

THE SUPER BLOCK PROJECT  
by  
Raj C. Udeshi

The Chicago Community Policing Evaluation Consortium is located at the Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University. It also includes faculty and students from Loyola University of Chicago, DePaul University and the University of Illinois-Chicago. It is supported by grants from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, and the National Institute of Justice, US Department of Justice.

May, 1998

## THE SUPER BLOCK PROJECT

The Super Block project began the winter of 1995, conceived by a police commander who envisioned revitalizing his community — one of the most challenged in Chicago — one block at a time. Neighborhood clean up on the Chicago's West Side had always consisted of ridding vacant lots of garbage and weeds, removing graffiti, tidying alleys and sporadic restoring of individual buildings. Those buildings that did undergo upgrading would often return to their original condition within a year or two. The commander's idea was to rehabilitate an entire block at once, believing, "If that could be done, we would be enhancing life for a lot of people instead of just a few. If we could elevate one block and maintain a middle-class standard, then the whole community could be elevated, block by block." The commander's idea to tackle community problems in this way incorporated three important elements of the CAPS program: proactive problem solving, partnership with the community, and support from city agencies.

After articulating his vision, the next step was to get others involved and get their input. The commander sent letters to every group he thought could possibly make a contribution. For an initial meeting, the commander invited representatives of various housing agencies, the alderman, community activists, the president of the district's Advisory Committee, private banking institutions, the Department of Planning and the Department of Buildings.

The commander presented them with the Super Block concept and, almost immediately, all parties were quite positive. After sharing his vision, he asked the groups to go back and brainstorm about what a Super Block would consist of and what contributions they could make to such a project.

The next step was the actual selection of a block that could most benefit from implementation of the concept. Again, the commander sought input from the groups, asking them to identify promising blocks that had:

- evidence of urban distress
- at least a 60 to 70 percent occupancy rate
- face-to-face and alley-to-alley properties
- evidence of resident and business participation
- existing community-based organizations
- identifiable community anchors (e.g. business, schools, churches)
- involvement of financial institutions
- participation and assistance of the alderman
- structurally sound and secured properties (as determined by a planning site survey)

Once identified, the groups made a presentation on how the block they selected met the criteria. Questions answered by the presentations included: (1) What components were already in place? (2) Are the structures on the block worth rehabbing? (3) Is there an affiliation with neighborhood organizations? (4) Is there commitment by people that live on the block? (5) Is there a block club? The commander also asked the groups to point out the negatives — the things that had to be overcome.

Four groups were involved in nominating blocks and making presentations. After each was made, the commander met with the presenters and talked to them about what could be done on their block, and what resources existed on that block to help the project along. For example, one of the mainstays on a particular block was a large abandoned building, and the organization proposing the block brought an architect and a banker who would help underwrite the rehabilitation expenses.

After this dialog with the groups, the commander met with the Department of Planning, requesting a site survey on each block to determine the soundness of the buildings on each block. Seeking to ensure that the buildings were worthy of rehabbing, the commander went to examine each block with representatives of the Department of Planning.

At the end of this preliminary process, the inaugural block, nominated by the West

Humboldt Development Council, was named. Many characteristics of the block matched the commander's original conception: the residents are predominantly people without a lot of resources. "A big consideration was that block was not full of well-to-do folks," the commander said. "People everywhere want more than they have. That is just human nature. My desire, though, was to help the people in the greatest need."

There were many reasons for selecting the inaugural block. It had components already in place that could be utilized — particularly a block club with civic leadership. Another important factor was that there was a good framework of community-based organizations, which have been integral to the success of this project.

### **Documenting the Project**

The commander's intention was to have the whole Super Block process documented, reasoning that if the Super Block concept was successful on one of the neediest beats in Chicago, it might possibly be applicable anywhere. He also believed that recording the activities of the bold experiment could prove helpful for future endeavors. Originally, he had contacted a nearby state university to tap into its academic and human resources to document the Super Block project, but eventually he decided to work with the Government Assistance Program (GAP). GAP is an affiliate organization of one of Chicago's well-known private universities and is already working in and around Chicago's West Side. Also, Super Block was well suited to the activities of GAP, which pledged important contributions to the project, including holding five strategic planning sessions in addition to documenting the entire process. The planning sessions were to involve a dialog between residents, police and representatives of community-based organizations and would be facilitated by GAP representatives.

