



Community Core Initiative

Southside Community Core Pilot Program Report, 2015



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Executive Summary

Greater Peoria Local Initiative Support Corporation (LISC) launched its Community Core Initiative in the Southside in partnership with PCCEO in 2015. Only one year later, the Community Core Pilot Project experienced great success in the Southside community.

- 58 of the 164 homeowners participated and 29 of the 65 rental properties participated.
- 144 projects were completed: 69 Paint & Porch Projects, 57 Lawn & Landscape, and 18 Locks & Lights
- Residents provided 490 Sweat Equity Hours including a Fall Community Work Day.
- 4 Community Gardens were built.
- 4 resident-led projects were funded with LISC mini-grants including:
 - Planning for a summer music and wellness festival at M.L King Park.
 - A neighborhood inclement weather crew.
 - Bring Baseball back to the Southside” marketing activity to recruit youth ages 9 to 14 for baseball teams at Proctor Center.
 - A Holiday Display in the vacant lot at the intersection of Western and Howett.

The impact of the Community Core Initiative rippled beyond just the projects carried out under the three primary activities. LISC and its partners leveraged outside resources, built community relationships and connected residents to resources. These additional impacts included:

- Establishment of the Neighborhood Academy leadership development training program.
- \$120,000 in additional funds from the City of Peoria for exterior improvements to resident homes.
- Development of a Resident Committee Meeting.
- Planning and Launch of the Night Out Against Crime.

Overview of Program Objectives

The Community Core Initiative developed as a response to residents' concerns regarding neighborhood blight and safety raised during extensive community engagement. Community Core is a targeted revitalization strategy that blitzes a target area with physical improvements to create immediate visible impact and demonstrate community ownership in a neighborhood. These improvements include projects such as exterior home improvements, beautification projects, safety initiatives and community organizing. In a relatively short amount of time, with a relatively small amount of funds, the program is designed to transform a core zone and usher a ripple effect of private and public investment.

