

After 25 years, Dudley St. Initiative still going strong

Bay State Banner

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For the last 25 years, the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) has had a vision for its community that includes getting people invested in their surroundings.

Refurbishing dilapidated houses to sell at more affordable rates and spur community homeownership is a big part of the nonprofit group's overall strategy, but it's only one aspect. The initiative aims to do more than just help provide people with a place to live — it also wants to give them a reason to live there.

Since 1984, according to DSNI employees, the organization has sought to strengthen the Dudley neighborhood by bringing its inhabitants together to address community issues.

“This is a wonderful community, where many different kinds and generations of residents and other stakeholders have come together to control what happens here, for the benefit of the [residents],” said May Louie, the initiative's director of leadership and capacity building. “We've been able to halt the devastation, establish community institutions like the land trust and find innovative solutions together.”

The “devastation” to which Louie refers was caused by a combination of arson during the 1970s and '80s, and illegal dumping of waste materials, including lead, that continued into the '90s.

In 1993, the Dudley Triangle — a section of Roxbury and North Dorchester encompassing the area between Howard Avenue, Woodward Park Street, Folsom Street, Robin Hood Street, Hartford Street, Brookford Street, Blue Hill Avenue and Dudley Street — was plagued by illegal dumping. Nine percent of the city's waste was dumped in an area that housed 4 percent of the population, according to a 2002 DSNI study, and the neighborhood faced an epidemic of children suffering from lead poisoning. The situation was so bad that the Boston Public Health Commission declared the neighborhood near the triangle an Emergency Lead Poisoning Area in 1993.

Louie, 58, who has been with DSNI for 15 years, said the neighborhood improved the situation by getting residents involved in the waste removal processes. Composed of residents and local businesses, DSNI's Solid Waste Task Force is dedicated to ensuring that nothing like the illegal dumping problem happens again, and also works to address local environmental issues like hazardous waste and emissions.

Louie also works closely with DSNI's Resident Development Institute, which helps develop standardized practices to advance the initiative's goal of getting the community to invest in and improve itself. The Resident Development Institute provides training on a number of topics dedicated to community organizing, public policy advocacy and leadership.

DSNI's model of community building focuses on several key grassroots tenets — fostering

youth involvement, resident engagement and leadership, community-controlled development,

community organizing and building social capital.

The initiative also promotes the use of geographic information systems for community planning. Such systems can analyze geographic data to determine the best places to build homes, find wetlands or other areas that might be especially sensitive to hazardous waste, or even address emissions issues.

A wide range of groups from across the country and around the world have tapped DSNI to study the initiative's vision for grassroots community development, including the Association of American Geographers, the Neighborhood Funders Group and the National Community Land Trust Network.

"We've had national visitors from every region, including Anchorage [Alaska], Sacramento, Los Angeles, Detroit, Greensville [Va.], New Orleans, Wisconsin and D.C.," said Louie.

"International visitors have come from Canada, Australia, South Africa, Japan, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Ireland, France, Singapore and Cuba."

The initiative fields a steady stream of requests for information about its land trust, a parcel of land inside the Dudley Triangle in which DSNI has the power of eminent domain, enabling the organization to seize property and redevelop it. Essentially, this gives Dudley Neighbors Inc., DSNI's business arm, the ability to control prices of the homes inside that area, keeping a measure of affordable housing in the community.

"DSNI are the dreamers," said Jason J. Webb, director of operations for Dudley Neighbors Inc.

"We put [their] plans into action."

On walking tours through the neighborhood, DSNI staffers show visiting groups examples of the range of physical improvements that have been made to the area.

They display new homes built in the land trust, playgrounds assembled by community volunteers and youth-designed murals free of extraneous graffiti. They show off the Dudley Town Common, which highlights local art, history and people, as well as the area's community

centers and community greenhouse, land farmed by The Food Project and residents' home gardens.

They visit historical landmarks like the colonial-era Shirley-Eustis House, modern facilities of partner organizations like Project Hope and La Alianza Hispana, and future cornerstones like the site of the new, state-of-the-art Kroc Corps Community Center.

"If people have seen the documentary 'Holding Ground,'" which highlights the initiative's efforts to revitalize the Dudley Street community, "we are able to contrast the current conditions with the earlier ones," Louie said.

And the difference, she said, is remarkable.

"This is a wonderful neighborhood, with a lot to show for 25 years of hard, collective, resident-led effort to build an urban village out of the devastation," Louie said. "We're proud of what the community has done, and want to share lessons that may be useful to others."