



WESTSIDE DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

Healthy Community, Strong Economy!

Event Report

February 17, 2016

Sponsored by



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On November 16, 2015, the Westside Development Corporation (WDC) hosted the Fall 2015 edition of its Look West Series entitled Healthy Community, Strong Economy! at the San Antonio Food Bank.

Developed from community goals identified during the WDC's Spring 2014 Look West Series, the Healthy Community, Strong Economy! summit had three objectives:

1. Bridge the discussion between community health and economic development;
2. Provide education on the connection between health and economic development; and
3. Inspire heightened awareness and action toward improved population health through economic development.

The summit brought together various institutions and practitioners working to improve community health in the Westside. District 5 Councilmember Shirley Gonzales delivered the keynote address and spoke to her vision for a healthier Westside community. A series of expert panel discussions on mental and emotional health, physical health, criminality, and substance abuse were held. Panelists and attendees shared their experiences, discussed barriers, and spoke to tangible next steps to improve public health.

Topics discussed during the Mental Health Panel included addressing barriers that hinder the proper addressing of mental health needs, as well as the need to destigmatize treatment in our communities. A recommendation from this panel discussion included a City-wide PSA campaign to increase awareness on the commonality of mental health issues.

The Safe Communities Panel discussed the need to improve recidivism rates, and highlighted prevention and re-integration measures. Recommendations from this panel discussion focused on bolstering community support systems and reengagement opportunities for the formerly incarcerated through community engagement projects and volunteerism.

The Physical Health Panel addressed the social determinants of health and highlighted upcoming Westside developments with the potential to significantly impact the community for the better, namely the Westside Creeks Restoration. Recommendations from this panel discussion included the development of linkages to connect Westside residents to community resources.

Of the many findings and recommendations from the day’s panel discussions, the WDC investigated three potential projects. These include a Wayfinding signage program, a Paseo (scenic pathway) program, and farmers’ markets. The wayfinding program would guide pedestrians to nearby community resources while the Paseo program would transform underutilized and downtrodden alleyways into safe, and convenient pedestrian pathways, and the farmers’ markets would increase access to healthy and nutritious foods.

Wayfinding Signage Program



Drawing from panelist suggestions and resident concerns, the WDC proposes the implementation of pedestrian way-finding signs within the near-Westside.

Based upon a model put forward by the organization Walk [Your City], these informational signs will show the distance in minutes to community amenities.

The WDC believes these signs can have a threefold effect:

1. Pedestrian way-finding signs will reinforce and celebrate walkability;
2. They will highlight and inform of nearby resources such as health care resources, community organizations and amenities, public spaces and educational facilities; and
3. Way-finding signs promote outdoor activity by highlighting the pedestrianism of the near-Westside.

The WDC views that “Walk the Westside” way-finding signage presents an opportunity to expose community residents to vital resources and community assets.

Also, by targeting key intersections in already well traversed routes, these wayfinding signs will reveal community assets to broader audiences of residents and visitors alike.



Westside Paseo Program

Repeated through various panels was the notion that the resource-rich Westside is very often perceived by both residents and visitors as resource-deprived. In fact, the Westside boasts, in very high concentration, a large number of public assets, healthcare services, community organizations, as well as three universities.



To aid in highlighting area assets and to better improve the connectivity between Westside assets, the WDC proposes the transformation of alleyways into walkable paseos. One such paseo would connect St. Mary's University to Woodlawn Lake. The route is depicted above.



Transforming current alleyways into a walk/bike trails provides neighborhood residents, students, and visitors with safe passageway across numerous blocks while providing traffic control measures and speed mitigation in line with the goals of Vision Zero.

These linkages, exclusive to pedestrians, can serve as a catalyst to creating rich, meaningful, and healthful pedestrian experiences for the Westside community.

Farmers' Market

Area farmers' markets were another topic of discussion. More Westside farmers' markets will provide local residents with healthy and affordable food options in line with the SA2020 Health and Fitness goals. Such markets provide fresh, locally grown produce into current urban food deserts. In addition, available cooking demonstrations are a means to pair access to healthy foods with education on preparation. Together, access and education, represent efforts to help overcome significant hurdles to increasing consumption of healthy foods.

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Mental Health Panel

Mental health issues can often be overlooked and difficult to diagnose. However, mental health is critical to overall health and well-being. This panel aimed to shine a light on the problem and discuss solutions for employers and individuals.