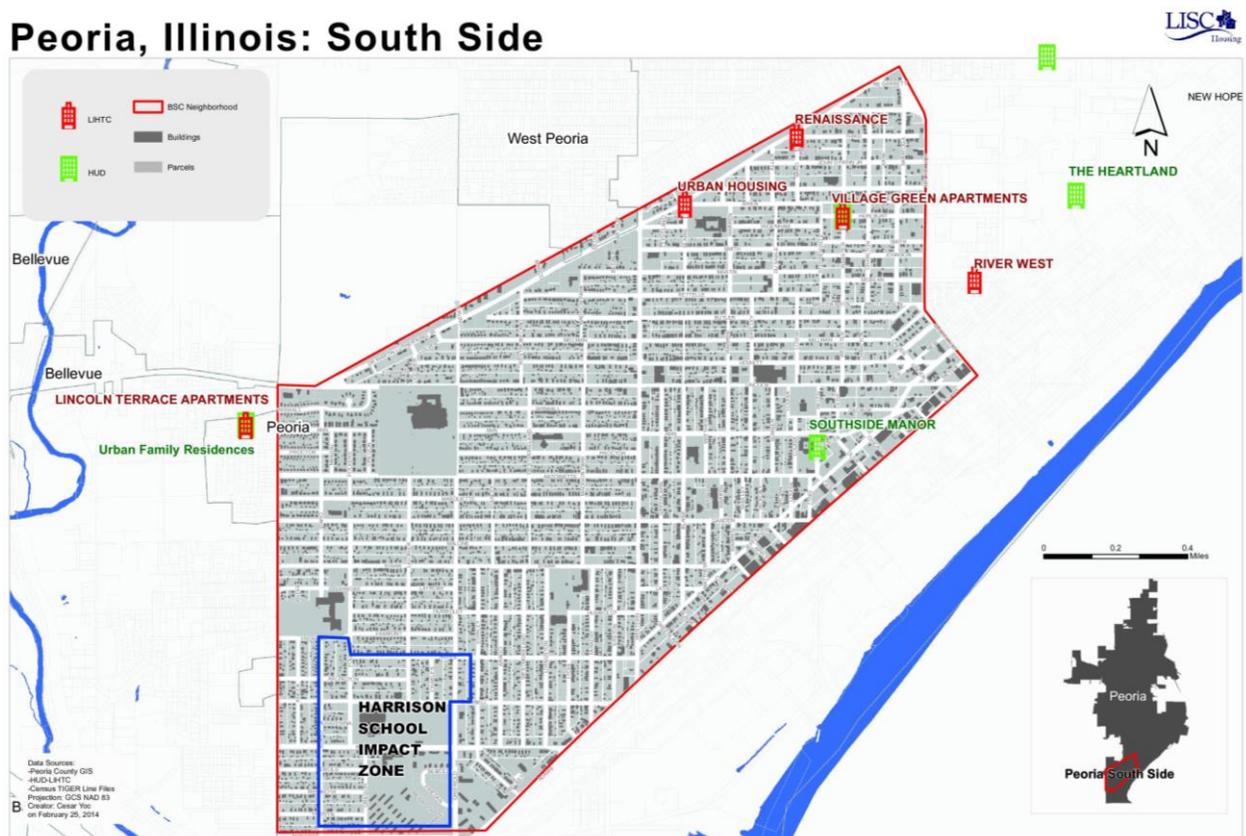


Greater Peoria LISC selected a lead partner in two neighborhoods: the East Bluff and Southside. These partners were responsible for program development and implementation with the support of a community organizer. The community organizer met with each resident (homeowner or tenant) to assess their property, set priorities, select a contractor and ensure the completion of high quality work. The partner organizations also set-up and organized volunteer workdays. Residents receiving assistance through the Community Core Initiative were required to provide sweat equity that could include participating in the improvement projects or other, less physical means, such as volunteering with a local organization.

The programs included in the Community Core Initiative were called Paint & Porch, Lawn & Landscape, Locks & Lights and Vacant Lots. Groups of residents could come together to apply for funds to complete collaborative projects on vacant lots within the target area such as community gardens or small pocket parks.

The goals of the program were to reduce blight, increase safety, organize community residents around a common goal, build capacity of existing community based organizations and drive collaboration. Each selected area had active community groups whose work would benefit from a coordinated approach and the additional resources from the Community Core Initiative. A deliberate effort was made to include all of these community groups in the Community Core Initiative so their projects would be targeted in the selected blocks to further leverage resources and increase the impact. This also created a structure for the initiative that encompassed the expertise and resources from the various groups. Long-term, the Initiative is intended to broaden the working relationship between Greater Peoria LISC, the City of Peoria and the lead partners to leverage resources as well as coordinate additional investments and revitalization efforts such as public safety outreach, capital improvements, permitting and code enforcement processes.

Description of Neighborhood, Southside

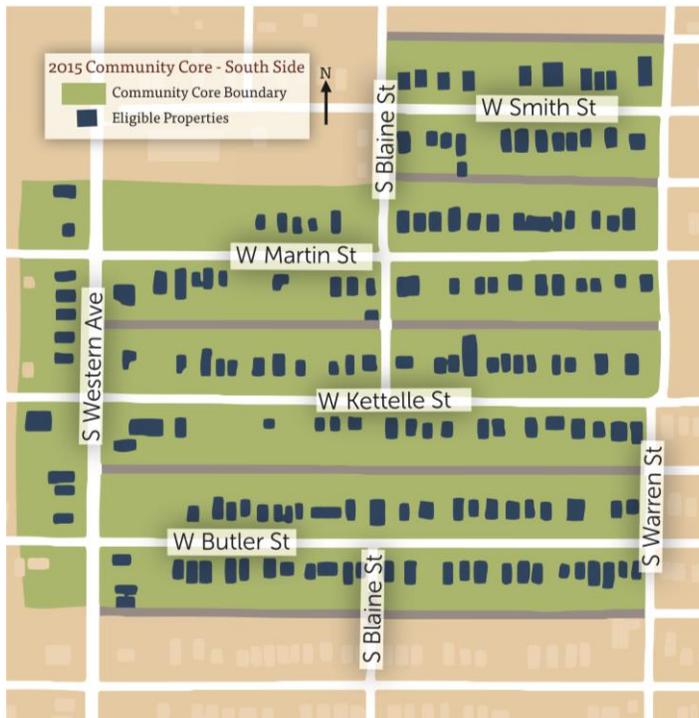


The Southside area is one of LISC's Building Sustainable Communities (BSC). The area is rich in history, recreation, architecture and culture. Approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile southwest of downtown Peoria, the Southside contains major corridors, Western Avenue, McArthur Highway, and Adams Street, which connects the neighborhood to the vibrant areas of the West Bluff, Downtown, and Warehouse District. The Southside has the highest unemployment rate in Peoria at 24%, a significant number of vacant buildings (13%), and one of the highest violent and property crime rates in the City. Crimes in the Southside area represent 27% of all violent and property crimes in Peoria. The lack of long term planning and disinvestment has resulted in declining property values, deferred property maintenance and excessive vacancies. Most recently, a full service grocery store closed causing a food desert within a one mile radius. Such high levels of poverty present significant challenges to achieving economic self-sufficiency and maintaining health and wellness.