So, at its inception, the Super Block partnership was composed of district police, the inaugural block's residents and block club, GAP and the West Humboldt Development Council. In the first planning session, the residents, police, and community-based organizations came up with a one-year vision with clear and tangible objectives:

- neighborhood beautification
- increased value of housing stock

- a safe environment
- an active block club
- new business development
- the creation of a Super Block park

The commander had succeeded in getting others in the community to buy into his vision, using the precepts of the Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy: proactive problem solving, partnership with the community, and support from city agencies. Taking into account the Super Block project's scheme of bringing community-based organizations, private sector investment and academic facilitators together with residents, the commander had brought to fruition a distinct manifestation of community policing.

### **Profile of the Inaugural Super Block**

A fundamental of community policing has been to understand the unique circumstances and characteristics of a specific community before dealing with its unique problems, and the Super Block project adhered to this principle. In seeking to get to know the community, those involved in the project asked a multitude of questions, such as, Who are the people that live on the block? What sorts of capital does the block have to offer? What was the level of crime on the block? How did police operate on the block? What problems are the evident in the community? What was the level of cooperation between police, residents, community-based organizations and the city? This section will examine the conditions of the inaugural block before the Super Block project began.

The designated block lies in the heart of the West Side of Chicago. Many of its residents are retired elderly people that have lived on the block between 20 and 30 years. The demography of the block has been quite invariable for many years; it is inhabited entirely by African-American families. A Hispanic family lived on the block not too long ago, but now there are none. There are a lot of single mothers there, including the block club president, who describes the block as being family-oriented. On average, each household has two to three kids, ranging in age from nine months to 16 years old. In addition, many youngsters visit their grandparents on the block.

From police officers to community leaders to residents, all involved are clearly in agreement when it comes to the biggest problem of the block: *narcotics*. According to community residents, there were about five big drug spots on the block. On Chicago's West Side, drugs are almost always sold on the street. In fact, street-based drug sales account for about 99 percent of all drug sale activity in Super Block's district.<sup>0</sup> People selling drugs on the block were from the community, but they were not block residents. Rather, they were people from the neighborhood who would come and sell drugs to outsiders, who often came from the suburbs. People routinely advertised their merchandise and hung out on the block without regard to anyone's property. It was an open air market for drugs: "Drug sales were 24-7, like a radio you couldn't turn off... They would just stand on your sidewalk, hollering for 'rocks and blows',"<sup>1</sup> according to the vice president of the block club.

Along with dealing drugs came loitering. While most pushers blatantly yelled out to potential customers, some would have "fronts," pretend to be working on engines of parked cars or act like residents by lingering on private property. "It was so bad that you would have to ask the dealers to get off your porch," said one resident. The drug dealers hanging around and hollering only attracted more loiterers and resulted in an atmosphere that the block club president referred to as "the party block." And with all those people on the streets, it wasn't hard to elude the police. In case the "fronts" did not work, lookouts were posted all over the place. "They would have a key phrase like 'five-o' or something similar, to signal that the police were coming. It was a hard problem to solve," the commander explained.

All in all, the block was a pretty tough neighborhood — "like Dodge City," according to a representative of the West Humboldt Development Council. "When I first saw the block, I just wanted to get off!" she added. Most people involved in the Super Block project agreed that the chosen block might well be the worst block on the worst beat in Chicago.

Besides the problem of drug dealers, there was the problem of drug users. Seeing people taking drugs on the block was commonplace. On the southeast corner of the block, there used to be a vacant lot — a place where drug use seemed boundless. "People would just sit in their cars

and get high, and a lot of people on the block used to turn their heads. Some still do,” the block club president noted.

