overview	Addressing nuisance properties (houses that are severely neglected or where illegal/illicit activity is taking place)	Very important
Save	Improve access to recreation opportunities at Glenwood Park and Mill Creek MetroParks	Very important
Share	Fixing streets, sidewalks, and crosswalks in the neighborhood	Very important
Bookmarks	What do you think is the MOST important thing that can be done to improve your neighborhood?	renovating the vacant lots on glenwood ave.
Filter	Why do you feel this is the most important?	they are useless spots not doing nothing for the neighborhood
Style	What types of things would you NOT like to see on Glenwood Avenue?	we don't need anymore gas stations and liquor stores
List	Thank you! If it's alright with you, we'd like to keep in touch with you to update you on our work and other ways you can get involved. Your voice and your input is important to us! Can we contact you about upcoming neighborhood meetings and to provide you with updates?	Yes

status is 2
My name is XXXX and I live in the neighborhood and work for Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation (YNDC). YNDC is a nonprofit neighborhood development organization that has worked in partnership with residents in this community for over a decade to help improve quality of life in the neighborhood. YNDC is surveying the neighborhood because we want to hear from YOU about how the neighborhood is doing and what you think...

REGRID is intuitive and a great tool for parcel-level data collection. There are fees for different levels of use, but there may be incentives for nonprofits.

<https://regrid.com/>

For YNDC, employing Neighborhood Stewards helps the organization to grow and build strong community support. “When you have someone going door to door,” said Jack Daugherty at YNDC, “and this person lives in the area and understands the context of the neighborhood, that really builds connections.”

YNDC’s first Neighborhood Steward, Patricia Stokes, was recruited from an existing pool of active resident leaders. They asked her to start by conducting a detailed survey in the neighborhood that she lived in, and she was more than willing to help. “I’m the type of person who works toward what I believe in,” said Stokes. “When I saw what YNDC was doing in the neighborhood, I wanted to be a part of it.”



The door-to-door survey included questions about safety in the neighborhood, repairs needed, problem properties, crime, and so on. YNDC’s Neighborhood Stewards use REGRID to collect resident feedback on a house-by-house, parcel-by-parcel level following a similar approach as the Citywide Housing Conditions Survey. Results revealed what needed work and what residents wanted. In the

neighborhoods Patricia surveyed, residents wanted a neighborhood grocery store and pocket parks, as well as a laundromat, restaurant, and local day care.

The Citywide Housing Conditions Survey

In the summer of 2021, YNDC completed a detailed Citywide Housing Condition Survey in Youngstown to identify properties that needed attention. College interns trained by YNDC surveyed all residential properties on every street in the city using REGRID and documented all vacant and occupied properties with visible exterior issues, such as peeling paint or a failing roof. Some parcels had nuisance issues, while others needed demolition or involved homeowners in a challenging situation needing help. YNDC completes citywide housing conditions surveys every two years in partnership with the City of Youngstown and the data is used to inform plans and strategies to improve housing conditions in neighborhoods and across the city.

According to Stokes, when you greet people in person and one-on-one, there’s a greater chance that they will talk about what they see happening in the neighborhood. “Residents see what is going on firsthand,” said Patricia, “and many do not feel comfortable talking about problems at public meetings. When you meet one on one, you can get a response. People are more willing to answer honestly if you talk to them privately.”

The Neighborhood Steward position is part time, and the number of hours varies based on the season and the work being done. Neighborhood Stewards track their hours, invoice the agency monthly, and are paid out of the agency’s general operating fund. YNDC notes it is relatively easy to raise funds for this expense: local foundations, businesses and stakeholders can easily see the value of the work and the data is useful to them as well.

Survey Outcomes. Survey data is used to create an up-to-date market typology. It informs funding sought for demolition or real estate development and drives partnerships with the local land bank to help sustain affordability. It informs neighborhood action plans, and goals for monitoring and pursuing tax foreclosure properties. Sometimes, when housing quality or code enforcement issues are found with occupied homes, YNDC sends direct mailings to share details on resources and support available. For example, during the citywide Housing Quality Survey, YNDC identified 527 owner-occupied homes with deteriorating roofs and sent each household information on a local roof replacement program.

Conducting a face-to-face community survey is a successful community-building strategy. When people are offered an opportunity to share what they want, and then see results, it builds trust and neighborhood pride. Data can also be used for building and planning purposes; for example, when YNDC worked on redeveloping a commercial plaza, they used data from the survey to establish the plans. Results help identify campaigns for local neighborhood associations to take on and, as local issues or properties needing help are identified, can prompt the city to act. When neighborhood comprehensive plans need updating, survey priorities can help identify strategies.

Using local residents to gather intelligence is perhaps the most effective way to support neighborhood revitalization and stabilization. “Be sure to listen to the community,” said Daugherty. “You will have more success and get a lot more accomplished if you follow their lead.”

Tips for Success

Find the Right Person	Connect with someone who lives in the area, is committed to the cause, and understands the issues facing the neighborhood. It is important to hire a person that people trust, is a good listener, and can foster positive relationships.
Find Funds	Demonstrate value for the position by creating a budget for it. Many people are willing to volunteer on a short-term basis but sustaining a long-term community liaison is worth the expense.
Share Updates	Share project updates and neighborhood news so residents understand the work being done. Prepare fliers, send emails, and create social media posts.
Meet People Where They Are	Prioritize one-on-one contact. Many people don’t want to share ideas in public, especially if there is a problem with a property. Direct communication gives residents a chance to talk and shows the agency is listening and responsive.
Be Honest	Some ideas or initiatives are not possible. Be up front about that possibility and explain why a particular request or project cannot be fulfilled.
Use Multiple Methods	It is sometimes necessary to visit a property twice or use another method to communicate with a resident. Leave door hangers or fliers with multiple ways to engage, including online forums. Employ a few methods so you can capture as much information as possible.

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