The neighborhood has many significant assets that will support neighborhood investment. In May 2013, the City established a South Village TIF District to create incentives for commercial and residential redevelopment. The district is bounded by three major corridors; Western Ave., McArthur Hwy, and Adams St., and contains 2,003 housing units and approximately 4,536 residents. The Southside has seen several low-income housing tax credit (LIHTC) and other HUD investment over the years. The Harrison School in the south area, as well as the Lincoln Branch Library, Proctor Center, and Christ Lutheran School are also neighborhood assets.

Community Core Boundary

The Community Core Initiative is one component of the Southside investment strategy developed for this BSC neighborhood. The boundary for the 2015 Community Core in the Southside



extended from W Butler Street to S. Warren to S Blaine Street to S Western Street as illustrated in the Community Core Map.

Reasons for Selection

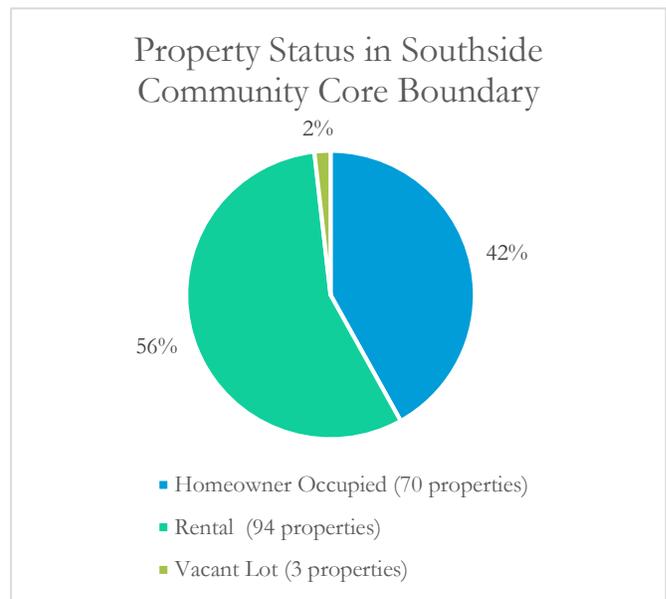
- The proximity of the core to the Western Street Commercial Corridor was the primary reason for selecting the 2015 boundaries. The hope was that the revitalization of the area would spark investor interest in the vacant Aldi's building.
- The ratio of homeowner to renters was desirable.
- The condition of housing stock
- The area was close to Roosevelt school and the Proctor Center which were used for Community Core meetings and kick-off events. This proximity increased participation.

Statistics & Demographics

- 164 Homes
- 70 Homeowner occupied
- 94 Rental
- 3 Vacant Lots
- 4 Commercial Businesses
- The average condition of housing in the area was a 5 on a 1-10 scale.
- The area has a housing association: *Martin-Western South Side Neighborhood Association*

Partner Selection

Selecting the right lead partner in each neighborhood was imperative to the success of the Community Core Initiative. Peoria Citizens Committee for Economic Opportunity (PCCEO) became the best choice for several key reasons.



PCCEO has operated since 1964 when it was created to administer and operate the Community Action Programs (CAPs) in Peoria under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. Its mission as a Community Action Agency and leadership organization is to promote self-sufficiency and empowerment and serve as an agent of change for low and moderate-income individuals and families while improving the standard of living in Peoria County.

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PCCEO presently operates twenty-one programs including well known programs such as Head Start, Early Head Start, Foster Grandparents Program, and the Peoria Area Food Bank. PCCEO has 150 full and part time employees and its current operating budget nears \$17 million dollars. PCCEO completed the Spring Grove redevelopment project on the Southside of Peoria that included 32 single family market-rate homes.