Drug use was not the only problem in the vacant lot. People also dumped garbage there. The debris mainly consisted of paper, bottles and cans, but some would also unload furniture, old tires and even appliances. So the lot was garbage-strewn, with drug dealers doing business in one of the lot’s corners. As if that weren’t enough, the lot also served as another escape path from the police.

There was not a very good relationship between residents and their beat officers. When asked about the police before the Super Block project began, most block residents said they did not know their beat officers. Some residents said that officers just drove on by them, while others commented on just how quickly they would do so. But officers did go to beat meetings regularly, and the few block residents that were consistent beat meetings attenders considered the police to be effective.

Residents had their own ideas about the reasons that the police and block residents lacked communication. Some believed that the police did not want to get too close to anybody, and others said that the police did not seem to have a sufficiently strong commitment to solving the community’s problems — the kind of commitment that could only be fostered by developing personal relationships with the residents. Another reason for the lack of a relationship between the police and the block residents was that residents feared the drug dealers. Because they were afraid of retaliation, they would pretend to ignore criminal activity. “We were very much afraid... We turned our heads and looked the other way. We let it happen,” said the block club president who, before Super Block, was afraid to call the police because she thought the dealers had some type of phone scanner.

This element of fear was quite apparent on the block. Many residents did not even want to live there anymore. According to one resident, “You either stayed out of the neighborhood or stayed in your house. You were a prisoner in your house.” Residents really had no unity. Many of them, until recent years, worked outside the community. Being away all day, they would not

see the community's problems. And after they retired they started to see the problems, but still had no mechanism by which to solve them.

A block club existed on the block, but in name only. Residents knew one other, and sometimes neighbors would sit on a porch together. But there was no real sense of community; neighbors did know one another, but they did not feel connected.

Although few residents of the block regularly attended beat meetings, there were some who did. Through the efforts of the local development council — and one member's continued efforts — numbers began increasing at the Super Block's beat meetings. Regular attendance at the meetings for that beat now exceeds 60 people. A development council worker holds on to the belief that the block's biggest resource is the residents: "Even the drug dealers have to deal with them."

Another big problem on the block was that of real estate negligence. About half the houses on the block were in good shape, and the other half were either barely habitable or in very poor condition. According to Neighborhood Housing Services (NHS), the block's real estate woes consisted of three basic issues: vacant buildings, absentee-owned buildings and buildings in severe need of home improvement.

Vacant buildings had generally been abandoned by the owners, and the abandoned buildings attracted squatters. Along with squatters come a host of problems: drug use, accidents, property damage, and lack of accountability. "The squatters would do drugs and, many times, they would accidentally set the buildings on fire. Crack cocaine is cooked, and sometimes, the flame accidentally gets out of hand," said the block club president. "Also, squatters burn garbage for heat...that also leads to buildings being burned down."

Absentee-owned buildings are buildings where the owner does not live in the property, and in most cases, not even in the same community. In these situations, problems arise because there is really no contact between landlord and tenant. Because the landlord is not there to see exactly what is going on in the building, the occupants have much more opportunity to engage in behavior that the landlord would not condone. Furthermore, when landlords do not live in the

building or community, they are much more likely to look the other way when occupants do engage in untoward behaviors.

But the housing stock problems could not be blamed solely on absentee landlords, because numerous buildings in severe need of repair were occupied by owners. The facades needed improvement, the grass needed to be replaced and the sidewalk and roadway were in bad shape.

The problem of drug use and drug sales were the most obvious threats to the Super Block community but, that, coupled with the real estate problems, made for quite a depressed and depressing community, leaving residents with a despair about their problems that was so profound that they were not motivated to try to change the state of affairs.

Before adverse conditions could change, attitudes would have to change. People needed a sense of hope.

### **Profile of the Super Block Project**

Who were the civic leaders involved with Super Block? How was the Super Block strategy implemented? What specific objectives had been laid out? What has been the role of the police and CAPS? How have the residents been involved? What has the involvement of community-based organizations been? Which city services have been involved, and how? This section will profile the Super Block project and what measures were taken to implement the Super Block concept.

