Current Issues in Practice

City of Little Rock Neighborhood Alert Centers: An Assessment Report

Hunter Bacot, University of Arkansas at Little Rock
Christopher Diaz, Arkansas Bureau of Legislative Research
Bruce Moore, City of Little Rock
Bryan Day, Little Rock Port Authority

The City of Little Rock's Neighborhood Alert Center program assessment focuses on understanding program functions, how these centers serve the respective neighborhoods, and the roles and responsibilities of neighborhood facilitators (program directors stationed at each location). A case study approach is used to provide a holistic, rigorous evaluation of the program. Though much has changed for these centers since the inception of the program, this assessment reveals that citizens appreciate the Neighborhood Alert Centers and their neighborhood facilitators. Assessment results show that these centers are key components to sustaining healthy, vibrant Little Rock neighborhoods. The project demonstrates the usefulness of an outside evaluation for providing recommendations to enhance a program and increase its capacity.

Keywords: Neighborhood Capacity, Community Building, Citizen Engagement

The City of Little Rock commissioned the Institute of Government (IOG) to conduct an assessment of the Department of Housing and Neighborhood Programs' Neighborhood Alert Center program. These neighborhood centers are staffed with a city employee (neighborhood facilitator) and serve as hubs of city government within select neighborhoods; these centers link residents with basic city services, law enforcement, and code enforcement as well as other service needs. This program assessment focuses on the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities of these Neighborhood Alert Centers: in serving their neighborhoods; the service functions of these facilities since program's inception; and the roles, responsibilities, and duties of the Neighborhood Alert Centers' neighborhood facilitators. The assessment consists of:

- Assessing Formal/Informal Roles, Responsibilities, and Duties of Facilitators: researchers conducted in-depth interviews with neighborhood facilitators at each of these Neighborhood Alert Centers;
- Gauging Community Perspective: researchers solicited feedback from neighborhood residents through focus groups at neighborhood association meetings;
- Preferred Practices of other Communities: researchers compared Little Rock's program with analogous programs in similar cities; and,
- Performance Data: researchers reviewed quantitative data on code compliance (from the first quarter of 2007 through the second quarter of 2013) and criminal activities (defined as property and violent crimes from 2000 to 2012).

In conducting this program assessment, other important factors are uncovered about these centers' development, maturation, and evolution over time within these neighborhoods. Foremost of these revelations is the recognition of the expanded role these centers have assumed for these communities and neighborhoods. As a result, the research scope of this program evaluation expanded to provide information contextualizing these neighborhoods and considering new functions adapted as part of each neighborhood facilitator's roles and responsibilities as well as their importance in serving their respective neighborhoods.

Given these changes in service orientation and recognizing fully developed service areas and constituents for the Neighborhood Alert Center program, we find these centers warranted and essential to sustaining Little Rock neighborhoods. Based on this assessment, several recommendations are provided the City of Little Rock for improving and sustaining these Neighborhood Alert Centers in a new service environment. To date the City of Little Rock has implemented nearly all of the recommendations and is considering expanding the program into other neighborhoods.

