Neighborhood Transformation Strategy
A holistic approach to Community Development & Engagement

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UNIVERSITY AREA CDC

The University Area Community Development Corporation Inc. (University Area CDC) is a 501(c) (3) public/private partnership whose mission is children and family development, crime prevention, and commerce growth. Its primary focus is the redevelopment and sustainability of the at-risk areas surrounding the Tampa campus of the University of South Florida. For over 20 years, the UACDC has championed positive change in the economic, educational and social levels of the community through youth programs, adult education, affordable housing, workforce, resource assistance and community engagement.

We promise to be a beacon of hope and a safe-haven for those who need a voice. As fearless champions of University Area residents, we will empower them with the essential tools needed to attain better jobs, better health and better futures for their children. We’re doing more than making positive change in our community – we’re transforming the lives of generations to come.

UNIVERSITY AREA COMMUNITY

The University Area Community (UAC) is an 864-acre underserved residential/commercial neighborhood located on the northern edge of unincorporated Hillsborough County, a HUD Promise Zone Finalist. The neighborhood is blighted by vacant and abandoned lots polluted with solid waste, and is surrounded by numerous businesses that produce hazardous wastes. Roughly 75 percent of the approximately 10,500 residents in the neighborhood represent minority groups, primarily Hispanic (39 percent) and Black (33 percent), and 19 percent are U.S. Veterans (2010-2014 U.S. Census).

Formerly known as “suitcase city” by Tampa residents because of the perceived transient nature of the population (89 percent of the homes are rental properties), this community has been identified as “one of the most economically depressed neighborhoods in Florida” (Smith 2004). Per capita income has remained steady at roughly $12,000 over the past several years, with 58 percent of residents below the 2015 federal poverty level. Roughly 80-100% of K12 students in the UAC receive free/reduced lunch (the primary elementary school, Mort Elementary, is a Title I School). Many residents struggle with lack of education (32 percent lack a high school education), lack of employment (the unemployment rate is almost twice that of the county), language barriers (51 percent report speaking English “not well” or “not at all”; UACDC 2015), and health problems (e.g., an infant from this neighborhood is twice as likely to die during the first year of life than any other area in Florida; Smith 2014). In sum, social and economic challenges in this community, which are integrated with existing brownfields, have historically constrained efforts to initiate redevelopment of the UAC.

OUR HOLISTIC APPROACH TO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT & ENGAGEMENT

The University Area CDC’s Neighborhood Transformation Strategy focuses on a community development model that effectively supports University Area residents in a real and meaningful way. Our holistic approach is one that engages and empowers the community by including them in the process of creation, implementation and management. Serving as the “Connector” the University Area CDC is working to address and partner on services that are needed in order to stabilize the community and provide opportunities to the residents. We believe that we can grow our community, one block at time, by empowering residents to become change agents to improve the economic and social conditions of their community.
Our strategic direction is outlined in the following ten initiatives.

1. **HARVEST HOPE PARK**

In 2015, the University Area CDC conducted a needs-based assessment, the assessment concluded that the primary needs identified by residents were environmental and human health. Community members specifically wish to have access to a recreational park in the neighborhood, especially one in which they can develop a community garden and gain access to healthy foods, due to being located in a food desert. A neighborhood park would also allow residents the opportunity to engage with one another to form social bonds as well as provide a safe place for all university area children as there are no parks in this community. Establishing a catalyst site in the center of the University Area community is critical in the redevelopment strategy of improving a community from the inside out.

The Harvest Hope Park is being constructed in the heart of the community where it sits on 7 acres of land, accessible by walking and biking to community residents. The park is currently home to a 33 bed organic community garden, harvest hope teaching kitchen and classroom, one acre pond, newly built community playground and five community art installations. Additional construction include building a walking trail and multi-purpose sports field for community use through our Get Moving program, adult fitness area, dock, parking, lightning and fencing.

The development of this catalyst site has high potential to spur redevelopment in surrounding properties such as residences and vacant lots, which in turn will play a key role in further redevelopment to surrounding businesses, local schools, and other commercial and service-oriented properties. These changes can positively impact job creation in the area and help to address concerns about unemployment and poverty. In many ways, area residents view Harvest Hope Park as a keystone to redevelopment and a beacon of hope for community change. A critical component to the development is ensuring that residents feel a sense of ownership over the park, either through hands-on support or information sharing.

*Below includes the rendering of the Harvest Hope Park.*
2. **Block-by-Block Model**

Block-By-Block is an initiative designed to further the University Area CDC’s reach into the community in by building meaningful relationships with residents, and assisting residents to improve their lives. This is a community development program designed to identify neighborhood segments in need of support, conduct needs assessments within that particular block, and implement projects and resources to address the particular need at both the individual and community level. Often, neighbors may have similar challenges regarding community infrastructure, high crime, lack of transportation, lack of clean water, and other issues. Once identified, these challenges can be responded to in a real and holistic way that supports the prosperity of an entire block of residents rather than just a few.

