

# Improving Safety in Immigrant Communities

*Mercy Housing Colorado and the Denver Police Department*

## Reducing and preventing crime in neighborhoods with diverse immigrant populations is a uniquely challenging endeavor.

Often the sheer number of languages spoken by residents can hinder broad-based community organizing and positive police-community interaction. In addition, immigrants who fear deportation or recall negative experiences with law enforcement in their countries of origin may be reluctant to report crime or otherwise work with police to improve neighborhood safety.



*Grace Apartments, operated by Mercy Housing, is home to a diverse immigrant and refugee population.*

In Denver, Colorado, the Denver Police Department and an affordable housing and services provider called Mercy Housing Colorado are trailblazing creative approaches to respond to these challenges. Starting with an open dialogue with immigrant community leaders, they worked together to create a safety training curriculum and other programming tailored for a very diverse resident population. Results include a notable decrease in crime and improved trust of law enforcement among

community members—both of which have translated into more efficient and effective use of police resources. Their approach, including the difficult lessons they learned along the way, are instructive for community developers and safety practitioners working to improve safety in immigrant communities.

## GRACE APARTMENTS AND ITS NEIGHBORHOOD

Mercy Housing Colorado provides affordable housing and services to nearly 1,700 people in 13 communities across the state of

Colorado. At its Grace Apartments facility in Denver, Mercy Housing serves 53 families. While around 20% of Grace's families are of American and Latino descent, the majority of residents are refugees and immigrants from different countries in Africa and Asia. These countries include Sudan, Somalia, Gabon, Myanmar, Sierra Leone, Mauritania, Rwanda, Burundi and the Congo. Approx-

imately 30 languages are spoken at Grace Apartments, many of which do not have a written form.

While the mix of tenants at Grace fluctuates as residents move on to longer-term housing situations, there is one thing that the refugees and immigrants at Grace have in common – they arrive in Denver “straight off the plane” with almost no contacts in the U.S., limited knowledge of the English language and little exposure to American laws, customs and society.

The neighborhood surrounding Grace Apartments is a challenging one for these new residents. Southeast Denver struggles with gang and drug-related crime like many low-income, urban neighborhoods. As a result, disputes in the neighborhood are often settled without police intervention. This pattern is reinforced by a small number of police officers relative to the geographic size of the precinct; Denver Police Department's District 3 has only sixteen officers to cover around 32 square

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## LESSONS AND TIPS FROM MERCY HOUSING AND THE DENVER POLICE DEPARTMENT

On creating a safety program when language barriers are an issue:

- ▶ Use images, role-playing, costumes and visual communication, since it is easier and more engaging when language barriers are present.
- ▶ Translation is slow, so budget extra time when heavy translation is needed.
- ▶ Take advantage of translators from within the community.
- ▶ Translation is most effective during Q&A's or when role-playing is not an adequate substitute.
- ▶ Meet with partners after every session to refine your methods. Look for opportunities to engage the surrounding neighborhood.

On building partnerships between communities and law enforcement:

- ▶ Be patient.
- ▶ Be adaptable.
- ▶ Recognize the strengths and limitations of your partner organizations. Take advantage of your organization's specific skills and experience and trust your partner organization to do the same.
- ▶ Start the process with an open dialogue – this builds trust and may reveal issues that you could not have anticipated.
- ▶ Respect the community's existing leadership and recognize that informal social networks can increase your program's reach.

miles. This leaves law enforcement officers heavily dependent upon the community to keep the neighborhood safe and to provide reliable and relevant information about illegal activity.

### AN UNUSUAL “HOTSPOT”

In 2005, the Denver Police Department's District 3 realized that a 911 “hotspot” was developing in the neighborhood around Grace Apartments. While the neighborhood had always had a comparatively high level of criminal activity, the new calls differed from calls of the past. Specifically, the new calls indicated an increase in domestic violence and child abuse in the neighborhood.



Other unusual 911 calls were coming in too – calls that suggested that the callers did not understand how to use emergency services appropriately. For example, residents were calling 911 with questions about how to enroll children to school, or with requests for transportation to a doctor for minor medical problems. The shortage of police officers in District 3 complicated law enforcement's role as first responders, since the non-emergency calls were diverting time and energy away from legitimate domestic violence calls and other proactive policing efforts.

District 3's Special Projects Coordinator, Officer Phil Epple, realized that some-

thing was wrong and that the geographic center of the hotspot was Grace Apartments. “We recognized that we had an immigrant population there and for them, in their understanding, if they needed help no matter what it was, they would call 911,” remembers Epple.