In completing this project, faculty, researchers, city administrators, and city staff worked closely to ensure complete and accurate information was shared. In full, this project proved an exemplary case example of how university faculty and researchers can work with city administration and staff to conduct a worthwhile and practical assessment of a city program. Through this collaboration, the university catalyzes its connections to the community by utilizing its expertise, highlighting its community connections, and creating partnerships to address important community issues. Collaborative research between faculty and city administration create reciprocal and advantageous relationships for both university and community. As a result, universities, especially urban universities, serve as vital community resources that, through community partnerships, can address important neighborhood issues that benefit the greater community (Trani & Holsworth, 2010). Universities are in such a position because these institutions harness many resources that "… are unique among institutions in the scale and breadth of human, cultural, and economic resources they control, including many of the attributes required for successful economic and community development – leadership, expertise, capital, land, and tools for innovation" (Coalition of Urban Serving Universities, 2010, p. 2). As is the case herein, the collaboration among university faculty and researchers, city administrators, and city practitioners combines the resources and expertise of these entities to provide a review of a long-standing neighborhood program in the City of Little Rock. Working together, this combination of practitioners and academics prepared a program assessment that addresses realities of program administration and performance and provides recommendations for program changes and improvements that are feasible politically and practically.
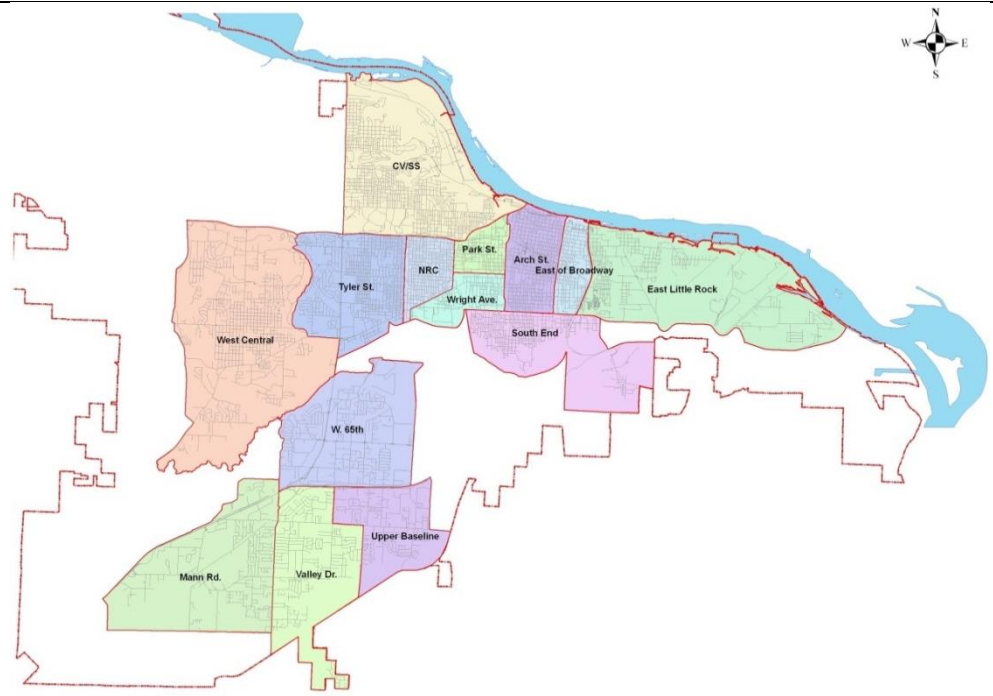
Assessing the City of Little Rock's Neighborhood Alert Center Program

The Neighborhood Alert Center Program: Background and Current Status[1]

As originally envisioned in the early 1990s, a Neighborhood Alert Center provides an extension of city service functions directly in various neighborhoods of Little Rock. These Neighborhood Alert Centers were established by the City of Little Rock in response to escalating gang and drug violence across the community. Although these operations were originally intended to serve as a one-stop shop for residents to address complaints in the neighborhood (e.g., gang activity, graffiti, etc.), these operations have evolved over time to become, in practice, neighborhood centers that facilitate neighborhood organization and community engagement (e.g., National Night Out, providing space for neighborhood association meetings, community gardening, neighborhood cleanups, etc.) as well as becoming *the* place in these neighborhoods where residents can learn about various local events and city services (e.g., recycling, applying for reduced-rate utility bills, applying for city jobs, etc.).

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[1]Much of this section *quotes directly* from the Department of Housing and Neighborhood Program's website on the history of the program (City of Little Rock, 2013a).