The first planning session was an eight-hour day. A representative from GAP facilitated the session, the goal of which was to learn about the residents' hopes and expectations. "We had to break off into small groups.... about 10 people each. This way the police and residents got to know each other," said one resident. "There was no, 'I am police, you are resident' business. We were all people."

The main focus of the first planning session was to strategize about eliminating narcotics sales, particularly on the corners of the block and in the vacant lot on the block's southeast boundary. More police showed up to the session than did community residents, but everyone

who attended did get a chance to say what they thought. “And if someone was quiet, the facilitator would motivate them to talk,” said the block club vice president.

**Police.** Beat officers became very involved from the start. They offered many suggestions and pledged their full support during the planning sessions. “Since the police officers were a part of the strategic planning process, they became intimately involved,” the commander noted. “The great thing is, none of the officers were required to do anything. They did this voluntarily on their own time.” And, increased responsiveness to the community seemed to evolve from the police officers’ involvement in the planning sessions.

Community residents identified the drug sales locations. Formerly apprehensive residents began coming forward with names of drug dealers and expected commitment by their beat officers. “The residents wanted us to go all the way. It was important that we — the police — let them know they were not going to be abandoned,” the commander emphasized.

When the project first got underway, there was a substantial increase in police presence on the block. Once the officers got to know the residents, they started to care for them personally. They stopped and talked to residents while on the beat. “The block became swarmed with police 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Even at the planning sessions, there were more police than residents,” said the block club president. By having so much presence on the block, the beat officers got loiterers and drug dealers off the street. “We always made it a point to do drug stings and lock-ups. We also started enforcing curfews,” explained the commander. And because the police and residents are friends, there is much more cooperation. “There’s a new understanding between residents and the police... we all come from the same place,” said the block club president. So because of police commitment, attitudes were starting to change.

**Block Residents.** Community leadership is key to the project’s success. The block club president, a single working mother of two, has provided the charismatic leadership that has energized the Super Block project. Her determination and vision are obvious: “I just want people to act how they were raised. I want people to respect each other as human beings.”

There were approximately 10 residents of the block who participated actively in the Super Block

project, but the majority of residents did seem to buy into the idea, including most young people. “Some teenagers are bad. One kid walked through the wet cement when they were repaving the sidewalks....out of spite for me,” opined the block club president. But many teens help out with resident efforts, especially in Super Block Park. It is the club president’s job to attend — and promote attendance at — all beat community meetings and crime and safety meetings, as well as be a neutral facilitator at block club meetings. The block club’s first order of business was to make a phone tree. And not only were residents more connected to one another, but they took a proactive stance on drug sales on the block: residents began making phone calls to the police all the time. The block club collects dues from members and uses the money to buy lawn maintenance products for the park and school supplies for neighborhood youngsters. The club also sponsored a “going-back-to-school” block party.

The block club vice president has also been a vital participant in the Super Block project, serving as the caretaker for Super Block Park as well. The park came out of the initial planning session. Residents wanted to turn a problematic and trash-filled lot into a park. Greencorps Chicago, a city-managed program that provides horticultural instruction and materials, offered its services to the park’s development. The block club vice president volunteered to go to Greencorps training sessions, attending classes every Saturday morning for eight weeks. At the classes, she learned how to do gardening, planning, development, upkeep, and long-term care of the park. “We were taught how to take care of the park. That meant long-term commitment. I had to coordinate everything about that park.” Had the vice president not completed the training

sessions, the Super Block would not have been eligible to receive the horticultural materials that were eventually planted at the Super Block park. She took responsibility for ordering all the flowers, plants, trees, and even four truckloads of wood chips — all of which came from Greencorps — and she assumed the role of contact person for anything concerning the park. Community residents raised their level of participation considerably and began attending beat meetings in increasing numbers. They also started attending crime and safety meetings regularly. Besides organizing a block club and attending community gatherings, residents found more dynamic modes of participation. Some became involved in the Court Advocacy effort in their district, going to court to support the prosecution of criminals. Many helped in seeing that two of the worst buildings on the block underwent renovation. Building owners began cooperating with a local housing assistance organization. And because people were helping rebuild their own community, a sense of pride grew. Their attitude toward their neighborhood was changing as they gained a sense that the community they lived in was a good one.

