

Love Your Block: A City of Phoenix Mini-Grant Program
Local Government Hispanic Network Civic Engagement Award Submission
City of Phoenix
Neighborhood Services Department
City Manager's Office

Contact: Leonard Gross

E: leonard.gross@phoenix.gov

P: 602-262-4790

Love Your Block PHX (LYB) is a mini-grant program that engages residents in revitalizing their neighborhoods, one block at a time. The city offers mini-grants of up to \$1,000 to neighborhood organizations in low-income areas, encouraging groups to identify priority projects and develop volunteer-fueled solutions. The city of Phoenix was awarded \$30,000 in 2015 from Cities of Service to implement the LYB blueprint over a three year period. Cities of Service is a national nonprofit that helps mayors and city leaders tap the knowledge, creativity, and service of citizens to solve public problems and create vibrant cities. Since its inception in 2015, LYB has engaged over 2,500 volunteers to implement 24 grassroots projects.

Two AmeriCorps VISTA members administer LYB. VISTA is a federally funded program that aims to eliminate poverty by equipping local organizations with resources to drive change. In the city of Phoenix the VISTAs are embedded in the Neighborhood Services Department (NSD), where they leverage the community engagement expertise of Neighborhood Specialists, and are supervised by the Chief Service Officer in the City Manager's office, where they have access to the city's resources across departments.

Developing the Program with Community Input

To co-create LYB with residents, the VISTAs conducted visioning sessions in high-traffic areas of low-income communities, asking residents to exercise creativity in revitalizing their neighborhoods. With interactive boards and visual aids, the VISTAs encouraged the community to imagine innovative ways to invest \$1,000 on a public project that would fill an unmet need. Community leaders identified food producing gardens, community art, and tree shade as priorities. Visioning sessions also indicated a need for grassroots funding to reduce blight and build a more verdant city.

Integral in the planning phase of the program was the NSD Engagement Division. The Engagement Division supports over 1,000 registered Neighborhood Associations and therefore provided an essential conduit for the VISTAs to reach residents. By leveraging the engagement capacity of NSD, the team was able to collaborate with resident leaders to co-create a revitalization program accessible and attractive to low-income Phoenicians. With considerable citizen input, the goals of LYB were established: beautify communities and reduce blight; engage disengaged stakeholders; and build the capacity of community-based organizations.

A Multimodal Engagement Campaign

During the 2014-2016 funding cycles, organizations within a pilot region comprised of low-to-moderate income census tracts and 10% of the city's population were eligible to apply for mini-grants. LYB was launched citywide in 2017, posing new challenges and opportunities to the program administrators. As the country's 5th largest city with 1.5 million residents and growing, the VISTAs had to reach 90% more Phoenicians in the program's third year.

To reach a broader demographic, the VISTAs created a multimodal engagement strategy capitalizing on the popularity of social media and video news. At the core of the engagement campaign was the LYB [video](#). Part promotional, part tutorial, the video was an easily referenceable tool for communities to learn basic features of the program, such as how to apply, eligibility requirements and examples of past projects. Enlisting Phoenix Mayor Greg Stanton as a feature in the film extended the video's reach via his official social media channels. The video made engagement demonstrably more efficient too: instead of responding to inquiries individually the VISTAs directed residents to the video URL, saving approximately one hour every day which enabled the VISTAs to devote themselves to other engagement objectives.

Aware of inequitable access to the Internet amongst low-income residents, the VISTAs forged in-person relationships by attending community meetings and partnered with local mass media outlets to promote the program. To accommodate all Phoenix residents, the VISTAs translated engagement materials and often presented in Spanish (Phoenix's Hispanic population totals 40%). The VISTAs have shared LYB at over 140 community events, reaching over 5,000 residents through in-person connections. To further bolster the inclusivity of the program, the VISTAs also leveraged the power of mass media through live Spanish radio broadcasts, interviews with local TV news networks, and publishing content in local newspapers.