Figure 1. Neighborhood Alert Center Boundaries

Source: City of Little Rock (2013a)

The Neighborhood Alert Center system was originally intended to address the issues of crime, illegal sale and abuse of drugs, and the deterioration of neighborhoods and housing. These problems were acute in the early 1990s to such a degree that they spurred the city to apply for a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation grant to fund the project. According to the grant proposal, the Neighborhood Alert Center system identifies, alerts, mobilizes, and integrates forces necessary to successfully fight substance abuse in defined neighborhoods (Boland, 1994). The goal of this effort was to improve the life conditions of residents and create positive neighborhood environments that lower the risk of substance abuse as well as the criminal element that often coexists with substance abuse. A historical depiction of the Neighborhood Alert Center program is available from the Department of Housing and Neighborhood Programs (City of Little Rock, 2013b).

Over the years, neighborhood facilitators, who are stationed at each center, have become the most visible city representative assigned to these communities. Many residents look to their neighborhood facilitator to address problems, answer questions, and act as a liaison between them and the City of Little Rock. There are 11 Neighborhood Alert Centers and 13 service areas (as a few centers share service area responsibilities). Figure 1 displays the respective service areas of these centers.

Efficacy of Neighborhood Centers

Based on the evidence, neighborhood centers appear to be a viable solution for not only connecting local government to communities but also for sustaining stability across neighborhoods. These community connections manifested by neighborhood centers pose real consequences for communities, as devolving decision making about neighborhood-level issues typically enhance neighborhood quality of life (Ostrom, 1990). Moreover, decentralizing city services to a neighborhood level as is done through Neighborhood Alert Centers in Little Rock is

a more efficient means for addressing micro-level issues or problems. As some city-level decisions may lack full or adequate information for addressing the issue satisfactorily, neighborhood or community organizations may inform the situation more fully and thereby more readily provide a viable resolution (Levy, Meltsner, & Wildavsky, 1974; Lineberry, 1977); such resolutions are most viable when there is a collaborative government effort to promote citizen involvement. These Neighborhood Alert Centers act as vehicles for promoting such citizen or community involvement, and the City of Little Rock is able to cultivate and sustain an active citizenry through these centers; this becomes a mechanism for promoting discourse and input across neighborhoods. In fact, Denhardt and Denhardt (2000) call for this new focus as part of reforming government to be more responsive; they state that

> public administrators should focus on their responsibility to serve and empower citizens as they manage public organizations and implement public policy. In other words, with citizens à the forefront, the emphasis should not be placed on either steering or rowing the government boat, but rather on building public institutions marked by integrity and responsiveness (p. 549).

Through these centers, citizens are afforded additional avenues in which to participate and engage local government, which promotes trust among members of these communities. As a result, these Neighborhood Alert Centers play an important role in mitigating neighborhood, or micro-level problems as well as disseminating information about city services that work to improve the quality of life in these neighborhoods. This opportunity the City of Little Rock provides its citizens for "self-governance" via these Neighborhood Alert Centers has sustained neighborhood activity and institutionalized a path for citizens to advocate for their neighborhoods, which has likely mitigated neighborhood blight typical of other cities (particularly during the recent economic downturn) (Ostrom, 1990).

Developing strong neighborhoods and communities requires commitment by cities and the City of Little Rock demonstrates its commitment via these Neighborhood Alert Centers. In committing its resources to these communities, the City of Little Rock has established within these neighborhoods a community anchor to which residents can turn for information or assistance. Sustaining and transforming communities requires immersion in the community, such as this commitment by the city. In committing resources (fiscal and personnel) in these neighborhoods, the City of Little Rock becomes closer to its citizens and families and, in doing so, provides its citizens with a platform for engaging and embracing their community. Such efforts instill community pride in citizens that beget community connections and relationships and leads to improved neighborhood capacity among residents (Portney & Berry, 1999). The City of Little Rock's Neighborhood Alert Centers serve their communities well by extending city service functions directly into the neighborhoods, thus straight to the citizens of Little Rock.