3. **University Area Community Safety Action Plan**

The University Area Community Safety Action Plan was developed in 2016 with over 30 community partners, businesses and residents who met consistently for 6 months giving input and holding focus groups, community night walks, safe design trainings with over 50 stakeholder interviews. The plan was designed to help reduce crime and improve perceptions of safety based on sound research and community and resident engagement. Building upon key property acquisitions, planned public improvements, community cleaning and safety initiatives, a variety of supportive services, and an expanding community policing approach, this plan outlines a comprehensive series of integrated efforts.

4. **University Area Leaders Collective**

The University Area Leaders Collective (UALC) program is a consortium of no less than 50 established or developing leaders from the University Area community as defined by the 33612 and 33613 zip codes. The goal of the UALC is to create a team of community residents that will serve as partner leaders in many of the UACDC initiatives including programming, internal committees, community engagement, surveying, public presentations, and co-facilitating community forums and focus groups. Residents that choose to take on a leadership role within the community will be supported through a series of marketable leadership trainings, staff support and leadership resources. With the goal of creating community, there will be bi-monthly UALC meetings where members can talk about issues impacting the UA and how to best respond to those issues. Often, residents may have similar challenges regarding community infrastructure challenges, high crime, lack of transportation and education, fragmented opportunities to connect with their neighbors, and other issues but are never given the opportunity to build collective efficacy with one another. The UALC will create an environment where likeminded residents, in a group setting, can focus on real community issues that affect their ability to live a healthy and well balanced life.

5. **Community Outreach**

The COC (Community Outreach Committee) is comprised of University Area CDC employees, partners and residents that are working on building bridges into the community through effective community engagements activities like Apartment Socials, Community Movie Nights, Poetry Nights and Family Events. The goal of the Community Outreach Committee is to better communicate services, supports and activities with residents of the community. Through the support of the COC over 59 community events were held this past year through the engagement activities listed above.
6. **Harvest Hope Properties, Acquisition and Housing**

The University Area CDC created Harvest Hope Properties, LLC in 2016 as a real estate arm of the organization to aggressively pursue acquiring properties through the land banking program. Harvest Hope Properties will serve as the catalyst for community development and revitalization in the heart of the University Area. Through property acquisition, the community will inform what type of affordable housing is built and where. Affordable Housing is a key priority in the University Area Community and it all begins with land acquisition. The following are the holistic housing programs created specifically for University Area Residents:

- Sound & Safe Housing – Lease to purchase modular homes for single parents in the UAC
- Multi-Family Housing – Rental housing for families that is affordable
- Single Family Housing – Home ownership on partnership with Habitat for Humanity Hillsborough
- Commercial Properties – Building/rehabbing commercial properties to offers holistic services to UAC
- Parks & Green Spaces – Building parks and green spaces in the UAC for residents to enjoy

7. **Land Banking Program**

Land is one of the most important factors in local economic development and by viewing these properties as potential assets, rather than barriers to revitalization, land banking will provide a new way to reinvest in our neighborhoods. University Area CDC’s concept aims to convert vacant properties that are contaminated or have been neglected by the open market into productive use, and thereby transforming neighborhood liabilities into assets. Since the program’s inception, in 2016, 18 properties have been acquired within one mile of the catalyst site (Harvest Hope Park) and have been earmarked for affordable housing. Once a property has been acquired, a land banking sign is erected to show the community that we are *Growing Our Community, One Block at a Time*. 

![Growing Our Community, One Block at a Time.](Image)
8. Harvest Hope Cultural Campus

The mission of the Harvest Hope Cultural Campus is to serve as a navigational hub connecting community residents with six anchored partners who are providing direct programming and services through a holistic approach. Through the organizations land banking program, two contiguous lots across the street were purchased as phase I of this project. Phase II of this project is the purchase of two additional lots that house three commercial buildings. Phase III is the final phase of this project and will be the design, rehab and programming of these commercial buildings to host a collective of community partners offering services to low income residents living in the University Area Community.

9. Community Infrastructure

The University Area CDC is working on sidewalks and lighting as well as well flooding and storm water challenges to improve the walkability and safety of residents. Current plans are to build sidewalks that will provide a safe route from Mort Elementary, to the Harvest Hope Park and back to the UACDC. With over $800,000 in funding already committed for sidewalks and over $200,000 committed for lighting, the UACDC plans to leverage these funds to create even bigger investment and impact for community change.

10. Partners Coalition via Collective Impact

The University Area CDC has attracted more than 210 businesses, nonprofits, residents and government agencies to become members of a comprehensive Partners Coalition. This group of colleagues is working together through the Neighborhood Transformation Strategy, bringing their varied wisdom, skills and resources to bear on the complex problem of poverty and on-set gentrification in the University Area Community. In the University Area CDC’s Partners Coalition, professionals working with people at the street level are strategizing with law enforcement, administrators, residents, funders and business owners to make decisions guiding responses to community needs, programming and distribution of funding.

As we succeed in improving critical areas together, like a healthcare system, our goals is to foster an environment that shifts from a very expensive (in lives and dollars) crisis to a cost-effective and life-saving preventive care.

Instead of reacting to community trends after the fact, the University Area CDC is building an agile, responsive coalition that can react to community needs in a real time. A coalition that doesn’t just react to community trends, but is positioned to guide community trends towards positive outcomes. The Partners Coalition is the engine that powers the Cycle of Transformation. The tables below show the old model of collaboration and the new model highlighting collaborative impact.