The story of the Women's Support Group of South Phoenix (WSG) highlights the importance of a multimodal engagement campaign. The WSG discovered LYB in an editorial written by the VISTAs featured in a free community newsletter. They applied for and were awarded funding to implement a project. Prior to LYB the WSG had not yet formed a relationship with the city; LYB has ignited their relationship with local government which will continue into the future. By creating low-risk and more appealing opportunities for groups like the WSG, the initiative has achieved one of its central goals: engaging disengaged stakeholders.

While LYB has increased the effectiveness of the City's engagement strategy, it has also helped grantees engage their own communities and build support for shared causes. Over a three year period, LYB grantees have leveraged over \$100,000 in cash and in-kind donations by engaging local businesses and stakeholders, maximizing the impact of the \$17,000 provided through LYB mini-grants. By funding grassroots projects LYB serves as a magnetic force, drawing in neighbors to synergize, revitalize, and achieve goals together. All together, the 2017

engagement model was a success: 155% more groups applied for LYB compared to years passed, indicating the effectiveness of a multimodal engagement strategy.

Filling a Void

By listening to citizen concerns, NSD learned that a barrier to civic engagement was a lack of resources to drive grassroots change. LYB mini-grants have filled that void by providing funding around which to collaborate and build neighbor-to-neighbor relationships.

The creation and development of the Triangle Neighborhood Association illustrates how LYB acts as a low-risk entry point for burgeoning neighborhood groups. Prior to LYB, the neighborhood was not yet organized into a traditional neighborhood association. Applying for the mini-grant positioned Triangle's neighbors to mobilize, form an association, and leverage the initial \$1,000 investment by over 300%. Indeed, lead volunteers in Triangle credit their LYB project with having jumpstarted the neighborhood's grassroots revitalization efforts. Likewise for other community-based organizations, the LYB mini-grant program has served as an entry point to initiate a relationship with local government and build beautiful communities together.

The LYB program has also provided a platform for city officials to leverage citizen power to achieve citywide goals. In Phoenix, resident engagement serves as the foundation for addressing the city's most pressing needs. Phoenix's Tree and Shade Master Plan aims to provide 25% tree canopy coverage by 2030; LYB has funded tree planting projects and developed the Citizen Tree Planting Blueprint to progress toward that goal. Since 2015, LYB has supported the planting of over 350 trees, creating vital shade in neighborhoods to mitigate rising temperatures. By funding projects that align with city goals, LYB leverages Phoenix's spirit of volunteering to create citywide change together.

Conclusion: Program Impacts and LYB Sustainability

LYB is a metrics-centered program. Grantees are required to track program deliverables such as funds leveraged, volunteer attendance, and other relevant data. Since 2015, LYB has engaged over 2,500 volunteers in grassroots projects. By equipping residents with funds to implement their own projects, the city encourages neighborhoods to increase community cohesion and address their own needs directly. The results are revitalization projects that reflect community needs, strengthen community pride, and connect residents to city resources.

To date, LYB grantees have created 8 gardens in food deserts, transformed 53 vacant lots, created 88 art displays, and removed 29 US tons of litter from Phoenix neighborhoods. These data demonstrate the measurable impacts of a multimodal community engagement model.

The program's tangible achievements prompted city executive's decision to transition LYB from a pilot program to a permanent one. To sustain LYB, NSD created a full time Community Education and Volunteer Manager position and will fund an additional AmeriCorps VISTA. City management also partnered with the Phoenix IDA, a nonprofit which seeks to positively impact underserved communities. The IDA has awarded \$60,000 to the city to conduct impact volunteering initiatives, with funds specifically allocated to growing LYB.

LYB taps the spirit of residents and empowers them to build and implement their vision of change. Only when underserved groups avail themselves of low-risk opportunities like LYB can the city begin dialoguing with them, developing trustworthy relationships, and better understand and address their needs. After its three year pilot, LYB will gain a permanent home in the NSD Civic Engagement curriculum and continue to deliver measurable impacts, empowering neighbors to build more beautiful, revitalized, and socially cohesive neighborhoods.