COMMUNITY SAFETY AUDIT SUMMARY

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Introduction

The Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) and Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH) awarded the Cambridge Police Department a grant in the amount of $30,000 to complete a community safety audit project as part of the Middlesex Community Transformation Grant. In collaboration with the Cambridge Public Health Department the grant was utilized to support the community safety audits in the City of Cambridge.

The Middlesex Community Transformation Grant (CTG) has a strategic direction for healthy and safe physical environments. The aim of this strategic direction is to implement initiatives to improve the built environment in order to increase physical activity opportunities. The community safety audit project was implemented to evaluate various communities in the Middlesex County, specifically Cambridge, Everett and Somerville. The method that was used to complete these audits was Photovoice.

Photovoice is a participatory action research method intended to give the power to members of the community regarding pressing issues. Photovoice has three main goals: "(1) to enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns, (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues through large and small group discussion of photographs, and (3) to reach policy makers." (Wang & Burris, 1997) This project has certainly met the three goals of Photovoice. Project members were able to capture the safe and unsafe conditions of the City of Cambridge from their point of view. The group had several discussions regarding these issues and possible solutions which are discussed further in this summary. The group will be presenting in front of the City Council about their findings.

This summary will describe the project members, using Photovoice, and selecting themes. Also included are recommendations that have been created to address some of the issues identified throughout the project. Lastly, there will be a section with recommendations to continue this project and how to make it evolve into a project that can continue to benefit the City of Cambridge.

Project Members

Since Photovoice was the method chosen to complete the community safety audit, and one of the goals of Photovoice is "to enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns," (Wang & Burris, 1997) part of the agreement through the grant was to engage youth, train them on the community safety audit and provide assistance to conduct the audit. The Cambridge Police Department employed 11 youth ages 15-23 that reside and/or go to school in Cambridge as Action Researchers. Most of the youth employed to complete the audit had worked with the department previously through an internship or they were recommended by members of the department.

Also employed was a technical consultant who had previous knowledge of the Photovoice method. Her role was to help the project coordinator with the facilitation of the meetings with the Action Researchers, as well as some of the extra work such as printing photographs, creating PowerPoint presentations and helping put together the visual presentations for the Photovoice Exhibit. The Project Coordinator was responsible for overseeing the project and all its details.

The project also had four officers work with the youth to get out into the community, survey the youth and homeless populations and help a few businesses identify safety problems through a SARA(scanning, analysis, response and assessment) problem solving method.

Training, Taking Pictures, and Choosing Themes

At the commencement of the project youth gathered twice during the week of July 9, 2012. Youth were introduced to the idea of safety, the method Photovoice and what the rest of the summer would entail through this project. Youth also attended a workshop that was prepared by Mr. Eric Wong, a School Psychologist for the Boston area and Ms. Sarah O'Leary, the Regional Coordinator for Boston and the New England for Visual Thinking Strategies and the Coordinator of School Partnerships with the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. During this workshop, youth learned not only how to take meaningful photographs but also how photographs may be perceived by people in various ways and how they can influence those ideas with their cameras. After this workshop youth were given cameras and assigned to go out into the community and take photographs using their knowledge from the trainings.

The next three weeks (See Attachment A for full schedule detail) youth were tasked with going out into the community to take pictures of things they found to be safe and unsafe; and each week youth would gather to discuss what they found. To aid the discussions, the MAPC provided the Department with the "SHOWeD" method, a method to look at analyze the photos they took. (See Attachment B) After analysis the Action Researchers were tasked with categorizing the pictures into themes. At the end of the third week youth had identified six themes that they found important and concerning to the safety of the community. The six themes are: City Maintenance, Residential Maintenance, Health, Crime, Homelessness, and Positive Prevention.

Themes

City Maintenance. Youth photographed many objects that would be considered broken: cracked sidewalks, lights that are out, dead animals on the sidewalk, signs that are hidden among other things. In discussions, youth stated that they do not know who is responsible for the maintenance or how to go about telling someone. They described a need to provide information to the community so they can report areas of concern.

Residential Maintenance. Youth found that there are a significant amount of areas in which residents are not caring for their own property or are responsible for the unmaintained city property. One problem that was reoccurring was that people would not properly dispose of their rubbish even when there was a trash can nearby.

Health. The youth have identified health as one of the themes that affect our safety, particularly smoking, but other concerns have been physical fitness and dietary needs. These sub-categories have a great affect on our personal safety and smoking can have an effect on the community through second hand smoke and the litter that it leaves behind. Physical fitness plays into safety because if you do not feel safe enough to exercise in certain locations, you may not get the adequate amount.