Several community groups were also engaged and recruited to participate in the Community Core Initiative. The success of the program resulted from collaboration and leverage of other programs and community groups. Below is a list of groups that participated in the Southside Community Core Initiative.

- Keep Peoria Beautiful
- Dream Center's Mission Week
- Hope Builder's Mission Week
- Southside Mission
- Police Explorers Program
- Sovereign Grace Baptist Church
- Proctor Recreation
- St. Neighborhood Association
- Martin-Warren Neighborhood Association



A concerted effort was made to collaborate with several departments at the City of Peoria as well. Residents were assisted with applying for funding through the City of Peoria home repair program. The Code Enforcement Department assisted in identifying and addressing code violations within the core area. The Community Development Department was engaged on the boundary selection and provided insight on considerations, especially with city data indicating which units were owner occupied and which vacant lots were privately owned. This partnership became especially helpful in working through processes of permitting, code enforcement and use of vacant lots for community assets. Councilwoman Denise Moor was very supportive of the initiative, attending several events and assisting with getting information out to residents. Several city officials including Councilwoman Denise Moor, Parks District Board Trustee Robert Johnson and Southside resident community police officer Chris White participated in various community outreach efforts including the Night Out Against Crime.

Community Organizer

In order to build the capacity of the lead partner to carry out this pilot program, funds were provided by LISC for one full time employee to be dedicated to the work. This funding also helped support a direct supervisor and training for the community organizer at a NeighborWorks Training Institute.

Community Roll-Out Event

Information about the 2015 Community Care was provided to residents through mail, local media opportunities (church announcements, community center postings, etc.) and door to door conversations. The kick-off event was held on May 2, 2015 at the Proctor Center facility. Approximately 65 people attended. Neighbors from the area were able to learn about the program and build enthusiasm and comradery around the project. Following the kick-off event, the Community Organizer began an assessment of the properties in the boundaries.

Community Organizer - Key Responsibilities

- Build and maintain key relationships with community residents, government, private and nonprofit sectors.
- Attend and participate in community meetings, forums and public events as required to generate organization and community commitment to Community Core Initiative priorities and projects.
- Maintain current and create new partnerships with other neighborhood improvement programs.
- Provide management of specific Community Core Initiative programs ranging from grant management to organizing community projects.
- Establish and maintain contact with residents and community organizations through recruitment and implementation of activities related to the Community Core Initiative.
- Recruit, train and manage volunteers.
- Coordinate and carry out logistics for meetings, events and relevant activities for Community Core Initiative.
- Work with partners to design and maintain communication tools such as newsletters, websites, flyers and e-blasts.
- Create and maintain record keeping information systems related to Community Core Initiative activities.
- Prepare reports, as required, for submission to LISC and other partners.
- Perform other relevant duties as assigned.

Program Results

The Community Core Pilot Project saw great success in the Southside community. This included completion of the following 144 projects:

- 69 Paint & Porch Projects
- 57 Lawn & Landscape
- 18 Locks & Lights
- 4 Community Gardens

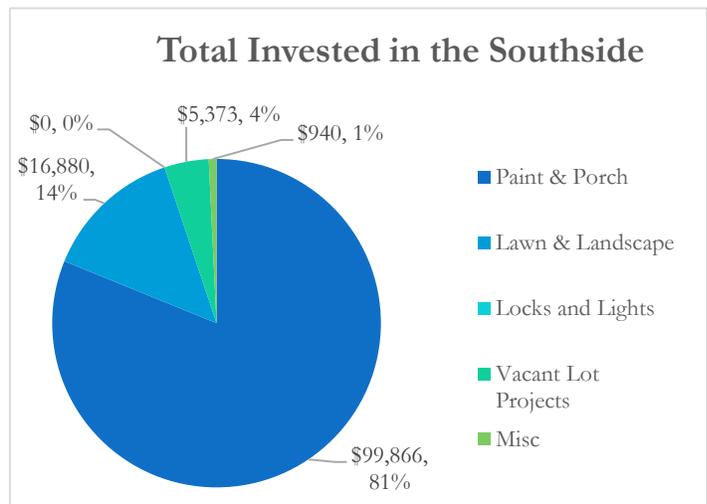
In addition, the Community Organizer assisted 2 residents in securing additional funds from the City of Peoria for exterior improvements such as roof repairs. Property owners were very engaged, providing 490 sweat equity hours and activity participating in community work days.