The Program Assessment Process

This research examines the Neighborhood Alert Center program using a mix of data, information, and approaches. First, as understanding that the community is important for providing study context, a characterization of the community is provided to offer a sense of these neighborhoods and their respective assets and challenges. To establish a sense of what other cities are doing in this arena, a comparative city matrix is prepared to provide some sense of Little Rock's program vis-à-vis practices by other municipalities. Upon understanding program context, findings from facilitator and community interviews are discussed and service trends across Neighborhood Alert Center areas are catalogued and evaluated. Finally, program recommendations are provided along with a current status report for each one. This evaluation

is an example of how a university center and local government entity can collaborate to deliver a viable and rigorous but affordable program evaluation the community.

Project Approach and Methodology

A case study approach infused with mixed-methodologies (focus group and personal interviews as well as demographic, crime, code enforcement, and social service data) is used to assess the utility of the Neighborhood Alert Centers program for the respective neighborhoods, along with evaluating the roles, responsibilities, and functions of the center facilitators. The case study approach as employed herein permits rigorous evaluation of several objectives established in consultation with city administrators prior to the study; these are assessing Neighborhood Alert Centers facilitator formal/informal roles, responsibilities, and duties; gauging community perspectives; preferred practices of other communities; and performance data.
Assessment and evaluation processes include:

- an intensive case study assessment and review of the Neighborhood Alert Center program;
- personal interviews of Neighborhood Alert Center facilitators using a standardized questionnaire;
- guided inquiries of attendees at neighborhood meetings, which includes standardized instruments used to guide conversations with citizen or neighborhood groups at community meetings; and,
- analysis of secondary data from the U.S. Census Bureau, the Little Rock Police Department, the Little Rock Code Compliance Department, the Arkansas Department of Human Services, and the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR) IOG Center for Public Collaboration.

For the personal interviews that gauge facilitator roles, individual in-depth face-to-face personal interviews are conducted with each Neighborhood Alert Center facilitator. A structured questionnaire is used to inquire of facilitators' roles in their locations, these neighborhoods, their daily/weekly duties, job tasks, challenges of the position, and other tasks that they like to or believe should be done but are not. Appointments were scheduled with each facilitator at their Neighborhood Alert Center at a time convenient to their schedules. Data about facilitator duties and Neighborhood Alert Center functions represent the population of Neighborhood Facilitators in the aggregate; these data are presented as actual frequency counts or percentages and, as such, there is no statistical analysis provided. These data provide an accurate depiction of the general functions, activities, and setting for these Neighborhood Alert Centers and their personnel.

Group sessions (which are similar to focus groups) are conducted with citizens at neighborhood association meetings in the community/neighborhoods served by the respective Neighborhood Alert Center (during the study period); these group sessions are guided by a standardized questionnaire. Further, the group sessions served to ascertain collective views across a host of questions about services offered by these Neighborhood Alert Centers as well as about their neighborhood facilitators, and the neighborhood generally. Though these are strictly convenience "surveys," i.e., only those willing to participate did so, results from these "community conversations" are best described as 'impressionistic' and general descriptions of perspectives. These surveys are not randomized efforts, and these results cannot be extrapolated to other populations.

The assessment also depends on secondary data from a variety of sources, including the City of Little Rock (for code compliance and crime statistics), the U.S. Census Bureau, and the Arkansas Department of Human Services. These data are matched as closely as possible to the corresponding Neighborhood Alert Center service areas. The code compliance data extends back to 2007, while the crime data is from 2000 to 2013. Proper protocols and institutional review board compliance procedures are observed in the conduct and administration of this research.

The Community Context of Neighborhood Alert Center Service Areas

A better understanding of the situation for these neighborhoods and communities is acquired by placing the community in context. A community characterization helps uncover the underlying social structure that assists in contextualizing research findings and create an understanding of a community's needs and resources, as well as acquire an appreciation of the community by assessing socioeconomic and demographic information (Bacot, 2008). Set in the southern United States, Little Rock is located in a state and region marked by political difference and deference relative to the rest of the country (Black & Black, 1987; Key, 1949). Over time scholars have pointed to the unique political features of the region and further distinguished states based on social and cultural factors (Black & Black, 1987; Key, 1949). Cities such as Little Rock, while progressive by southern standards, tend to be traditional compared with metropolitan counterparts located elsewhere in the United States.