The increase in domestic violence calls from these residents, however, reflected cultural patterns of domestic violence that were drastically at odds with the U.S. laws and customs; these calls represented a legitimate use of 911 emergency services. “After I went out to Grace and met with Sheryl (Johnson, of Mercy Housing), it became clear that we had an immigrant population that was living how they thought they

should live and how they had lived in the past. That was part of the problem.”

Managers and employees at Grace Apartments also recognized that the residents needed help in understanding the role of law enforcement in America, and, more profoundly, the basic laws and customs that undergird American society. “I had been looking for someone at the police department to work with, and fortunately the new District Commander had decided to focus more attention on the area because of the hotspot. So I was thrilled when Officer Epple appeared at my door and said, ‘How can we help you?’” recalls Sheryl Johnson, Resident Services Coordinator of Grace



Apartments. “From the beginning, he was really willing to explore the issues of our residents here and to get down to the specifics of what this community really needs.”

## THE FIRST MEETING

Together, Officer Epple and Sheryl Johnson organized an initial meeting between District 3 officers and Grace Apartment’s Somali Bantu community. The goal of this first meeting was simply to start an open-ended dialogue between law enforcement and Grace residents, so that the police could understand why the “hotspot” had developed. “I think we realized that we had to back up a little bit and try to meet the residents where they were at,” recalls Sheryl Johnson. “We did prepare for the meeting, but we didn’t put an agenda out there. We just said we would try it and see what happens.”

To encourage open communication, both the police and Grace Apartments brought an equal number of participants to the meeting. Somali Bantu elders sat across from the District Commander and other officers, while staff from Grace Apartments and younger members of the Somali community also joined in the discussion. This balanced group of participants created an environment of discovery rather than instruction—critical for engaging the residents and earning their trust. It also encouraged law enforcement to step back and take a broader look at the community so that all parties could begin to grapple with the complex issues that were compromising the community’s safety.

“The Somali Bantu at that first meeting

really had courage,” remembers Johnson. “They came in and said, ‘We have many questions, and the first question is, in our country we have many wives. Why can’t we have many wives here? And why can’t we beat our wives?’ I had been working with this community already, so I knew about some of these issues, but even I was shocked by their honesty with so many police present.”

Both Johnson and Epple remember this first meeting as an eye-opening experience. “Hearing from some of the elders – they were living how they had lived in Africa where domestic violence, child abuse and polygamy were tolerated,” said Epple. “We recognized right off the bat that this is why we have a huge hotspot – you’ve got a man thinking it’s okay to beat his wife and we were getting phone calls from other neighbors about the abuse. There was a cultural disconnect between how we deal with domestic violence here and how they had dealt with it in the past. And it’s hard for us to go in and enforce the law if somebody doesn’t know what the law is.”

Domestic violence was only one of many problematic customs that residents had brought with them from their native countries. Police had also received calls about children being left unattended in the neighborhood, since residents were accustomed to treating childrearing as a collective responsibility. To make matters more difficult, many residents had little confidence in law enforcement, since they had experienced violence, thievery and institutionalized corruption at the hands of police officers in their home countries.

Traffic safety, too, presented a serious challenge to residents. “They told us that many members of their community had died because they didn’t understand traffic laws here and they asked

for help in understanding how to drive,” remembers Johnson. In fact, the meeting brought to light a number of issues that neither law enforcement nor Grace staff could have anticipated. “After that first meeting, we knew that there were a large number of issues that we had to take care of,” said Epple. “From then on, it was just a matter of breaking it apart piece by piece.”

After these initial meetings with the Somali Bantu, the Grace team continued to meet with members of other ethnic groups to gather information and build buy-in for a new safety program.

## DESIGNING A PILOT PROGRAM

After the success of this first meeting, Grace staff and law enforcement began to brainstorm about what kinds of educational and safety programming would help Grace residents. The partnership came up with several goals for the programming: one, to increase resident confidence in law enforcement officers and in their community at large; two, to educate residents about basic American laws and the principles behind them; and three, to familiarize residents with their environment so that they could take an active role in preventing crime and promoting public safety. To achieve these goals, the programming needed to address a wide range of subjects, from explaining domestic violence laws to recognizing a drug transaction on the street.





Sheryl Johnson looked for other programs on which to base the curriculum, but she could not find anything similar to what she and Epple had in mind. “There weren’t as many programs out there as I had hoped. We felt like we were starting from scratch,” she said.