The Community Core awarded four mini-grant dollars to implement projects throughout the Southside community:

- A planning grant for a summer music and wellness festival at M.L King Park
- A neighborhood inclement weather crew in the Community Core area. This activity will make the sidewalks and streets safer for children catching a school bus or seniors.
- “Bring Baseball back to the Southside” marketing activity which would recruit youth ages 9 to 14 for baseball teams at Proctor Center
- A Holiday Display, with tree and decorations, in the vacant lot at the intersection of Western and Howett.

PARTICIPATION

- Of the 164 Homeowners within the Community Core Boundary, 58 participated, or 35%
- Of the 65 Rental properties within the Community Core Boundary, 29 participated, or 44%
- Of the 3 Vacant Lots, 1 participated
- 490 Sweat Equity Hours
- 161 1-on-1 meetings were held.



Work Days

In November, a Community Work Day was held with residents from within the core and surrounding neighborhoods.

“This is a wonderful opportunity for the community to come together and create positive impact.” Ms. Brown, resident

They built three community gardens, including raised beds, within the core. More than 15 residents came throughout the morning to lend a hand towards setting up raised beds for the 2016 growing season. The camaraderie and dedication for creating a better quality of life in their neighborhood was the driving force of the day’s success. Residents communicated their joy in being a part of positive change.



Ripple Affects

There are many side effects of the Community Core Initiative that supported the success of the pilot. These are noteworthy changes and activities that are related to the activities of the programs within the boundaries.

Community Partnership

Several community partnerships were forged from the efforts of the Community Core Initiative including with Hope Builders to create the Neighborhood Academy. Hope Builders is a partnership between Metro Peoria Baptist Association and the Mission that coordinates the repair and renovation of many homes owned by the poor and elderly using volunteers, churches and area businesses in the Southside. Hope Builders helped residents within the Community Core boundaries meet homeowner insurance requirements.

The Neighborhood Academy is leadership development training that provides six sessions focused on harnessing and investing in grassroots and community leaders. The Academy assisted with organizing projects, advocating, and increasing collective impact in the targeted area with residents. When launched in September, 45% of the participants were from the Southside Community Core.

This increased to an average of 75% of weekly attendance. In November, residents put into action the skills developed in the Neighborhood Academy. Four community core residents attended their first City Council meetings. After the meeting residents were able to meet and introduce themselves one-on-one to their district councilperson as well as other at-large councilmembers.

The Neighborhood Academy successfully wrapped-up on November 21st with a formal Graduation ceremony that had 50 in attendance. Many of the resident attendees living within the Community Core were not aware that there was a support organization that included all the Southside Neighborhood Associations and groups. As a result of this event, these residents received helpful information on resources in their neighborhood and how to be more involved in revitalization efforts.

Leveraged Resources

The Community Core Initiative saw many resources leveraged from outside sources. Homeowners and landlords privately invested within the boundary even though they did not receive Community Core funds. In addition, the City of Peoria made several investments through their Roof Repair Program and infrastructure investments such as an alley light. The Roof Repair Program provided 2 residents with funding needed for home repairs such as new roofs and exterior painting.

Resident Engagement and Community Engagement

In addition to the Neighborhood Academy's impact on engagement, the Southside's Night Out Against Crime served as a catalyst for establishing a Resident Committee Meeting. The Night Out Against Crime was an event held in the South Side that sought to bring the community together. The event was an opportunity for residents to connect with one another, stand-up against crime, and enjoy the amenities within their community. To organize the Night out Against Crime, the Community Core Initiative partnered with Smith St. Neighborhood Association, Martin-Warren Neighborhood Association, The Proctor Recreation Center, and Sovereign Grace Baptist Church. The early evening event brought many neighbors and friends together enjoying hot dogs and hamburgers as children played in the pool, and the young men played basketball. Southside resident community police officer Chris White, city councilwoman Denise Moore, parks district board trustee Robert Johnson, and Southside Community United for Change president Robin Berry were all in attendance enjoying the festivities.

Since the Night Out Against Crime, the resident committee meets twice a month. The meetings are scheduled on the same evenings as City Council meetings to encourage residents to become more vocal advocates for themselves and their neighbors with City Officials. Residents have become more vocal about crime and safety issues within the Core and share more information with the community resident police officer. Through the committee, a neighborhood watch was developed for W. Kettelle St in response to significant safety issues.