A community's identity is further understood by its demographic characteristics, which are instrumental in understanding an identity that comprises the overall community. Due to its status as the largest city in Arkansas, the state's capital, and its pronounced wealth relative to most other areas of the state, Little Rock is quite different from other communities and regions of the state. As a result, knowledge of the social demography of neighborhoods served by the Neighborhood Alert Center program provides a cursory glimpse into their constitution and challenges.

With the exception of the Capital View/Stifft Station service area, Neighborhood Alert Centers serve neighborhoods that are predominantly African American and have an average median annual household income of $32,134. In eight of the Neighborhood Alert Center service areas, women outnumber men. In three of these Neighborhood Alert Center service areas – East Little Rock, Valley Dr., and W. 65th St. – women outnumber men by at least 10% (see table 2). Ten of these service areas have average median household incomes well below 185% of the 2013 federal poverty guidelines for a family of four (Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). As is surmised from a review of these data, about half of the Neighborhood Alert Center service areas are characterized by low-income households and comparatively lower overall home values; such factors speak to the importance of the assistance provided to citizens of these communities. These services not only sustain these communities, but work to preserve residents' property values and hopefully increase property values due to greater attention and resulting maintenance of residences, which also translates into better overall valuations across neighborhoods. In fact, as Craw observes, strong neighborhoods and the resulting institutions they beget "play an important role in addressing neighborhood-level problems and providing regulation and services that enhance neighborhood quality of life overall" (Craw, 2013, p. 3).

As a result, the more that neighborhood decisions are abdicated to the neighborhood level, area residents' must nurture a sense of community governance via shared norms. Again, as Craw (2013) observes, these can take many forms in the urban community, e.g., "reciprocity among neighbors, socially enforced norms (for instance, on noise, litter, home maintenance), informal

Table 1. Matrix of Neighborhood Alert Center Services Provided in Select Cities in the U.S.

	Beaumont, TX	Cincinnati, OH	Columbia, SC	Dayton, OH	Durham, NC	Greensboro, NC	Kansas City, KS	Mobile, AL	Norfolk, VA	Richmond, VA	St. Louis, MO	Little Rock, AR
Program Comparable to Little Rock's NAC												
Neighborhood Center Facility							✓					✓
Neighborhood Facilitator/Coordinator												
Assigned to Neighborhood Center							✓					✓
Liaison between City and Residents				✓								✓
Neighborhood/Community Engagement Center												
Includes Facilitator/Coordinator	✓			✓			✓				✓	✓
Includes Police Officer				✓			✓	✓			✓	
Includes Code Compliance Officer	✓			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			✓
Provides Meeting Space							✓					✓

institutional arrangements on business activity and land use (e.g., Venkatesh, 2008), and neighborhood improvement and social organizations (p. 4)." In organizing these efforts via Neighborhood Alert Centers, the city creates institutions to serve as an established entity and community anchor in these neighborhoods as well as seeks to align city initiatives and services with residential/neighborhood concerns or be able to advocate such arrangements (Craw, 2013).

Best Practices: Neighborhood Programs in Comparable Cities

In order to assess the Neighborhood Alert Center program, comparable programs in other cities are utilized to establish a standard for comparison. In selecting cities for comparisons and as is feasible, municipalities are first judged based on similarities in population size and racial demographics relative to the City of Little Rock. While similar cities typically offer comparable programs, there are no cities that have programs directly analogous to Little Rock's Neighborhood Alert Center program. Nevertheless, all of these cities do have programs that serve a similar purpose as Little Rock's Neighborhood Alert Center program (see table 2). In many of these comparison cities, neighborhood/community engagement centers serve multiple purposes for residents that include some of the same services provided by Little Rock's Neighborhood Alert Centers; unlike the Little Rock program, most of these centers have an educational and recreational focus.