**Community-Based Organizations.** Perhaps the biggest agents of change in the Super Block Project have been community-based organizations (CBOs), which were involved in every step — from the selection of the block to construction of the park. CBOs serve to increase a community's political capacity — its ability to aggregate and articulate the interests of neighborhood residents in conjunction with the capability of producing public goods or alleviating public harms.<sup>2</sup>

Many CBOs have contributed to the Super Block project. Joining Greencorps was the Garfield Park Conservatory Alliance, which developed the plan for turning the vacant lot on the block's southeast end into a park. The organization gave legitimacy to Super Block Park and ensured that it would be more than just a garden. Archeworks, a non-profit architectural firm was also responsible for the park becoming a reality. Architectural and design interns, along with design professionals, helped in the design and constructed a banner and pavilion for the park. Many CBOs have helped along the way, but the two most directly involved came right out of the community. The first is the West Humboldt Park Family and Community Development Council,

which serves to revitalize the area, and the second is the previously mentioned NHS (West Humboldt Division), which helps the community stay strong by tackling real estate issues. Through the diligence of these two organizations, people have started to take notice of the changes on the block. Both groups have specific individuals assigned to oversee involvement on the Super Block project. And both groups have been critical to the project's success.

The Development Council provides the community's residents with information and resources to help them revitalize the community. It is trying to solve the community's prevailing problems — specifically narcotics, lack of business development and real estate problems. Three components comprise the development council: economic development, family development and community development. The latter has been the arm utilized in the Super Block project and is actively involved with coordination of block meetings, from facilitation of the meetings to increasing resident turnout. "We are responsible for organizing the community around CAPS," explained the director of the Development Council's activity on the Super Block project. "The West Side of Chicago is the forgotten side... Our job is to make the community aware that resources exist to help their problems."

The Development Council serves as the fiscal agent for the block. At Super Block planning sessions, representatives helped set strategic goals and raised money for the park and the celebration to commemorate the park by involving corporate sponsors.

NHS, which has served the area for nearly 20 years, helps strengthen the community, primarily through home improvement lending. "Neighborhoods get worse because residents think they are getting worse. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy," according to the NHS representative that works most closely with the Super Block project. "People's confidence in their neighborhoods comes from their perceptions."

The organization's contributions included providing loans to fix up houses, acquisition of abandoned houses and help with foreclosures; it has also provided loans for general home improvement in the area, with very accommodating terms. The group acquired homes on the block and brought in corporate partners to rehabilitate them. After the properties were

preliminarily rehabbed, the organization found buyers for them. NHS had specific requirements for selling properties: (1) the building had to be vacant, (2) the building would have to be owner-occupied and (3) the remainder of the rehabilitation would have to be done by the buyer.

As the project progressed, the housing organization's representative began to notice a big difference between the Super Block project and another block revitalization program in which it had long been involved: "The key change here was having the police involved. This was the first time they were there. Their involvement completely changed the dynamic of the case," said the representative. "I initially thought that they were making a bigger deal out of [Super Block] than was needed. But I was wrong... the park would not have been done if this was not the Super Block."

**City of Chicago.** The City's contributions have been considerable. Actually, most of the services that were utilized were not exclusive to the Super Block; most were previously available, but residents did not know how to access them. City departments that contributed most to Super Block were: Environment, Housing, Planning and Development, and Streets and Sanitation. The Department of the Environment played a major role, through Greencorps, in the development of Super Block Park. The Department of Housing did a lot of work with the block residents and helped the block gain eligibility for the City's Facade Program, through which residents will receive funding for improvement to their home fronts. Streets and Sanitation repaved sidewalks and streets and was instrumental in ridding the park of refuse. The Department of Planning and Development's role centered around the park's planning and the refurbishing or renovating of abandoned buildings.

