

THE FRONT PORCH ALLIANCE | KANSAS CITY

one neighbor at a time

REMEMBER FRONT PORCHES? They used to be vital to your survival during the summer, before air-conditioners and garage door openers made them obsolete. But they were much more than that – front porches connected you to your neighbors and helped build a community. ■ Twelve years ago, Village Presbyterian Church in Prairie Village, Kan., wanted to commemorate its 50th anniversary with a volunteer project. They chose to help one neighborhood in Kansas City – the Ivanhoe neighborhood, which at the time was the No. 1 crime-ridden area in the city. But instead of cleaning up a few houses and heading back to the suburbs, the project expanded and grew roots. Today, the neighborhood still needs assistance, and the Front Porch Alliance is there to fill the gaps. ■ BY COLLEEN COOKE



MEETING THE WHOLE FAMILY'S NEEDS

The Front Porch Alliance is based on a similar program that the Village Presbyterian Church minister imported from a church in Dallas. Before getting out the paintbrushes and brooms, however, a task force explored the neighborhood and asked the residents what sort of services they needed.

"Instead of coming in and saying, 'we're going to fix your lives,' we sat down with the residents and said, 'we really want to help, we want to make a difference, we want to do what you need us to do, but we don't know how, so we need to work together,'" says Patsy Shawver, the group's executive director.

All of the group's actions and programs are in response to four priorities they identified: cleaning up the neighborhood, education, economic development and health. "We want to meet the whole family needs," Shawver says, "addressing all the issues in the family – the health issues, healthy eating, exercise, the education and safety."

The group started with the major cleanups that the neighborhood desperately needed.

"For a lot of them, we're their last stop," Shawver says. "They have no place to turn. What would it feel like to have no place to go – to be so desperate. I'm so honored that they trust us enough to come to us."

DEPTH, NOT BREADTH

Having planted roots in the neighborhood, the group can see up close what the residents' needs are, and they adapt programs and initiatives to meet those needs. They serve 8,500 people in about 2,500 homes in the community, which isn't a large percentage of Kansas City's nearly 460,000 residents. But The Front Porch Alliance chooses to focus on how well they can help the people in this neighborhood, not on racking up big statistics.

"We don't serve millions of people, but we serve family units," says Lynn Flaherty, development director. "It's difficult to say that you're going to focus on getting whole grains and fruits and vegetables when your house is falling down or your can't get your lights on. It's hard to focus on your kids' school when you don't really have the skills to do that and you're worried about putting food on the table. It's an all-encompassing look at the family as a whole verses zeroing in on one issue. Our numbers are smaller, but the impact is greater."

This deep focus on the family unit results in programs that not only clean and repair houses, but also provide food where it's needed, or organize field trips around the city, or teach teenagers entrepreneurship skills, or offer computer access. Everyone from babies to grandparents can benefit from the group's offerings.

"Sometimes, I'd like to say we're able to help thousands of kids each week," Shawver says. "We don't, but the kids that we help, we really help remarkably and make a real impact."


"IT'S EXPENSIVE TO BE POOR"

Colleen Innis, the group's project manager, says, "It's really expensive to be poor."

"These people can't afford nice cars, so they drive run down cars that break all the time," Shawver says. "So they have that expense. They can't afford to maintain their houses, so they have a million problems there. Their houses aren't efficient, so their gas bills are off the chart."

Here's an example of how the Front Porch Alliance can step in and help the neighbors:

A bad summer windstorm knocked the meter off one woman's house. When KCP&L arrived, they said the house wasn't up to code, so they couldn't repair the meter yet.

"The beauty of our organization is that there's no bureaucracy whatsoever," Flaherty says. "You don't have to wait 10 days to go through red tape and fill out all your forms. We're able to make a phone call to one of our partners and get a dramatically discounted rate on repairs. This gentleman worked into the night to bring the house up to code so that KCP&L was able to come out the next day and restore power. A lot of times our residents receive other forms of assistance and they go stand in line and they provide forms and they have to wait for approval and proof of this, that and the other thing. We're able to cut through that." 

PROGRAMS

The group's programs often spring up organically, based on the needs and issues that arise among the neighbors.

- Minor home repairs
- Gardening partnerships
- Academy of Opportunity (youth entrepreneurs)
- PAL (tutoring program)
- Learn 'N Grow (life skills classes)
- Shoppers' club
- Parent to Parent
- Teen Talk
- Family First (support group)
- Book club for youth
- Computer lab and classes
- Ivanhoe Boys and Girls Mentoring
- Health initiatives
- Financial literacy
- Legal literacy
- Food distribution

CONTACT

The Front Porch Alliance is a non-profit organization that relies on donations and volunteers to complete its mission.

frontporchalliance.org

3210 Michigan
Kansas City, MO 64109
816-921-8812

