

# Lessons Learned

The UEI team work from 1995-2000 to implement integrated workplans in each target city, log thousands of work hours in the field, and put the UEI Community Development Pyramid model into action resulted in the following eight lessons learned from the UEI pilot program:

## **Lesson 1: Build Credibility & Redefine Roles and Responsibilities**

In order to implement the UEI Community Development Pyramid, the UEI had to redefine traditional roles and responsibilities for staff. UEI had to serve as a trusted and dependable partner at the table with a wide range of stakeholders. The staff also had to serve as facilitators, capacity-builders, and as visionaries to help find common ground between groups and organizations with no successful history of working together on environment and public health issues. The UEI had to become an effective and efficient team that could become dedicated and effective resources, working together to leverage all available resources at the agency and help to put a face on the agency.

The UEI also facilitated redefining roles and responsibilities within the community and local government. The community had to be broadly defined with a broad list of stakeholders beyond local residents. The community was responsible to become informed decision-makers and critical partners throughout all phases of the pilot program, and must be treated as valuable and critical resources. The role of local government also had to change. Local government had to work in effective partnership with the EPA and the broadly-defined group of stakeholders and jointly share responsibility for developing inclusive and responsive local infrastructure for healthy urban communities in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

## **Lesson 2: All Stakeholders Must Be Engaged & Invested**

The UEI staff learned first hand in the field that no one person speaks for everyone—and it takes more than just one or two people around a table to solve complex environment and public health problems. In order to build a strong base of local partners and stakeholders, UEI made sure that a wide range of stakeholders were engaged throughout the entire process including representatives from local residents, academia, local business, medical community, local government, state government, environmental groups, churches, faith-based groups, and other non-profit entities. Once these stakeholders were identified, the UEI initiated a “Win-Win Approach” to achieve measurable environmental results with our local partners. This approach is locally-driven, meaning that the core of the work responds to local concerns and priorities and focuses on building community capacity to tackle environment and public health problems. This is distinctly different from a traditional agency approach that puts EPA in the lead for determining priorities. The UEI’s successful approach let people define the problems and focused EPA resources to directly respond to those priorities. The approach also developed inclusive partnerships. Everyone with a stake in the future of an urban community must be involved early and constantly throughout the process. These stakeholders must also be accountable for results—sharing

responsibility for making measurable improvements is a tremendous motivator for successful partnerships. Without ownership and sweat equity, stakeholders cannot be personally invested or empowered to serve as long-term environmental stewards and work together to produce meaningful change in their neighborhood.

## **Lesson 3: Recruit Staff With The Right Skills, Passion & Creativity**

The UEI team has gone through considerable transition since its inception, but one fact has remained unchanged: this program requires a special set of skills, ability, and passion to get the work done efficiently and effectively. UEI staff must have excellent communication, organizational and technical skills, be creative, be willing to learn from mistakes, respond well under pressure, be a mediator, resolve conflict, and have a passion for helping people resolve problems. All staff members must be able to work independently and as a cohesive team. A critical element to supporting each member of the unit is a multi-functional team, with a full-time Team Leader, that meets regularly to share experiences, concerns, and work together to resolve challenges. This combination of skills is critical to ensure that EPA builds and maintains credibility throughout the implementation of each phase of the UEI Community Development Pyramid. If there is a staff transition, a new credibility-building process has

to take place for the new staff member. It is also critical to note that although some of these skills can be learned through training, some things can only be gained through the right aptitude and attitude to embrace change and learn by doing. This is not a job or position for every person that works in the federal government, but is very challenging and can be very rewarding for the right person.

In addition to having the appropriate people representing EPA through this program, the City Program Manager must also be able to identify and secure participation from the multiple levels of stakeholders for each city to ensure results. This requires a considerable but worthwhile investment of time and training to help educate and enable community stakeholders to be involved and informed about their environment and public health. Training might include specific sessions on how to apply for federal grants, facilitation, or an in-depth training on risk assessment or the health effects from lead poisoning. In addition, stakeholders must share some of the characteristics of UEI staff: they must be creative and open to new ideas, communicate well, and be amenable to coalition building and conflict resolution. These are skills that can be learned or improved through training. The critical link is that if you have the right person representing the UEI pilot program and designing and implementing a work plan for a city, the staff member will identify and train the right community stakeholders to participate in the program.