### **Assessment of the Impact of the Super Block Project**

In order to estimate the impact of the Super Block project, many factors — quantitative and qualitative — need to be taken into account. Has the program been beneficial to the community? How has the appearance of the block changed? Has the level of crime gone down? How has the project helped solve the community's problems? Has the project increased co-operation in the community? What are the Super Block's residents' opinions of the project and its impact? What

have been the set backs and shortcomings of the project? This section will measure the impact of the Super Block project on the block and the surrounding community.

The program's impact on the block is easily observed. As the block club president strolls down the block, she notices how much cleaner the yards are than they were just one year before. "We cleaned up the entire street, and we cleaned together. We even clean the yards of neighbors that weren't cooperative. Whether others do it or not, we just clean up," she added. There is new grass all the way down the street, as well as new sidewalks and curbside walkways. A big new park with a walking track is located on a formerly vacant lot. "On a scale of one to 10, we have reached eight in terms of the impact of the project," said the block club president.

The NHS representative enumerated the impact of Super Block on the block's real estate problems: one abandoned building was torn down; another was totally rehabbed; an owner restored another; and a fourth has been totally boarded up. Plans to tear it down are still underway.

Signs stand at either end of the block to welcome people. The signs also serve as sort of a declaration of the resident's rights: no selling drugs, no loud music, no littering, no horn blowing, no car repairing, keep off the grass, no loitering. These are symbols that remind criminals every day that they are not the ones who control the neighborhood.

**Crime and Drugs.** Since the start of the Super Block project, drug distribution and possession have decreased approximately 84 percent. Total drug offenses have declined more than sixfold and the total number of criminal incidents went down from 284 to 70. From the tables below, it is apparent that the project's greatest impact in terms of crime has been the decline in drug activity.

With respect to criminal activity, the impact of the Super Block project has been extraordinary. According to many block residents, the once constant advertising for "rocks and blows" is now completely gone. The block club president explains, though, that drug users do still live on the street. "They stick out like a sore thumb now. I'm just sick of it. But what you do in your house is your own concern... just don't sell drugs on my block!"

***SUPER BLOCK***

	4/26/95 – 3/27/96	4/26/96 – 3/27/ 97	% change
total drug offenses	242	38	-84.2
total incidents against persons	27	20	-25.9
total incidents involving property	15	12	-20.0
<b>Total Incidents</b>	<b>284</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>-75.4</b>

***2 SQUARE BLOCKS SURROUNDING SUPER BLOCK***

	4/26/95 – 3/27/96	4/26/96 – 3/27/ 97	% change
total drug offenses	276	245	-11.2
-drug distribution	96	48	-54.2
-drug possession	176	192	+8.3
total incidents against persons	215	168	-21.8
total incidents involving property	168	150	-10.7
<b>Total Incidents</b>	<b>668</b>	<b>570</b>	<b>-14.7</b>

*Source: Chicago Police Department*

**Police.** The Super Block residents' level of cooperation with the police now is 100 percent. "It goes both ways, too. We just love them," said the block club president. The officers on the beat are very familiar to residents, and most know them by name. It can easily be seen that there is a relationship between residents and police. "They used to just do their job. Now they are more than police. They're our friends."

The commander left the district and the Super Block project in October of 1996. He continues to be a part of the process, but has slowly stopped going to the meetings. In his new assignment, he is quite busy. "Even though I have left, neither the intent nor the direction of Super Block has diminished," he stated.

In the spring of 1997, the Chicago Crime Commission gave the commander the Professional Leadership Award for his work on the Super Block project. In addition to this, he has also received an award from Neighborhood Housing Services and a letter of appreciation from the President of the United States.

The commander was accurate in saying the Super Block did not diminish without him. The relationships between police and residents have been maintained. Residents feel they have a connection — someone they can reach out to. The beat officers have sustained their high level of involvement.

But in spite of the excitement and involvement generated by the Super Block project, attendance at beat community meetings has not increased. Any attendance gain is attributable to the efforts of the Development Council representative's efforts prior to the advent of the project. When she first turned her attention to bolstering participation there were only 10 residents attending. At this report's writing, 60 or more community residents regularly attend beat community meetings. But it must be noted that not many Super Block residents attend. The only regular participants are the block club president, who now works for the development council, and the club's vice president.

