

Neighborhoods doing it for themselves: Homegrown journalism

Every Twin Cities neighborhood holds a thousand great stories. In the five neighborhoods where Twin Cities LISC works, those stories now have a much better chance of being told.

In North and South Minneapolis, St. Paul's East Side and Central Corridor, and Hopkins, a dozen new citizen reporters are on the job. They're out to tell stories that are overlooked or undercovered by the mainstream media, but that are important to the people who live there. Stories about new community gardens or homeownership workshops or new businesses in the area; stories that reflect the voices of the residents.

This is all part of LISC's push for a more comprehensive approach to community development. The goal is to keep residents, organizations, and businesses informed, engaged, and involved in planning and implementing positive change in their neighborhoods.

Using social media to reach residents, these neighborhood storytellers are also feeding content to five brand new neighborhood blogs: the [Frogtown Rondo Action Network](#) (Central Corridor), [East Side Pride](#), [The Northsider](#), the [Native American Community Development Institute blog](#), and Blake Road. The reporters' writing, photography, and video chronicle community development plans and progress, as well as a wide range of news and opportunities in business, education, culture, food, health, and the arts. Funded by Twin Cities LISC, this innovative communications effort already has yielded more than 250 stories, photos, videos and blog posts.



Each reporter is attached to a nonprofit coordinating agency in the neighborhood, and is guided by project coordinator Art Coulson, a veteran Twin Cities journalist. All involved meet regularly to share story ideas; learn social media best practices for Twitter, flickr, YouTube and Facebook; and develop skill at using the video and digital cameras they have access to.

“We wanted to help community organizations use communications tools effectively to reach their target audiences,” says Andriana Abariotes, TC LISC’s executive director. “A new Pew research report shows that more than a quarter of all adults who use the internet use digital tools to talk to their neighbors and keep informed about community news. We want to unleash this communications power to benefit residents and nonprofits in neighborhoods where we work.”

Lots of interest, lots of stories

More than 100 applicants were interviewed to select 12 community reporters. All have strong connections to the neighborhoods they serve. Some are professional writers, but most are relatively inexperienced neighborhood residents with a strong desire to help make their communities stronger through written and visual storytelling.



"The opportunity to tell the stories of my community to my community has been wonderful," says reporter Ariaah Fine, who lives in North Minneapolis. "There are so many positive things going on in our neighborhoods, and it is a valuable connection to be able to share what's happening both with nonprofits and with the community as a whole."

What are those stories? In St. Paul, reporters for the Frogtown Rondo Action Network have written extensively about community preparation for a \$1 billion light rail project that will bisect their community, giving a stronger voice to people and businesses affected by the project. On the East Side, reporters and a Twin Cities LISC-funded AmeriCorps member from the East Side Neighborhood Development Company worked with students at a local magnet middle school to create short videos about their community.

In South Minneapolis, citizen journalists are following the development of an American Indian Cultural Corridor and the collaborative process among American Indians in the neighborhood that culminated in a Community Development Blueprint. In North Minneapolis, reporters launched a video project — dubbed "I Am North Minneapolis" — to spotlight the people and organizations of the community, as well as its challenges and successes. In Hopkins, reporters have written about the collaborative efforts to expand activities and services—and safety—for youth in the Blake Road Corridor.

Early success with the reporters, blogs, and social media channels have led to a sustainability plan to keep up the momentum over time. Quarterly training sessions are open not just to reporters, but also to staff, board members, and those served by the partner agencies. The goal is to build bench strength in each agency, to grow trained reporters from within as the current crop of citizen journalists moves on to other endeavors. The project also helps the agencies to explore free or low-cost communications platforms, such as self-hosted blogs and video-sharing sites, that will carry the groups' messages to the broader community in a cost-effective way.

Hopkins' reporter Lauren Dees sums it up well: "I've had the privilege of interviewing community members and business owners, all of whom share the goal of improving their neighborhood. I'm proud to be part of such an engaged, hopeful community project."

LISC's total investment in the neighborhood journalism project to date: \$104,000