Panelists

- *Gilbert Gonzalez, Bexar County Mental Health**
- *Shirleen Romo, San Antonio Clubhouse*
- *Monica Fernandez, San Antonio Clubhouse*
- *Dr. Amanda Mathias, Center for Health Care Services*
- *Dr. Ezequil Peña, Our Lady of the Lake University*

* Denotes Moderator

Overview

The four panelists provided a wealth of expertise on critical issues relating to mental and emotional health and stability in San Antonio. The following were the questions asked to the panel:

- A. What do you see as some of the most pressing mental health needs for people in San Antonio?
- B. If you had to pick a top mental health policy for the Westside Development Corporation, what would it be and why?
- C. What is involved in the training of counselors?
- D. What do you see as some of the Westside community's greatest resources and strengths? How do we leverage these for the community?
- E. What can be done to ensure the population gets the support they need? How can we help Haven for Hope?

Shirleen Romo emphasized the importance of outreach to the community. In her capacity at the clubhouse, Shirleen helps individuals who come in to the clubhouse who need assistance finding a place to live, getting a buss pass to get around town easier, or addressing other needs on a case by case basis. However, Shirleen notes that even though the clubhouse and other services exist, we need to do a better job of reaching out into the community and letting them know about these opportunities.

Monica Fernandez noted that there are still many barriers to properly addressing mental health needs in our communities. Monica also noted outreach as an ongoing issue. She

works with many members of the community who come to the clubhouse for help but have never heard of many of the other services available to them on the Westside.

Monica also talked about the very present stigma that inhibits employers from hiring individuals with a history of mental health issues. In part of her work at the clubhouse, Monica communicates with employers to ask them about their perceptions on hiring individuals with depression or other mental health illnesses, and this is vital to getting employers interested in the program.

Dr. Amanda Mathias discussed how it is very important to de-stigmatize current perceptions of mental and emotional health. It starts with educating the community on what to look for and what mental health illness looks like. Amanda also mentioned the necessity of knowing how the specific cultures can shape the perceptions and discussions about mental health. The culture not only includes the language but relying on the experience of the community to shape the discussion.

Amanda also pointed out that we have many things going right for us, including superior leadership from the city. There are many leaders that are thinking about how we can get more access and how we can improve these services. She emphasized that it is critical to engage the community in these discussions and let them know that they are a vital part of developing the solutions.

Dr. Ezequiel Peña expressed the need for culturally and linguistically competent resources in the Westside. It doesn't matter how great our services are if we are not implementing them effectively. Most medical professionals were trained in English, Dr. Peña remarks how difficult it is to provide treatment in a language other than the one you were trained.

To truly work on effective solutions, there needs to be collaboration. Even though there are many different organizations on the Westside all have to be brought into collaboration because their insight is needed. Other issues Dr. Peña expressed concern over were the need for P3 (Public Private Partnership) opportunities and addressing the mental and emotional needs of our elders.

Recommendations

- Mental health services must be delivered in a culturally competent form, and those services must reach individuals where they are in the community.
- Community-wide recognition that mental health services are available for all.
- Stigma around mental health must be acknowledged and addressed.
- The interlinking of mental health and the environment is undeniable and efforts to revitalize and connect individuals to green space could do much good to improve mental health.

Safe Communities Panel

Individuals with criminal histories face significant hurdles in integrating with society. Often times, their criminal backgrounds intersect with other factors including drug use and an incomplete education making obtaining employment a serious challenge. This panel will roadmap solutions for the community to address prevention and re-integration.

Panelists

- *Debra Jordan, Bexar County Reentry Program**
- *Dr. Kevin Downey, Crosspoint Inc.*
- *Carol Lockett, Chrysalis Ministries*

* Denotes Moderator

Overview

The members of the panel have years of experience understanding and developing solutions related to crime and criminal rehabilitation. The following questions were discussed by the panel:

- A. What are the most important skills for individuals who have committed crimes to develop in order to not return to that lifestyle and make healthy living choices instead?
- B. How important is a strong social support system for formally incarcerated individuals?
- C. What factors contribute to a high rate of recidivism?

Dr. Kevin Downey noted that the first step in getting the previously incarcerated back on their feet is to make them feel redeemed. There are a lot “invisible sanctions” that make this difficult such as restrictions on public housing, finding food, and gaining employment. Without these services, a person may still feel like a felon long after they are released from prison. Dr. Downey expressed the need to eradicate these needless sanctions and also address the high recidivism rate. Many people return to prison not because they currently pose a risk to public safety but because they have broken paroles or failed drug tests.