Police have not only done a much better job of getting drugs off the streets, but they have also made friends with the people in the community. "The detectives always wave when they go past. They even come out and sit and talk with us in the park sometimes," said the caretaker of Super Block Park. Block residents do not fear calling the police anymore. And now that the community has the upper hand, there are not as many calls to be made.

One of the more discernible results of Super Block has been the gain in authority on the part of the residents. Now when the block club's president or vice president walks down the block, everyone knows exactly who they are, especially the criminals. "The punks on the block actually listen to me. I guess I have the authority," the block club vice president remarked.

**Super Block Park.** A place where the block club vice president does have unquestioned authority is in the Super Block Park, which she continues to oversee in addition to attending all

the beat meetings she can. Her efforts are evident there, as it filled with growing things and wood chips where there was once garbage and human waste.

NeighborSpace, a not-for-profit joint venture of the City of Chicago, Chicago Park District and Cook County Forest Preserve, is now helping to maintain the park and providing insurance for it. However, the park's day-to-day upkeep remains the responsibility of residents of the Super Block. Park hours are from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., and joggers can be seen on the path in the early mornings, while kids play there throughout the day. Elderly and retired residents even take leisurely strolls on the walk path in the early evening. The block club president and the other residents have preserved the privacy of the park, intending it to be mainly for the people on the block. "This kind of park could only come after the drugs were all gone," said the block club vice president. The once trash-filled vacant lot is now spotless. No one dares throw any litter in the park. Two large blue bins sit on either side of the park entrance, and they are tended by the block club vice president every week. There used to be a significant accumulation of cigarette butts in front of the entrance gate, tossed there by the elderly men that hang around the block. But now, even the old-timers help take care of the park.

**GAP.** As mentioned previously, GAP played an extensive role in the start-up of Super Block. The organization played a key role in strategic planning and facilitated the initial planning sessions. "They helped focus the residents' goals, and the process made people and organizations more accountable," stated an NHS representative. GAP also documented the entire process, as arranged by the district commander.

Tension developed toward members of GAP on the part of neighborhood organizers. GAP followed their own format of organizing while realizing their contractual goals, but neighborhood activists felt they themselves were better positioned to determine the types of organizing activities their neighborhood needed. The Super Block residents' ideas did not always fit the GAP format for organizing. As GAP fulfilled their assignment, representatives eventually began to withdraw their efforts and, in the process, a West Humboldt Development Council staffer took over. It was at that point that residents felt Super Block was truly becoming a

community effort. Residents began to fulfill their own goals rather than the agency goals of GAP. GAP's involvement in the project ended with the Super Block celebration in September 1997, and residents were confident the project would continue to flourish on its own because sufficient organizational structure and community involvement had been put in place to sustain the effort.

### **Shortcomings and Setbacks**

In spite of Super Block's success, it still has its share of problems. The most apparent challenge has been the great amount of time it has taken for change to come about. All of the agencies involved admit that things could have moved more swiftly. It has taken a long time for all these measures to be implemented, and those most involved believe that it could have been done much more expediently. But all involved also understand that grassroots efforts take considerable time to get off the ground, particularly in the dissolute neighborhoods of Chicago's West Side. And, according to one of the Development Council members, inclement winter weather also slowed everything down. "There isn't a lot you can do. We didn't know how long it might take...we are the first ones."

The former district commander who launched Super Block has always had very high expectations — for himself and for this project. And although Super Block has been a widely recognized success, he still claims that more could have been done. "I wish that I would have been more vigorous in involving the business community. I think that we could have been more up front and outgoing in getting businesses involved."

His only real disappointment came after the initial stages of the project were over and the block was finally selected. The commander invited all of the block presenters to the strategic planning sessions, but sadly, none of them ever came. "I wanted them to learn about the process and understand what they had to do when their block was selected," he said. "I understand, but I just wish people were not so short-sighted."

