

Virginia LISC Begins Work with Richmond's Northside Neighborhood to Hear Residents' Ideas and Begin Quality of Life Improvement Process

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Vivian H. Bagby, who has lived in Richmond's Northside for 45 years, came to the area when she was pregnant with her son. She loves her neighborhood, but has noticed deterioration in the area which now has more vacant houses and crime than the community with which she originally fell in love.

"I take some responsibility for the decline in the community because I didn't act," Bagby said.

Bagby decided to act now and is working with Virginia LISC on its neighborhood improvement program called United for Progress Neighborhoods. The initiative invites community leaders to poll their neighbors to learn what the residents of the area envision and desire for the community. Residents then use that information to create and implement a new plan for the neighborhood. The interviews, which started the weekend of February 27, 2010, will be recorded by University of Richmond students who will work with residents to help tell the community's story. LISC provides funding and expertise, but residents and community-based organizations will lead the charge and help usher in the positive change they hope to see in their community.

Candice Streett, executive director of Virginia LISC, said Bagby's enthusiasm and knowledge of Northside will help the neighborhood initiative succeed. "We are excited to have positive, committed and knowledgeable Northside residents on our team who are willing to donate their time and expertise to improve such a great, historic area," Streett said. "This is a resident-driven process and LISC is here for technical support using our experience of launching similar programs nationwide. We want to hear what the neighborhood needs and help the area reach its full potential."

LISC kicked off the program with coffee in January at the NeighborWorks Resource Group's offices in Northside on Chamberlayne Avenue. This was followed by a "Interview" training with residents and University of Richmond students held in February at the police precinct.

"It's probably been a while since folks felt like there was a focus placed on the neighborhood," said Cindy Ashwell Mims, executive director of NeighborWorks and a Northside resident. "I like the idea of a collaboration of organizations to better a neighborhood. It is almost impossible to do it alone. When all of the stars align, great things happen!"

Amy Howard, executive director of the University of Richmond's Bonner Center for Civic Engagement, said working with LISC is integral to the students' education and success. "We believe firmly in this project. It is a critically important initiative," Howard said. "Having community members be the drivers is paramount for successful community building and students can relate it back to their academic courses."

Professor Thad Williamson teaches the course "Leadership and Governance in the Contemporary American Metropolis" that includes 14 University of Richmond students working with the LISC program. "This project is particularly exciting because students will have a chance not only to see 'problems,' but to see the process of putting solutions into action," Williamson said. He regards

recording the interviews as a valuable resource. "There's no substitute for letting people tell their own stories and share their own perspectives in their own words," Williamson said.

"When I came to Northside, we had Neighborhood Watch, block parties and lots of things going on here," said Bagby, the long-time Northside resident. "I hope that with this project we will see some new activity in housing, renovation and build an active business corridor. You just can't take resources from the community and not give back."

For further information contact Candice Streett, Executive Director, 804.358.7602 ext. 11

About Virginia LISC

Virginia LISC, which celebrates its 20th year in 2010, is dedicated to helping neighbors transform distressed neighborhoods into healthy and sustainable communities of choice and opportunity - good places to work, do business and raise children. LISC supports community development organizations with grants, loans and expertise to help them construct businesses, community centers and affordable homes in low and moderate income neighborhoods. Visit us on the web www.virginialisc.org.