

With Vision and Determination, YPI's Los Angeles Promise Neighborhood Charts Its Own Path



By Patrick Lester, *Building Neighborhoods* blog

While tightening national, state and local budgets are posing significant challenges for much of the country, at least one local Promise Neighborhood grantee seems undeterred.

Combining its long-held vision with an aggressive approach to fundraising, the Youth Policy Institute (YPI) is charting its own path in Los Angeles, sustaining a growth trajectory seldom matched in the nonprofit community in good times or bad.

In so doing, this new UNCA member may become a model for others, making a virtue of necessity by accomplishing transformative change with the resources at hand.

Two Neighborhoods: Pacoima and Hollywood

One of the more interesting choices made by YPI during the lead up to its Promise Neighborhoods application was the decision to focus not on one Los Angeles neighborhood, but two: Pacoima and Hollywood. Of the two, Pacoima was the easier choice because of YPI's long-standing presence there. Moreover, poverty and economic distress have been a fact of life in this San Fernando Valley neighborhood for more than 50 years. Today "most businesses in the area consist of pawn shops, liquor stores, check cashing outlets, storefront churches, and automobile repair shops," according to its Promise Neighborhood proposal. The neighborhood's population of 32,000 is largely Hispanic (92%) and about a quarter of its families live in poverty.

In also choosing to include Hollywood, however, YPI took a chance. Nationally, Hollywood is seen as the home of the entertainment industry, a chosen destination for many Americans. But the reality is far different. With more than 36,000 people living on the streets annually in Los Angeles County Service Planning Area 4 (which includes Hollywood), including many homeless youth who are runaways and vulnerable to exploitation, poverty rates in the target neighborhood are actually higher than

in Pacoima. "Prostitution, drug dealing, tourist robbery, and pan handling are all easy (and criminal) alternatives to gainful employment in Hollywood," according to the proposal.

This need was one reason to include Hollywood. Another was that it was a good place to scale up the existing efforts in Pacoima. The target neighborhood is comparable in size (37,382). It also allowed the project to take advantage of a new YPI-operated FamilySource Center with \$1 million in annual city funding — one of 16 that comprise a signature citywide anti-poverty initiative focused on academic achievement and increasing family income.

The Saturation Model

That work is actually just the latest manifestation of YPI's ongoing commitment to neighborhood-level work, one that predates its Promise Neighborhood application by many years. In 2004, when its Executive Director, Dixon Slingerland, saw a *New York Times Magazine* cover story on the Harlem Children's Zone, he already knew that this was what YPI was all about. "That was what we were building toward," he said.

At the time, YPI was already developing what it calls a "Saturation Model" — a comprehensive community-based strategy that includes afterschool programs, mentoring, parent engagement, case management, college preparation, tutoring, and family support services, all of which have shown strong evidence of effectiveness. The strategy has already substantially increased academic achievement at a large elementary school in Pacoima that was converted into a charter school in 2003, and YPI's own charter and pilot schools.

When then-Senator Obama announced in 2007 that as President he would support the creation of 20 Promise Neighborhoods, Slingerland was determined that YPI would become one of the 20. "Really, we spent three years thinking about Promise Neighborhoods, getting

ready for Promise Neighborhoods, talking about Promise Neighborhoods,” he said.

The long lead-time helped. So too did several other factors. One was YPI’s significant internal capacity. Today, YPI has an annual budget of \$35 million and more than 1,200 staff at 125 program sites in L.A. This capacity is the result of an aggressive grant seeking strategy that has resulted in 50 percent growth each year for the past 6 years.

It has also landed more than \$11 million in related federal grants just since September. Those grants include \$2.25 million from the Department of Education’s Carol White Physical Education Program, \$750,000 from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) for 15 Los Angeles high schools, \$5.6 million from the Department of Commerce for 80 computer centers, and the second of two Full-Service Community Schools grants from the US Dept. of Education (\$2.5 million).

YPI also substantially benefited from its long-standing work with schools. It currently partners in various ways with more than 70 schools throughout the city. It also runs three schools of its own, including two charter schools and a pilot school, and plans to open more charters and Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) network partner schools in 2011, targeting Hollywood and Pacoima.

“YPI is one of our really great partners,” said Monica Garcia, president of the board of the LAUSD. “Its work in the Promise Neighborhood will take advantage of our public school choice process, where outside agencies and teacher teams are applying to operate and turn around schools and give parents a real choice between traditional, charter, pilot, and network partner schools.”

A final factor in the project’s success was the support of a large number of committed partner organizations. This was further leveraged by support from an innovative local collaborative of foundations, schools, and city and county officials called the Los Angeles County Neighborhood Revitalization Workgroup. This collaborative effort also supported the city’s other successful Promise Neighborhoods application submitted by Proyecto Pastoral.

With all of these resources at hand, does the Los Angeles Promise Neighborhood have it covered? Not yet. While the project has enough on hand to “touch” 65% of the

two neighborhoods’ populations, according to Iris Zuniga, YPI’s Chief of Staff, “it’s just a start,” she said. More is needed.

Unfortunately, while the state of California is helping with some of the funding – principally for afterschool services – it has not actively engaged with the project and is not likely to, given the state budgetary situation. That means more will be needed from the federal level.

“There isn’t any new money,” Slingerland acknowledged, “but there are ways to get creative with existing resources. Particularly given the question marks about Promise Neighborhoods funding, we need to redirect other funding streams if this is going to work.”

“We All Need to Pull This Together”

Like the other grantees, the Los Angeles Promise Neighborhood is now well into its planning year. So far, things are going smoothly. Meetings are being held with the principals of neighborhood schools. All of the working groups have met. Two general meetings have already been held for all of the project partners. “At that first partner meeting, with 50 people in the room, everyone was so pumped,” said Slingerland. “There was not a single negative or challenging comment.”

It was all the more remarkable, according to Karina Favela, the project director, because “Geoffrey Canada said there’s always going to be resistance. If you’re bringing in something new, there is going to be resistance.” Indeed, like every project, the Los Angeles Promise Neighborhood ran into some of this.

But they also saw the big picture. “The message was that we all need to pull this together,” said Zuniga. “How do we get that national spotlight and make sure our neighborhoods get that attention? How do we tell our story?”

The answer? “We all realized that it’s not about your organization or mine, but what it means for the community.” That does not happen very often, she said, but it did this time, and not by accident. Her experience was telling.

“For me, this is personal. I attended a lot of the schools on that transformation list. I grew up in this community ... it’s not just another initiative.”