Officer Epple, too, had never implemented a program of this kind; “I had no special training – everything that I encountered and learned was completely new,” he said. “It was a challenge, but I recognized that if it’s a challenge for me, then for these folks who have no knowledge of law enforcement in the U.S., it has to be a greater challenge.”

Grace staff began by working on several educational dialogues with the police. A few months later they came together with Mercy Housing’s Refugee Housing Program and partnered with Denver’s Institute for Consensus Action (ICA) to create a formalized safety leadership program. Officers from law enforcement also met with representatives from different national consulates in order to gain a better understanding of Grace’s particular refugee and immigrant cultures.

One key to designing and implementing a successful program was each partner’s recognition of the other’s complementary skills. For example, Officer Epple recruited detectives with expertise in domestic violence

and child abuse, while Johnson went door-to-door at Grace to encourage participation in the upcoming program.

“We shared the duty of planning,” said Johnson, “but Grace staff tried to take a lot of the weight off the police for the recruiting and some of the planning. That was where Mercy Housing and other organizations came in, because we don’t expect the police to do the work of social workers or program coordinators.”

## COMMUNITY EDUCATION AND SAFETY AWARENESS PROGRAM

In fall of 2006, Grace Apartments began its Community Education and Safety Awareness Program with a group of about 20 residents. Nearly all of the residents who began the Safety Awareness training stayed through the entire program, reflecting both its success as well as the residents’ desire to understand and embrace their new environment. Over the course of several months, the program covered a series of issues including domestic violence and child abuse, street drugs and how to recognize them, traffic safety and basic personal safety education. After each class, facilitators would set aside time for an unrestricted Q&A, when participants had the opportunity to ask any question they wanted of law enforcement.

In one course, residents learned how to recognize common American street drugs. Although drug abuse happens all over the world, many residents did not know that drugs in America often take the form of pills and many had never seen crack cocaine. Residents with children were taught how to recognize the effects of drugs, so that they would know how to protect their children from the drug culture that they might encounter at school or on the street.

In another class, one resident was recruited to surprise the class by running through the room, unannounced, in the middle of a lesson. Law enforcement then taught residents how to describe the distinguishing characteristics of a criminal for a police report, using costumes, illustrations and other visual cues.

Another course focused on self-defense by incorporating aspects of particular cultures that might make residents more vulnerable. “In one instance, we talked about what a veiled woman could do to be aware of her surroundings and how to see things in her peripheral vision,” said Epple. “Plus we talked about general safety, like staying off your cell phone when you’re walking at night, what to do if you encounter a stranger and staying where it’s well lit.”



“Don’t Walk Alone at Night.” The Grace team utilized drawings and role plays to teach safety lessons when language barriers were present. Art by Joe Punicki.

## LEARNING FROM THE LANGUAGE BARRIER

The partners realized early on that language would complicate their program since Grace's residents come from all over the world and most speak only their native languages. Mercy Housing lacked the funding to hire translators, so the partners (with the expertise of the ICA-Denver and The Refugee Housing Program) developed a multimodal curriculum that relied heavily on illustrations, role-playing, costumes and visual communication. The partners also took advantage of residents with English, Spanish, Swahili, Kinyarwanda, Somali and French language skills by enlisting them as volunteer translators.

The use of resident translators had the added bonus of creating new alliances among different ethnic groups. For example, Spanish-speaking residents from Puerto Rico and Mexico were paired with Spanish speakers from Gabon and Sudan. Often these residents had not met each other and did not realize that they shared a language. "Just because our residents are from Africa doesn't mean that they talk to their neighbors from Africa – often they don't share language, religion or cultural practices," said Johnson. Grouping residents by their

shared languages helped residents form new relationships with neighbors from different countries. This was just one unexpected way in which the program increased confidence and safety within the larger Grace community.

Officer Epple remembers that the classes often moved much more slowly than he predicted because of the need to translate. Residents often needed to translate a lesson into two or three languages before it could reach other residents in their own tongue. "Sometimes a meeting that would take 30 minutes with John Q. Public was taking an hour and a half because things have to be translated several times," he said. Sheryl Johnson summed up the frustration with volunteer translation, "When you don't have a professional interpreter, it takes a lot more time to get less done."

But both agree that the multimodal aspect of the program was essential to its success in community building. Johnson also pointed out that the immigrant and refugee population at Grace Apartments is always changing, so a successful and replicable program would have to rely less on

language and more on role-playing and other interactive techniques.

As the partners moved forward with each successive session, they paid attention to what worked best and continually modified their programming techniques.