On the issue of support systems, Dr. Downey remarked that many people do not have the family as a support system. For these people the work of the faith community is critical. There are many churches that fill this void and provide support services to the community.

Employing the previously incarcerated is also fundamental to redemption. Dr. Downey stated to address this issue we need to change the perceptions of employers on this

subject. Many times, if you are hiring a person under criminal supervision then you are getting an individual that is highly motivated to work hard. Dr. Downey emphasizes that this is a community wide issue because these are people who could be contributing to our local economy if we give them the opportunity.

Carol Lockett pointed out that rehabilitation starts the day someone walks in to prison, not the day they walk out. The time that people are spending serving their sentence is the perfect opportunity to learn some basic vocational skills.

Also having a strong family support system is critical but there are many people that do not have that available to them. In this instance it also important to work with the families to encourage understanding when possible.

Carol also mentioned the importance of this issue to the entire community not just the individuals and families of the previously incarcerated. If people care about safety and local government expenses, then the more opportunities the previously incarcerated have to find jobs and stay out of trouble is less money the taxpayers have to spend and the safer our communities will be.

Recommendations

- Ritualized degradation is institutionalized in penitentiaries. It is through the restoration rituals of transitional services that ex-offenders successfully reintegrate with their community.
- Of the nearly 7,000 individuals returning to San Antonio every month from the criminal justice system, only 10% are enrolled in transitional services. This gap in services available and need leaves tremendous room for organizations that do not traditionally work with ex-offenders to intervene.
- Be it through employment opportunities or engagement in community service projects, involvement in activities that positively contribute to society at-large are instrumental in reducing recidivism rates.
- At a city-wide scale, data-driven policies that “redeem” ex-offenders and remove the invisible sanctions that ultimately contribute to recidivism are key to building the self-sufficiency of the formerly incarcerated.

Physical Health Panel

San Antonio's Westside faces significant physical health disparities as a result of both poor infrastructure and sedentary lifestyles. This panel spoke to action that individuals may take now to improve community health as well as looked forward to infrastructure and policy improvements that have the opportunity to catalyze community-wide change.

Panelists

- *Christian Sandoval, Earn-A-Bike Co-Op**
- *Laura Esparza, UT Health Science Center*
- *Louis Lopez, YMCA*
- *Rudy Farias, San Antonio River Authority*

* Denotes Moderator

Overview

The panel consists of members that have actively promoted healthy lifestyles in San Antonio through reaching out and creating opportunities to be active. The panelists were asked the following questions to facilitate the discussion:

- A. How can the community gather around issues with public safety and safe outdoor space?
- B. What does Vision Zero mean to the Westside?
- C. What does Vision Zero mean to the pedestrian?
- D. How will the Westside creeks project help the Westside?
- E. What type of changes do you think need to happen on the Westside?

Laura Esparza noted how important it is to get the community to speak out and get involved. If the community expresses their desire for public safety and outdoor spaces, then the city will realize that it is a priority. Laura also spoke about the importance of trails as a family activity which is key. The Westside Creeks project will enhance the opportunities that families have to go out and be active greatly.

Additionally, it can not be understated how important it is to transform our communities in to healthy living spaces. If we tell people how important it is to live a healthy lifestyle but then we send them out in to a community that they cannot walk or bike safely in then it makes it much more difficult.

Louis Lopez remarked that there are many social determinants affecting people getting

out and being healthy. The Westside has the most parks in San Antonio but many are not used. There is a lot of resources already in existence on the Westside but many people do not know of them. Louis commented on the need for an easily accessible tool where people could look within a radius and find whatever resources they need. Additionally, we need to promote the services and programs that already exist.

Louis also expressed a concern over the conflicting messages that we are sending to the community. If organizations are doing a good job on education and preventions but the public still lives in food deserts then this is an issue that public policy will need to address.

Rudy Farias encouraged progress to occur in areas where we have already seen a lot of success. The overwhelming support for the Westside hike and bike trails that were approved by voters numerous times are an example of the community's desire for these spaces.

On the topic of Vision Zero, Rudy pointed out that people need to be aware of the many accidents and pedestrian deaths that occur as a result of our dangerous streets. If you can create this awareness, then it will be easier to pass policy focused on reduced speed and complete streets.

Recommendations

- Community health must be made a priority and in doing so, messaging must be consistent. For instance, investments in bicycle infrastructure should not be degraded in favor of on street parking that effectively removes bike lanes.
- In approving taxation for increased hike and bike trails along area creekways, the community has stated clearly that they want outdoor recreation space. The discovery of sustainable outdoor activities is key for families to live healthful lives together.
- The Westside is home to more parks than any other part of San Antonio. A long term effort to connect parks into a greenbelt would significantly improve connectivity and lend much to improve public health.
- In the interim, families and community members must be made aware of these assets that too often go underutilized for lack of awareness.