Table 1 displays information that underscores the uniqueness of Little Rock's Neighborhood Alert Center program, especially the provision of a "one-stop shop" to its citizens seeking city services. While other cities provide similar services, only Little Rock centralizes these services in distinct community locations. The one commonality across programs is that, other than Little Rock, none of these programs has the word "alert" in the program's title. This naming of centers is significant, as the connotation of alert implies that the Neighborhood Alert Centers are police substations (which they are not) or only serve to address exigent problems in the neighborhood. Removing or replacing the word "alert" and changing the program's name to something more inviting or conventional (based on other cities) may heighten engagement across neighborhoods.

Table 2. Population Demographics of Neighborhood Alert Center Service Areas (2007-2011)

| Neighborhood Alert Center | Total Pop | *Gender* | | *Race/Ethnicity* | | | | | | *Housing & Income** | |
		Male	Female	White	Black	Latino	Native American /Alaska Native	Asian	Two+ Races	Median HH Income	Median Home Value
Park St.	6,987	3,635 (52%)	3,352 (48%)	2,588 (37%)	4,093 (59%)	90 (1%)	5 (.07%)	63 (1%)	139 (2%)	$28,363	$165,420
CV/SS	42,597	19,879 (47%)	22,718 (53%)	32,466 (76%)	6,452 (15%)	1,183 (3%)	161 (.38%)	1,472 (3.5%)	838 (2%)	$63,235	$251,603
East Little Rock	2,048	830 (41%)	1,218 (59%)	433 (21%)	1,546 (75%)	69 (3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	$30,939	$66,033
East of Broadway	2,798	1,463 (52%)	1,335 (48%)	953 (34%)	1,719 (61%)	91 (3%)	0 (0%)	5 (.18%)	25 (1%)	$17,361	$75,733
Mann Rd.	8,676	4,131 (48%)	4,545 (52%)	2,863 (33%)	5,021 (58%)	675 (8%)	0 (0%)	14 (.16%)	103 (1%)	$38,352	$112,250
NRC	4,122	2,202 (53%)	1,920 (47%)	619 (15%)	3,181 (77%)	218 (5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	88 (2%)	$22,698	$61,783
South End	10,241	5,031 (49%)	5,210 (51%)	2,250 (22%)	7,357 (72%)	456 (4%)	12 (.12%)	8 (.08%)	151 (1%)	$34,273	$82,100
Tyler St.	21,940	10,107 (46%)	11,833 (54%)	5,757 (26%)	14,364 (65%)	829 (4%)	133 (.61%)	300 (1%)	490 (2%)	$30,673	$89,495
Upper Baseline	9,198	4,608 (50%)	4,590 (50%)	1,464 (16%)	4,685 (51%)	2,929 (32%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	120 (1%)	$28,025	$69,220
Valley Dr.	12,269	5,562 (45%)	6,707 (55%)	1,780 (15%)	8,884 (72%)	1,365 (11%)	115 (1%)	34 (.28%)	71 (.58%)	$35,201	$85,683
W. 65th St.	10,774	4,854 (45%)	5,920 (55%)	2,400 (22%)	6,567 (61%)	1,382 (13%)	60 (.56%)	36 (.33%)	319 (3%)	$33,329	$75,300
West Central	19,558	9,474 (48%)	10,084 (52%)	7,578 (39%)	9,743 (50%)	2,041 (10%)	31 (.16%)	47 (.24%)	118 (.60%)	$44,837	$111,047
Total/Median	151,208	71,776	79,432	61,151	73,612	11,328	517	1,979	2,462	$32,134	$83,892

Figures for "Native Hawaiian" and "Other" are omitted due to few numbers (159 total)
*These data are based on a composite median calculation from block-level medians across service areas.
Source: Census Bureau (2013); USA.com (2013)

