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News Release

For Immediate Release

Community Program Aims to Help Neighbors Work Together

A new community program will help neighborhoods dealing with crime, economic problems, tensions between different groups of people, and the day-to-day challenges of struggling to make ends meet. The program is called Neighbor for Neighbor.

Faced time and again with issues caused by challenging economic times – many that couldn't be simply changed with legislative action or with only help from City departments - Mayor Jim O'Neal asked City Manager Greg Burris, "What are we doing to help alleviate the economic obstacles of the residents in Springfield's most stressed neighborhoods?"

Burris believed that to find solutions to these problems, and make lasting changes, neighborhoods need everyone's ideas, work, and talent. So he sought help from various Springfield experts.

He reached out to leaders from Springfield Public Schools, Council of Churches, United Way, Community Foundation of the Ozarks, Missouri State University, Community Partnership of the Ozarks and others.

This initial group agreed to work with two Springfield neighborhoods – Weller and Robberson - and decided to follow guidelines from a national organization called Everyday Democracy. A leader in the field of civic participation and community change, Everyday Democracy has been successful using what is called a dialogue-to-change process to help drive positive change for citizens who need the most help. The dialogue process mobilizes neighborhoods to come together and work together to identify and solve problems together with community partners.

"We hope Neighbor for Neighbor will help people build the trusting relationships necessary for long-term change," said Janet Dankert, project co-chair and Chief Deputy Director, Community and Neighborhood Development for Community Partnership of the Ozarks.

Experts like Mike Stout, Missouri State University sociology professor, who now co-chairs Neighbor for Neighbor with Dankert, says this type of process works because it brings different kinds of people together around a public concern, and creates a place that enables constructive, respectful conversation, followed by a plan to improve life in that neighborhood in some way.

Lisa Sharon Harper, Executive Director of New York Faith and Justice, created a successful dialogue-to-change process in the five Burroughs of that famous city, to help reduce food and health disparities. "The biggest lesson I've learned is that when communities are engaged in the process of change from the very beginning, then they will carry that work through to the end, Harper explained.
"I've been absolutely really blessed to see the working groups have moved forward – they're actually moving and meeting. It was so funny, because when we first began to meet with them, we told them you have to meet once a month, and what they did is they came back to us and said, 'we want to meet more than that.' I said, are you really for real? Because nobody wants to meet more than that in New York City – but they are. Some of them are meeting two times a month – and some even more than that in order to make sure this work gets off the ground in the timetable we've set."

In Portsmouth, a small city in southern New Hampshire, residents have used "study circles" to engage citizens on a range of issues since 1999. In a city of 20,000, about 700 residents have grappled with issues such as sustainability, school redistricting, and violence.

"It's so cool to see that our voice was actually listened to, and the City has just improved dramatically," said Portsmouth citizen Terry Nulph.

After identifying challenges and solutions at study circles, Portsmouth project teams have addressed seven different themes since 1999 and the spectrum has been broad and has ranged from the prevention of violence, to the design of a town center and even environmental issues. 700 adults and young people have been involved over the past 12 years.

Springfield's Neighbor for Neighbor project will kick-off at a rally, 6:30 - 8 p.m., April 26 at Evangel University. Volunteer facilitators will be there, along with representatives from partner organizations, to encourage Robberson and Weller to sign up on action teams who will meet for five, two-hour discussions beginning the first week of May. Free childcare and food will be provided at the rally and the action team meetings, which will convene at a variety of times and dates in hopes to accommodate all work and family schedules.

The discussions at action team meetings will be guided by trained facilitators who manage the discussion and make room for all voices. Participants examine issues from diverse points of view, consider many possible approaches, and ultimately, develop ideas for action and change, including actions the neighborhood will take.

Burris says he hopes the Neighbor for Neighbor project will supplement the Community School project in the Robberson neighborhood. It's designed to solidify the school as the hub of a community by providing a wide array of services for students and families.

If the Robberson and Weller Neighbor for Neighbor projects are successful, the concept could be extended to other Springfield neighborhoods.

For more information, contact Cora Scott, Neighbor for Neighbor communication committee, at 417-864-1009 or cscott@springfieldmo.gov.

Neighbors/Participants:
Action Teams will meet for five, two-hour discussions beginning the first week of May. Child care will be provided at a kick-off rally 6:30 – 8 p.m. at Evangel University, and the action team meetings, which will meet at a variety of times and dates beginning in May, in hopes to
accommodate all work and family schedules. Participants will use discussion materials that set up a framework for conversation. Participants begin with personal stories, and then move on to a discussion of the issue, including data or other relevant factual material. Participants examine the issue from diverse points of view, consider many possible approaches, and ultimately, develop ideas for action and change, including actions the neighborhood will take.

**Facilitators:**
Organizers are looking for volunteer facilitators to help participants consider all sides of the issue, ensure a safe and productive environment, and support the group's process. Training, ongoing support, and all materials and supplies needed for the project will be provided for each facilitator. Facilitator training is set for 8:30 a.m. – 4:00 p.m., Saturday, April 14 at Pathways United Methodist Church, 1232 E. Dale St. For more information or to sign up for facilitator training, please contact Ilga Vise, ivise@drury.edu or 883-7817.

**Partners:**
Springfield Neighbor for Neighbor partners include: BKD, LLP; City of Springfield; Community Foundation of the Ozarks; Community Partnership of the Ozarks; Convoy of Hope; Council of Churches; Evangel University; Grupo Latinoamericano; The Kitchen; Missouri State University; NAACP; Springfield Area Chamber of Commerce; OACAC; Praise Assembly; Springfield Public Schools; Springfield Remanufacturing Corporation; United Way of the Ozarks; Victory Mission.