One key to the program's success were the regular follow-up meetings between law enforcement and representatives from ICA and Mercy Housing. "We met after every class for several hours to refine our methods," recalls Johnson. "The follow-up meetings were definitely time-intensive. It was a constant learning experience. But the goal even then was to create a pilot, to take what we did and build upon it."

## SPOTLIGHT: CITIZENS' POLICE ACADEMY

In December 2006, eight young Somali Bantu men were elected by the Somali Bantu Elders to participate in the Denver Police Department's Citizens' Police Academy. Over the course of three months, these young men learned about the daily work of the Denver Police Department by shadowing officers, visiting police precincts and following criminal investigations through the law enforcement system.

The program's graduates developed personal relationships with law enforcement officers and the program reinforced the trust that had grown from Grace's Community Education and Safety Awareness Program. It also brought young people from Grace Apartments out into the larger Denver community and attracted the attention of the Rocky Mountain News, which published two glowing articles about the Police Academy and Grace's Community Safety program.

Graduates were amazed at the differences between policing in their home countries, where bribery and negotiation with police officers is common, and policing in the United States. One graduate of the program remarked to Sheryl Johnson of Grace Apartments that he had never before considered crime in the context of its economic and social impact, and that the program taught him how much crime actually costs.

*"He said that he had never thought about it from the perspective of how much money it costs to fight crime every year and to repair the damage that's done, physical and emotional, as well as with property. That really stuck with him."*

—Sheryl Johnson, Grace Apartments



## RESULTS

Since the formal programs started in 2006, District 3 has reported a 50% reduction in calls for service and a 54% decrease in reported offenses in the neighborhood. The number of 911 calls to the precinct has dropped by half and Officer Epple reports that the new calls address true emergency issues, making the entire system more efficient and enabling officers to respond more effectively. “We noticed a significant decrease in domestic violence,” he said, “but also an increase in calls about other things like suspicious people, people in the building that they didn’t recognize. It’s been a great turnaround because we’re getting better kinds of calls. And instead of taking four or five hours to handle a domestic violence call, officers are freed up to do more proactive policing.”

These tangible results signal a major shift in the relationship between law enforcement and Grace’s refugee and immigrant community. Before the program, many residents distrusted police officers based on experiences with law enforcement in their countries of origin. They also misunderstood the role of emergency services. Today, Grace’s tenants are playing an active role in crime prevention and public safety in both Grace and its surrounding neighborhood.

“This program has been the turning point in making our residents accountable to the law,” said Johnson. “It has made

them feel confident in their own surroundings and in their own knowledge about safety, which makes them the kind of people anyone would want to share in their community.”

Johnson attributes the success of the partnership to the mutual respect that developed between Grace residents, Grace staff

and law enforcement. “We’ve had a great relationship with the police because they approached us to begin with and because of Officer Epple. He really talked to residents rather than telling them what to do, and I think that made all the difference because I’m not sure our residents would have received the program so well with someone else. They’re used to voices of authority, but they might not necessarily respect them.”

For his part, Officer Epple believes that the population’s desire to learn and adapt to American society contributed significantly to the program’s success. “Everybody that we dealt with truly wanted to learn how to live as an American citizen and they were just like sponges. Everything we gave them, they soaked it up and wanted to more and more, and everything we taught them was taken back into the community and taught to others.”

This dissemination of knowledge and information is another key to the program’s effectiveness. Although on any given evening, only a small portion of the resident population was able to attend classes, attendees were able to bring the lessons back to the larger community. Young people, in particular, proved to be fertile ground for safety education. “The refugee community tends to work in a hierarchy, with elders first, then young adults, then kids,” said Johnson. “And the young adults really do act as the

buffer zone between the children and the elders, so that’s where we focused a lot of our attention since they’re in a position to teach the rest of the community about law enforcement. And they’re going to grow up here and raise children here, and that’s where we’re hoping our impact will be in the future.”

The program has the potential to reach a much wider audience, both as a replicable pilot program and as its graduates move out of Grace Apartments and into the community at large. Both Grace Apartments and Denver law enforcement plan to replicate and refine the program with Grace’s next wave of refugee and immigrant residents. A community development corporation in Louisville, Kentucky has already implemented a program based on Grace’s initiative and plans are being made to try the program in several new locations in 2007-08.

“The effects of the program are far reaching, since our residents will eventually move to other areas of Denver or the rest of the country,” said Johnson. “They are only here for one or two years, so I’m hoping we’re going to have a ripple effect, and that when they move to their new neighborhoods, they’ll say, ‘I was in this class and this is what I learned about laws and safety.’”

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