Another popular feature across cities is the use of nonprofit organizations and volunteers to provide this service. While a worthwhile public–private partnership, such a decision to incorporate volunteers and/or nonprofit organizations into Neighborhood Alert Centers must ensure proper preparation for these centers and their facilitators. Facilitators need volunteer training and management skills; thus, it is essential that organizations invest in the development of their staff to ensure that volunteers are well supported; only by doing so is the volunteer experience satisfying and productive for the volunteer, the community, and the city. Volunteer management is increasingly recognized as a distinct and vital role across organizations of all sizes in nonprofit and public sectors alike. People with volunteer management responsibilities have a challenging job; thus, they must be able to inspire people to give their time freely, maintain their motivation, ensure that they match skilled people with relevant roles, and ensure that paid staff and volunteers are able to work well together. If Little Rock decides to explore the use of volunteers in Neighborhood Alert Centers, it must consider the tangible aspects for ensuring success for this effort.

The Neighborhood Alert Center Program Assessment

Assessing Roles and Responsibilities of Neighborhood Facilitators

Interviews are conducted with each of the Neighborhood Facilitators to acquire insight about their perspectives of their roles and responsibilities. From these interviews a consistent theme emerges among neighborhood facilitators: they view their role in the neighborhoods as one that *helps and empowers residents*. As such, they also perceive their role as one that guides residents to resources they need and connects them to the City of Little Rock, or "City Hall" as it is affectionately referred, for services or needs that can be met by other divisions within the city. Most facilitators consider themselves the neighborhood ambassador, such that if there is a consensus in the neighborhood that more speed bumps or bicycle patrols are needed, for example, the neighborhood facilitator is responsible for communicating these needs to city administration. These facilitators also serve as sources and conduits of information for the neighborhood. In addition, facilitators assist residents with a myriad of needs, from helping them navigate city services to assisting them with securing necessary permits and cooperation from the appropriate city department.

Personal Interviews

Neighborhood facilitators were interviewed about the roles and responsibilities of their position. These interviews reveal many obstacles that facilitators believe stand in the way of their doing their job effectively. Based upon these interviews, these obstacles include: (1) lack of resources/support from city administration; (2) lack of attention from city management; and, (3) being micromanaged and too much redundant busywork. In general, poor pay and generally outdated work materials/functions have created low morale among these facilitators. Most facilitators complain of having to use old, outdated equipment and of never having sufficient resources to do their jobs properly. Eight out of 10 facilitators (80%) feel city administration micromanages them and that they do not have the leeway and flexibility needed to respond to immediate problems in the neighborhoods they serve. Many of these facilitators also complain about the lack of support they receive from administration and complain about "busywork" and duplication in assigned tasks.

Tables 3 and 4 present information about the current and hypothetical job duties for facilitators based on their responses (to those duties as presented). A list of activities derived from the

Table 3. Frequency of Current Job Tasks

Current Job Tasks	How Often Do You Perform This Task?					
	Several Times a Day	Three Times a Day	Twice a Day	Once a Day	Weekly	Rarely
Coordinates plans and strategies to solve problems identified by neighborhood residents.	50%	0%	20%	30%	0%	0%
Work and interact with police officers and code enforcement officers assigned to Neighborhood Alert Center.	70%	10%	0%	20%	0%	0%
Ensure that the Neighborhood Alert Center facility is cleaned and maintained.	0%	0%	0%	20%	70%	10%
Use a computer to communicate and to maintain files and records.	90%	0%	0%	10%	0%	0%
Identify neighborhood needs, problems, and goals through meetings and/or surveys with various stakeholders.	10%	10%	0%	10%	60%	10%
Inspect the neighborhood on foot and by vehicle.	0%	0%	0%	30%	70%	0%
Organize and facilitate neighborhood meetings.	0%	0%	0%	0%	60%	40%
Maintain log of Neighborhood Alert Center activities; compile activity and progress reports.	10%	0%	10%	40%	20%	20%
Identify and compile list of neighborhood-based resources.	0%	0%	0%	20%	20%	60%
Answer questions from neighborhood residents and general public.	60%	20%	10%	10%	0%	0%
Implement plans for relocation assistance in the event of emergencies or disasters.	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
Assist with planning and organizing neighborhood-based programs, projects, and activities.	0%	0%	0%	30%	40%	30%