#### **Lesson 4: Funding Must Be Stable, Used Effectively & Leveraged**

Building an infrastructure to solve problems requires stable and targeted funding. When the UEI pilot program first started, grant awards were all sole source funding. This was critical to ensure that funding could be used where it was needed the most—to identify, support and encourage participation by community stakeholders and understand the problems in each target city. This funding helped in part build the pilot program’s credibility, enticed early partners to work with the UEI pilot program, and helped secure a position in each target city as a federal program with resources, staff, and initiative to solve problems. Over time, the financial resources were allocated in a different way—through competitive Requests for Proposals that demanded strongly written proposals from prospective applicants. Without stable funding, the UEI would not have been able to secure participation from the wide range of stakeholders necessary to address the problems and would not have been able to continue building up toward effective partnerships and healthy, livable urban communities.

Another lesson learned through funding is that not all organizations can grow and develop into key players in a community. Funding one organization consistently for several years can be an effective strategy, as long as environmental results are consistently achieved and that the projects continue to focus and increase collaboration with other partners. The UEI pilot program demonstrated that efforts to stabilize small non-profit groups for several years through “general

support” funding did not guarantee that every group would continue to grow and develop. It is important to know when to stop funding an organization that does not continue to grow or evolve, but try to continue to have them participate as a member of specific projects. Although funding demands shift and change over time, there must be a stable source of funding for the UEI program to ensure continuity between projects and leverage small grants into greater resources for larger projects. A final funding-related lesson learned is that part of effective funding is for the UEI staff to help identify opportunities to leverage resources from alternative sources. UEI staff must help community partners develop the skills, abilities and expertise to secure funding from other agency organizations, foundations, and other private sector sources.

#### **Lesson 5: Start Small & Leverage Successes**

Building credibility in an urban community takes more than just providing financial resources. It requires the skill of a dedicated staff person (i.e. UEI City Program Manager) to bring stakeholders together to share small, “event-level” successes and then leverage these small successes into larger scale projects. Event-level successes could include an Earth Day trash pick-up event, building a community garden, or hosting a small breakfast discussion group to bring people together around a common issue or concern. Starting small lets participants feel positive about donating their time and effort to attend and participate, and over time encourages other stakeholders to take on larger roles. This approach is also performance based. Local strategies need indicators or benchmarks to insure

## Woonasquatucket River Greenway

Years of neglect, illegal dumping, lack of useable open space, and abandoned industrial sites along the banks of the Woonasquatucket River in Providence, RI seemed a daunting challenge when The Providence Plan began trying to create a bike path in 1993. Trash from illegal dumping and overgrowth made it hard for some residents to even see the river. Residents that did see it witnessed abandoned cars, tires, and shopping carts. In the area along the river, over 36% of children lived in poverty and there was only 2.1 acres of park space per 1000 residents with limited public access to the river. The Providence Plan decided that the community and the Woonasquatucket deserved better. The Greenway project catalyzed urban renewal along the river to create a plan for more usable green spaces, better recreational opportunities and a bicycle path along the river to link parks and neighborhoods. The final product will include a 5.7 mile greenway, paths, and green spaces stretching from the Johnston and Providence line to Waterplace Park in downtown Providence.

The Providence Plan's vision for turning a neglected river into a valuable urban natural resource has included educating local residents about the Greenway project. With the help of UEI funding, the River Rangers Program was created in 1998 to engage youth, build community outreach and education programs, promote community stewardship of existing and new open green spaces, and conduct clean-ups and physical restoration projects along the river. Mobilizing each summer, the River Rangers serve as stewards of public parks in the river corridor, and teach youth how to take care of their environment through park maintenance, community development, and education. The Providence Plan continues to shine as a leader to implement the Greenway's vision and spearhead Providence's revitalization of the Woonasquatucket River as valuable natural resource to benefit the most economically disadvantaged neighborhoods.



accountability and measure progress in meeting community-driven priorities.

