

RESIDENTS LEARNING HOW TO CHANGE NEIGHBORHOOD

Erika Cooper had an idea that her neighborhood could use a lowcost after-school and summer enrichment program for kids, but little knowledge about how to turn that idea into a reality.

So, she signed up to be in the first graduating class of the Resident Leadership Training Program, a series of classes run by Neighborhood Housing Services of Waterbury, designed to develop the skills, savvy and passion in residents to change their neighborhoods for the better.

And she did. Her summer camp in the Walnut-Orange-Walsh neighborhood was such a success last year, it was recently awarded a grant to expand from the Connecticut Community Foundation, as well as that organization's Trustee Award.

"One of the things I learned was it was OK for me to ask for help and reach out to different resources," said Cooper, who now works for NHSW. "I never thought you could go to those people and ask for help."

NHSW is now looking for students for the next set of sessions.

"It's our goal they will help residents become advocates from their communities, and hopefully create positive change, while understanding that it's important for community organizers to work together," said Eden Brown, community building and engagement specialist at NHSW.

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Maria Fernandes, a community building and engagement specialist at NeighborWorks America, speaks at a Neighborhood Housing Services of Waterbury Resident Leadership Training Program workshop last June. NHSW is seeking students for this year's program.

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MIKE PATRICK

CITY BEAT

BEAT:**‘You can’t just tear down homes’**

The program achieves this through courses such as “The Art of Leadership,” “Community Assets,” “Time management,” “Communication Approaches” and “Planning Successful Meetings,” Brown said.

Of the Community Assets class, she said, “a lot of people don’t really realize what’s available in their community and how to reach out to those resources.”

Planning Successful Meetings, she said, teaches residents to create and follow an agenda, and to follow up with action. Cooper said what she found most valuable was a post-graduation trip to Kentucky to attend Neighborworks America’s Community Leadership Institute, where she met a local activist from another state who implemented a neighborhood student enrichment program similar to her own idea.

“That’s when everything came together for me,” she said. “I met a woman who did hers from the ground up.”

It’s that kind of dedication to bettering their neighborhoods that’s key to the success of NHSW’s efforts to build fresh housing in depressed neighborhoods, Brown said.

“You can’t just go into a neighborhood and tear down homes; it’s got to be a community effort,” Brown said. “This program really helps people know what’s available in their community, and makes them want to be invested in those changes and take ownership.”

The five courses made up of two-hour sessions are free, except for a \$10 registration fee, Brown said. NHSW provides all of the class materials, as well as food.

A total of 15 people completed the program last year, she said, adding she hopes more get involved this year.

“I think people who live in those neighborhoods, they want to stay there,” she said. “They just need help in terms of finding the resources to create change in their community.”

Applications are now available online at www.nhswaterbury.org until March 11.

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