Code Enforcement

PCCEO's Community Core team partnered with the City of Peoria's code enforcement officers to address compliance concerns within the core area.

Opportunities for Improvement

Several issues posed challenges to the Community Core Initiative and should be considered when implementing the program in the future.

Vacancy and Absentee Property Owners

Vacant lots and structures present significant challenges to the physical appearance of the Community Core target area. Overgrown and unmaintained greenery are especially prevalent on vacant lots and abandoned properties. In addition, bank owned properties are vacant and poorly maintained. These properties can be difficult to acquire and exacerbate the vacancy rate. Several blighted structures in the target area need to be demolished. This is an opportunity to partner with the City of Peoria in the future to secure demolition funding needed to remove these structures.

Outreach

There are several additional actions that can be conducted in the future to assist with outreach to the residents in the Community Core Target Area. Launch of the program should include information on other programs such as those funded by the City. This will allow residents to apply and access these resources. More visibility and media exposure on the successes will also help raise the profile investment made by residents and changes in the neighborhood.

Neighborhood Size

The target area was too large. Most of the community organizer's time was spent attempting to interview and assess each property over a large area. This limited the amount of time to spend organizing community residents to develop support and investment in the initiative, an essential component of creating a sustainable investment in the neighborhood. The East Bluff Community Core Initiative focused on an area with less than half the number of homes (122 vs. 258) in the Southside core area. In the future, a smaller core area will support better community engagement.

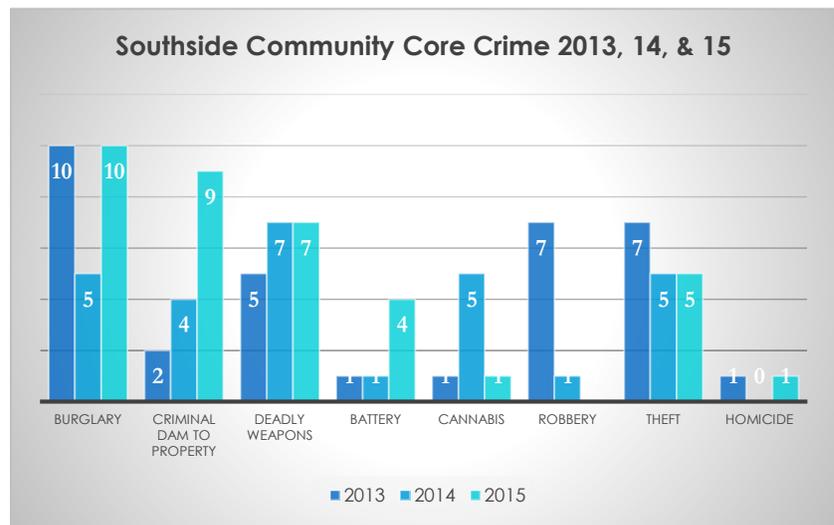
Tracking Sweat Equity

Residents are required to provide sweat equity for the resources received through the Community Core Initiative. Sweat equity is an important component to increase the impact of the small grants provided and increase neighborhood ownership from program participants. A total of 490 sweat equity hours were applied to the 2015 Community Core projects. A better system to manage and track these hours is needed to ensure that the sweat equity is contributed.

Safety

Community safety was a top priority identified in the Southside during the community outreach conducted for Building Sustainable Communities. The Locks & Lights program targeted these issues through target hardening, increasing visibility at night to deter crime and build resident capacity and advocacy for safer neighborhoods. As summarized earlier, residents organized to address safety issues by creating block clubs, hosting events such as Night Out Against Crime and participating in the Neighborhood Academy. These efforts built neighborhood cohesion and relationships. These efforts have not yet had an immediate effect on reducing the instances of crime.

The number of burglaries increased. (*Burglaries are defined as the act of entering a structure to commit theft and a top priority for homeowners to address.*) The number of thefts stayed the same from 2014 and robberies (theft with force) dropped to zero, as illustrated in Southside Community Core Crime Chart. The number of deadly weapons crimes stayed the same and criminal damage to property doubled.



It is anticipated that the Community Core Initiative has laid the foundation for resident organizing to address crime and safety concerns. Continuing to support and develop their efforts is essential to reducing crime.