In early stages of the UEI Community Development Pyramid, staff needed to take on the greatest share of organizational and administrative tasks. As events prospered and more people become involved, the City Program Manager was able to build credibility from these successes and other stakeholders started to assume a stronger leadership role. Building off of these small successes is key to building community capacity to solve problems. UEI staff learned that it is critical to constantly look for oppor-

tunities to continue to move forward and bring people together rather than just being content to stay with small scale projects. Ideas for new and improved projects can come from a variety of sources, including the increasing list of stakeholders involved with each passing event and success. This combined approach to share accountability, measure progress and share successes through the UEI Community Development Pyramid served as building blocks for larger, “structural” change that increased the community’s capacity to solve their greatest environment and public health problems.

## Lesson 6: Empower Urban Communities With New Skills & Information

UEI's field experience clearly demonstrated that urban communities do not have adequate information about the quality of their environment on a neighborhood level, and they also do not inherently have all the skills necessary to become an informed and active decision-maker to change local, state, and federal laws and policies to produce a better and safer environment. One of the greatest values that the UEI brought to community stakeholders was through trainings—ranging from

how to write grant proposals, to tips on preventing lead poisoning, reducing asthma triggers through EPA's Tools for Schools, conflict-resolution, general management skills, and much more. Federal, state, and local government has a language and uses terminology that is not reflective of the people that it serves. The UEI helped to inform and train local residents, environmental groups, and community partners to be able to participate more effectively when they interacted with government staff on every level.

### **Lesson 7: Urban Communities Have Environments & People Worth Protecting**

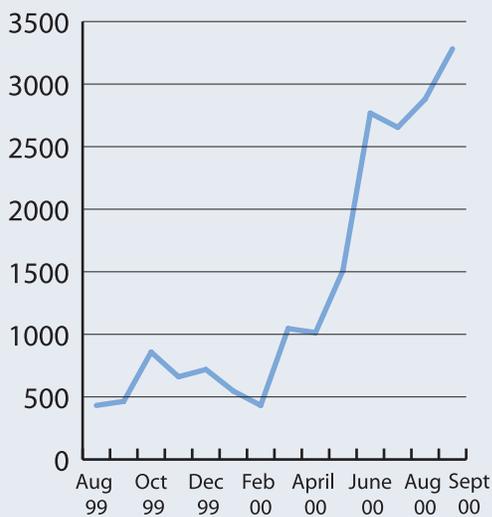
Five years of field experience designing, refining, and implementing this

pilot has lead to new discoveries in building livable urban communities in New England. When UEI staff first started reaching out directly to stakeholders, several misconceptions existed. One fundamental misconception was that communities don't care about the environment, and that the quality of the environment does not matter as much to urban residents as other social issues like poverty and crime. Secondly, there was a strong sentiment from urban stakeholders that EPA does not care about urban communities and that the agency will not make any meaningful or measurable environmental improvements in cities.

The reality is that citizens rally around and respond to environmental and public health problems that impact

their families and their children. Lead poisoning and asthma are passionate environmental issues for parents who want their children to have the best possible experiences in life. Urban vacant lots strewn with illegally dumped trash, drug needles, and rats are critical for a parent wanting to protect their child but also wanting them to have a safe place to play outside. Dangerously high levels of dioxin, PCB, mercury, and bacteria contamination in urban rivers and ponds affect families that rely on fishing to provide a source of food. The thousands of parents and families that the UEI has worked with over the past five years soundly refute the notion that urban residents do not care about environmental quality because they happen to live in a concrete jungle.

**UEI Web Site Hits**  
August 1999 - September 2000



### **UEI Web Page**

In 1999, the UEI team recognized the need to expand public access to information on urban environment and public health problems in the target cities of Boston, Providence, and Hartford. EPA New England initiated an expansion of its regional web page, and the UEI worked with the EPA New England Communications Team to create and launch a detailed site sharing information with the public on priorities, projects, progress, and partners in each target city. The UEI team worked with our community partners to highlight collaborative projects, create links to community organizations and active stakeholders, and create an on-line resource page for urban work in New England. The site was officially launched in July 1999 and public response has exceeded our wildest expectations. The UEI web page is updated regularly to keep information

current, has undergone design improvements to ease navigation, and content has grown over time to meet customer needs. It is consistently one of the most frequently accessed sites on the EPA New England Web site.