

Comprehensive Community Development

CASE STUDY

A Holistic Approach to Neighborhood Development

ST. JOSEPH'S CARPENTER SOCIETY

CCD PRINCIPLES HIGHLIGHTED:



INTENTIONAL
APPROACH



COMMUNITY
DRIVEN



LAYERED
STRATEGIES



GUIDING
VISION & PLAN



STRATEGIC
PARTNERSHIPS



COORDINATED
LEADERSHIP



LAYERED
INVESTMENT

KEY INSIGHTS

- Shifting their focus from housing to comprehensive community development helped SJCS understand the importance of engaging youth for long-term change.
- Through strategic partnerships, SJCS successfully integrated community development education into afterschool programs, fostering a new generation of community leaders.
- New young leaders are emerging and transforming local spaces, highlighting the potential for sustainable community leadership.

My East Camden Neighborhood plan

St. Joseph's Carpenter Society (SJCS) has long been a cornerstone in Camden, New Jersey's revitalization initiatives. Originally founded to strengthen and restore East Camden neighborhoods through affordable housing, SJCS's revitalization efforts over the last 30 years have increased property values and stabilized mixed-income neighborhoods. Their work has expanded to support vibrant commercial and residential corridors, empowering residents and inspiring community engagement far beyond East Camden.

"We've always been known as an affordable housing developer," said Felix Moulter, SJCS Project Manager. "But we build more than homes; we build community."

Resident guidance and feedback are key to building community in the neighborhoods SJCS serves. A comprehensive neighborhood planning process led by SJCS in the mid-2000s revealed that while residents found housing vitally important, they needed expanded support for their communities to thrive.

As a result, the My East Camden Neighborhood plan, a resident-driven, 10-year neighborhood plan that takes a more holistic approach to neighborhood development, was created. Included in this plan, which was updated in 2021, is the necessity of engaging young residents in community development and the idea that to create sustainable change, the next generation must be involved in shaping the future of their neighborhoods.

The Importance of Youth Engagement

“The neighborhood plan included some of the human components that we weren’t necessarily used to when we were just building houses,” said Director of Neighborhood Development Enrique Rivera. “That included a lot of advocacy, leadership training and community building. When we were doing these neighborhood planning processes and talking to people, we recognized there are a lot of great leaders in the neighborhood.”

Yet young people were missing among the active, engaged community leaders. While many dedicated older residents actively participated, it became evident that younger voices were not being heard.

Camden is a young city, with one-third of its population under age 27, yet members of this age group are highly underrepresented in Camden’s advocacy and community engagement efforts. Involving and engaging the youth is vital to creating lasting change that will continue into the future.

“I went from a point where I was kind of hopeless and had that mindset that nothing was ever going to get better, but I feel like this experience has really opened my eyes to what can be done.”

—ALESIA FIGUEROA-FALCON
East Camden resident

The Youth Engagement Strategy

SJCS understood the challenge of attracting young people to traditional engagement opportunities and knew they needed a different approach. Through strategic partnerships with local youth organizations such as Lucy Outreach, Urban Promise, and The Work Group, SJCS can reach young people where they already spend time and feel comfortable, such as in existing after-school programs. By meeting youth where they are, SJCS can integrate community development to make it more accessible and relevant.

Among the engagement opportunities SJCS has partnered to facilitate, they introduced NeighborWorks America’s Building





Leaders, Building Communities (BLBC) curriculum, which focuses on civic engagement and community advocacy, teaching young residents the knowledge and skills needed to become active participants in their community's development. They also worked to involve younger residents in their monthly East Camden advisory calls, which provide a platform for discussing ongoing projects, community issues, and potential solutions. By inviting youth to these discussions, SJCS encourages young residents to include their perspectives in the decision-making process, fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility for their community.

Leveraging their expertise in housing, SJCS also developed a workforce development program, teaching young residents practical skills such as home repairs, drywall installation, and basic electrical work. SJCS aims to grow this program to provide youth with valuable career opportunities.

A Story of Success

Alesha Figueroa-Falcon, a 27-year-old East Camden resident, exemplifies the success of SJCS's youth engagement, which is already showing tangible impacts. Initially involved in the Better Blocks program, a block improvement grant supported by SJCS, Figueroa-Falcon led a project to transform an empty lot into a serenity garden with fruit trees and a mural in honor of her late mother.

Following her work in turning a neighborhood eyesore into a vibrant community asset, Figueroa-Falcon has since become the executive director of Parents for Great Camden Schools and serves as a housing authority commissioner. She expressed that SJCS provided her with a platform to share her ideas and access necessary resources, giving her the support she needed and empowering her to take on more significant roles in the community.

"I went from a point where I was kind of hopeless and had that mindset that nothing was ever going to get better," said Figueroa-Falcon. "But I feel like this experience has really opened my eyes to what can be done if you're consistent, know what organizations to work with, and just participate."

Ambassadors for the Future

While youth engagement efforts are new, SJCS has begun to see a noticeable increase in youth participation. More young people are participating in community advisory calls and engaging in local projects. Young leaders like Figueroa-Falcon have emerged, demonstrating the potential for youth to drive positive change in Camden.

"Ultimately, we want them to become ambassadors for us," said Moulier. They become beacons and build bridges so they can be the catalyst for change that is desperately needed."

People like Figueroa-Falcon are already positioned to be the ambassadors SJCS seeks to create and lead the next generation of advocates.

"Being involved has really given me purpose," Figueroa-Falcon said. "It's given me a sense of responsibility, accountability, and value. I feel like when I come to the table, I know I'm bringing something...The things I want to see are to make a positive impact, and as long as I'm at the table with people who want to help do that, we'll make something happen."

LEARN MORE

- **Learn about** the St. Joseph's Carpenter Society's initiatives.
- **Read more** about the My East Camden Neighborhood Plan.
- News Article "[*A grassroots effort has a Camden neighborhood blooming with pride*](#)".