Crime. Youth found that crime was a safety concern for them. The two crimes that youth were able to capture in photographs were vandalism and theft. Youth believed that the police were already doing a good job with handling crime in this city, but that there could be other solutions to the amount of graffiti.

Homelessness. The youth have described homelessness as a safety concern in the City. There areas of the City that are highly occupied by this population and sometimes can make people feel unsafe. The biggest problem that youth see is the aggressive panhandling. In order to find out more information about those who are homeless in the community, youth went out with our Homeless Outreach Officers and surveyed the population.

Positive Prevention. Youth identified several things that people and the city are already doing to enhance the community. Some of the things that they captured and mentioned during discussions are the Mayor's Youth Summer Employment Program, Just-A-Start, Danehy Park which is one of the city's well-maintained parks and those who work in the city to improve it.

Recommendations

City Maintenance. One recommendation youth had was to create a brochure with all important city phone numbers and to distribute this brochure during the City's door-to-door campaigns, on the campuses of the universities and in other public buildings. Another recommendation that youth had was to create a 3-1-1 hotline. The hotline would make it easier to report maintenance problems.

Residential Maintenance. The largest problem that youth identified within this theme was the laziness of the people in our community. Most of the problems identified have to do with individual behaviors. One recommendation to address littering in the city is to create a sticker campaign that could be placed on all of the trash receptacles throughout the city. The sticker would say "Don't settle for outside shots, just dunk it." This would influence people to actually get their rubbish in the proper place.

Another recommendation that came to the department through our Facebook page is to have a city-wide clean-up day. It was suggested that if there was a day that students from the middle and high schools were spread throughout the city to help clean-up. This would not only help clean the city, but the awareness that a day like this would raise would help to keep the city clean. Another suggestion from Facebook is to create a work order program, a way that citizens who are either elderly or physically unable to maintain their property to receive help from youth and/or volunteers.

Health. One recommendation for health is to place more cigarette butt receptacles throughout the city and create more designated smoking areas within the City. This would encourage those who do smoke to do so out of the way of more populated areas. To promote physical activity a recommendation is to ensure that public parks are kept clean and maintained so that they can be used. Youth believe that Danehy Park is a great example of a park that is maintained in great condition.

Crime. There are several issues within this theme. One that youth identified as being very prevalent in their lives is the tension between certain Cambridge neighborhoods. One suggestion is to continue programs such as Night Court. These programs and events bring large amounts of people together and it does not matter what neighborhoods people live in. Youth that were surveyed would like to see these types of programs continued through the winter for those who do not make the City teams. Also suggested are more alternative programs at the youth centers in the winter. One program that was put in place during the winter of 2010 was a cooking class that was held at the West Cambridge Russell Youth Center.

Another issue within the theme that was identified was graffiti. A recommendation to combat this crime is to have more walls throughout the city where graffiti is allowed. If there are more designated areas for graffiti there will be less graffiti on people's private property. In addition, it is recommended that graffiti is removed more quickly. If a tagger knows that his or her work is going to be cleaned up quickly, they may not even bother in the first place.

The last issue that is most prevalent to youth is theft, particularly bicycle theft. The recommendation to address this is to make the information that the Police Department already disseminates even more public. It could be a part of the aforementioned brochure, or part of a packet that could be handed out during the door-to-door campaigns.

Homelessness. After speaking with the homeless, youth recommend that Cambridge build more shelters as well as a detox center. If there are more shelters, there will be less homeless people out on the streets at night which means there will be less homeless people who congregate together, a source of feeling unsafe to many people. Building a detox center would also allow some of the homeless people, as well as some others who are not homeless gets the help that they need. Many people do not get this help because centers are not easily accessible.

Project Recommendations

It is recommended that this project is done again next summer. The chance for the Cambridge Police Department to not only hire youth, but to have them produce great results that can influence our community is a great opportunity. The youth who participated stated that they not only enjoyed the project but that it changed the way they see issues in their community. It would be recommended that a larger group is utilized next year for the project. If funding is not available through the CTG, it is recommended that this becomes a worksite for Mayor's Youth Summer Employment Program.

Conclusion

The community safety audit through the Photovoice method gave members of our community a great opportunity to address issues in the community and come up with solutions. Presented above are the recommendations as a result of the work done during the summer of 2012. Project members look forward to helping with some of the recommendations and seeing the progress that this city can and hopefully will make.