For the block club president and the other residents, the biggest problem has been the run-down car wash on the southwest end of the block. Block residents have always voiced concerns about the car wash, desperately wanting it torn down. "I thought we would have gotten rid of it a

long time ago,” the president lamented.

Another obstacle the block residents have had to endure is the delayed implementation of the City’s Facade program. The City Council held up the money that had been earmarked for aiding homeowners on the restoration of the fronts of their houses. But eventually the Council released the funds. But the recurrent difficulty was in enlisting the community. However, more and more residents came onboard as they saw changes. “The Lord helped me reach these people,” said the block club president. Painstaking efforts have been put into increasing resident involvement in many ways: beat meetings, neighborhood clean-ups, cooperation with the police, and strategic planning sessions. The block club vice president voiced her disappointment that a lot of the block residents are still not involved or are under-involved with the project: “I would really like to see more of the neighbors get involved. “All people do is complain. My advice is, don’t complain. Get involved and do it yourself.”

In regard to the park, the vice president noted that there were many hurdles she had to face. The park did take a lot of planning, and she contends that there should have been an expert doing her job. Her involvement necessitated a major time commitment, including attending Greencorps classes every Saturday morning for four hours, with additional homework, and it was she who had to motivate residents to help out to do what was needed in the park.

Another complication was the fact that the private sector volunteers were somewhat afraid to be in the neighborhood. “I had to reassure all the CBOs and volunteers involved that there would be enough work to do... and that the volunteers would be safe while doing their work. But it all ended well, because on clean-up day, more than 100 people showed up.”

An ongoing hardship for the block club vice president has been that she has financed a certain portion of her efforts. It was very hard to get the funding needed for the park; the majority came from private donations and many times, when it did not match actual expenditures, she paid the remainder. She also pointed out that bureaucratic complications were an ongoing burden, often preventing her from accomplishing things in a timely manner.

Concerning real estate matters, the local NHS representative spoke of the difficulty of

finding people to purchase the renovated homes: “We were not able to get the buyers fast enough. I really think we overestimated the buyer market.” Neighborhood networks have been the most effective way for NHS to market their real estate, and the representative admitted that the local office had not yet fully developed their home ownership program.

**Impact.** The impact of Super Block is not restricted to the block itself — surrounding blocks seem to love the idea and are making steps to follow in that direction. The district’s current commander had taken a survey of the surrounding blocks, and they also want to have the Super Block program instituted on their block.

There has been some level of jealousy, though, in the surrounding community. “Everyone wants Super Block status,” believes the block club president. She and several others point out that simply ascribing Super Block status to any problem-ridden block is not enough to transform a community. “This is a program that must be done from the bottom up,” said a development council representative. And many blocks are doing just that. More block clubs are being organized, and more beat meetings are being attended. These initiatives will be helpful in ridding the surrounding blocks of drugs.

The NHS representative sees real estate opportunities on surrounding blocks and firmly believes that the other blocks are willing to do the work. He also proposes that NHS is the proper agency to deal with those blocks’ real estate finance matters. “I think we as an organization gained a lot from the Super Block, particularly in terms of strategy. But the program will not have reached its potential if it ends with the inaugural block.”

The critical difference between the inaugural block and others is that this block has a very strong block club, and more importantly, people living on the block that are willing to do what it takes. This is what the Development Council and the commander recognized from the inception of this project. The block club president sees the need for clubs to form on other blocks, but recognizes that it is hard to organize them. “Other blocks consist of about 11 or 12 households that are good families... the rest are drug dealers,” she noted. But, based on her experience, she has sound advice for surrounding communities: “You can’t stand in your house and yell for help

and change. You have to face your fears and get out and help your community. Don't sit and complain. Do it yourself." The community seems to be listening.

---

<sup>0</sup> 11<sup>th</sup> District Police Department

<sup>1</sup> Rocks and blows refer to crack cocaine and marijuana, the two most common drugs sold on the West Side.

<sup>2</sup>Community Policing in Chicago, Year Three, p. 65