Employer Panel

Westside employers deal firsthand with intersecting issues of mental and emotional health, criminal histories, workforce readiness, and physical health as they look to grow their businesses and drive economic development. Two employers shared firsthand how their organizations are impacted by these intersecting issues.

Panelists

- *Rudy Farias, West San Antonio Chamber of Commerce**
- *Shirley Gonzales, Bill's Pawn and Jewelry*
- *Megan Legacy, Christian Hope Resource Center*

* Denotes Moderator

Overview

With representation from a small, family-owned business as well as a non-profit organization this panel illuminated unique challenges that varied organizations face as they seek to recruit and retain a qualified and healthy workforce. Panelists were asked the following questions:

- A. What would you say are the most prevailing issues employers are facing in hiring employees?
- B. One of the issues that employers in the Westside have identified as a prevailing problem is a workforce that cannot pass criminal background checks. Based on your experience as an employer, what type of education do you think employers need to obtain to understand the challenges these potential employees face?
- C. The Texas Education Agency has identified that youth who have at risk factors are at the most risk to not finishing high school. Both the Edgewood ISD and San Antonio ISD statistics show that 68% of their student populations are at risk. What effect would this have on your future workforce if a solution is not found?
- D. What types of programs would you recommend employers initiate in order to encourage employees to get help or lead healthier lives?
- E. Should employers adopt a wellness program for their employees? How do you think this can reduce both hard and soft business costs?

Shirley Gonzales noted that because of the nature of her business prospective employees must pass both a background check and drug screening. These requirements dramatically reduce the pool of potential employees she may choose from – especially among young men. A lack of soft skills necessary for customer facing employment is another large hurdle Ms. Gonzales faces in finding qualified employees. For several years she was able to recruit area youth for part-time and summer employment, however, in recent years

Ms. Gonzales has been forced to refrain from offering these opportunities as many recruits lacked the basic arithmetic skills required for employment. In implementing an employee health plan, Ms. Gonzales found success in turning physical activity into team building exercises. Walks around Woodlawn Lake have been both successful and easy to coordinate.

Megan Legacy shared that childcare and access to reliable transportation are persistent workforce challenges. In her work with clients she has observed that the low pay of many area industries disincentivizes commitment from employees towards their employer. In regards to employer health programs, Ms. Legacy noted that the most successful programs may not often be programmatic in nature. Instead, they spring up organically among employees with shared values surrounding health and healthy living. As the head of her organization, Ms. Legacy has found that the best thing she can do to help employee health is to make their work environment as stress-free and open as possible. In doing so she aims to prevent the stress of work from seeping into the personal lives of employees.

Recommendations

- Work is needed to advocate for data driven best practices around hiring ex-offenders.
- Soft-skill training is crucial to improve employment options for Westside residents and, in particular, youth. Work must be done to connect residents to soft skills and workforce training to improve employment rates in the Westside but also to increase business investment.

Vision Zero Keynote

District 5 Councilmember Shirley Gonzales delivered the day's Keynote Address and spoke to the impact that Vision Zero will have on both individuals and the community at-large. Vision Zero prioritizes safety and people and establishes that serious injury and the loss of life on roadways is unacceptable. Gonzales lauded the safety of San Antonio's several military bases for both pedestrians and drivers and noted that the keys to reaching Vision Zero are no secret. By implementing travel speeds no higher than safe collision speeds (25 mph), military bases dramatically cut the incidence of fatal accidents along their roadways.

Policies currently put forward by the Texas Department of Transportation (TXDOT) prioritize traffic flow over traffic safety resulting in roads designed to accommodate dangerously high speeds. Gonzales urged that instead of building roads to swiftly move cars from one destination to another that San Antonio aim to build for people and for walkability. To see what these sorts of streets would look like, one need only to look west to San Antonio's near-Westside where tight gridded historic neighborhoods and narrow streets slow the flow of traffic to safe speeds and provide residents with one of the city's highest walk scores. Sadly, some of the city's most dangerous streets cut through that same area. Streets like Culebra and Zarzamora are notoriously dangerous for both pedestrians and drivers. To stem the incidence of fatalities along such roadways the first thing necessary is the will for such violence to end.

Councilmember Gonzales ended her address by urging those present to spread the mission of Vision Zero.