current neighborhood facilitator's job description is presented in table 3. From these results, there is evidence of consistency across facilitators on how they occupy their workdays. The majority of facilitators (70%) indicate that they conduct weekly inspections of their assigned neighborhoods by vehicle and on foot, and over half (60%) respond that they identify neighborhood needs, problems, and goals on at least a weekly basis. Over half (60%) of these facilitators organize neighborhood meetings on a weekly basis and coordinate strategies to resolve issues or problems (brought to their attention by residents) several times a day. Other duties performed on a regular basis by facilitators are basic, routine activities involving the neighborhood, e.g., answering questions for neighbors (see table 3). As is evident from these results, facilitators are immersed in these neighborhoods and perform important civic engagement activities that forge social capital among residents in these communities.

Table 4. What Job Tasks Interest Neighborhood Facilitators

Potential/Hypothetical Job Task	How Interested Are You in Doing These Things?				
	Not at all Interested	Uninterested	Interested	Definitely Interested	No Opinion Don't Know
Follow up on resident complaints (e.g., tall weeds, barking dogs) to determine if issue has been resolved.	10%	0%	54%	27%	9%
Act as neighborhood ombudsman or liaison between residents and the city.	0%	0%	73%	27%	0%
Pick up trash in the Neighborhood Alert Center facility's parking area.	18%	27%	45%	0%	10%
Monitor active public nuisance cases in assigned neighborhood.	0%	27%	63%	10%	0%
Promote city's quality of life initiatives in the neighborhood.	0%	1%	63%	36%	0%
Coordinate volunteer and nonprofit activities in assigned neighborhood.	10%	0%	36%	54%	0%
Meet every resident in the assigned Neighborhood Alert Center's neighborhood.	0%	10%	54%	36%	0%
Review and evaluate effectiveness of Neighborhood Alert Center's programs and projects.	0%	18%	63%	19%	0%
Conduct basic clerical work in Neighborhood Alert Center facility (e.g., answer phones, type correspondence, order office supplies).	0%	36%	54%	0%	10%
Oversee and manage Neighborhood Alert Center's budget.	10%	0%	63%	27%	0%
Assist in city's outreach initiatives to the assigned neighborhood.	0%	0%	73%	27%	0%
Develop training curricula and materials for various neighborhood groups and representatives, according to neighborhood need.	0%	18%	72%	10%	0%
Recruit and coordinate volunteers at the Neighborhood Alert Center.	0%	10%	45%	45%	0%
Draft proposed budget for assigned Neighborhood Alert Center with input from neighborhood groups and representatives.	10%	0%	27%	54%	9%

Having explored their actual job duties, facilitators are then asked about hypothetical tasks, or job duties to determine what, if any, tasks they view as needed or unnecessary (see table 4). Many of these items appear on job descriptions for similar positions in other cities. When asked

what job tasks they would like to do, most report that they would be "interested" in performing the tasks listed (see table 4). Most facilitators mention that they already perform these tasks anyway. Of interest in these results is the facilitator's interest in engaging volunteers and assisting with nonprofit organization activities in the neighborhood. From these results, it is apparent that facilitators prefer to have some financial wherewithal to support community activities (e.g., cookouts, National Night Out supplies, etc.).

Residents' Perspectives on Neighborhood Facilitators and Alert Centers

Residents' opinions about their Neighborhood Alert Centers and neighborhood facilitators are solicited around questions about neighborhood characteristics and quality of life. More specifically, residents are asked about services they use at their Neighborhood Alert Centers and what, if any, additional services they would like the city to offer through the Neighborhood Alert Centers.

As the neighborhood hub, these centers serve as a focal point or anchor institution in the neighborhood, which proves important for fostering social capital and engaging citizens in their neighborhoods. "Social capital" is made up of the features of social life – networks, norms, and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives (Putnam, 1995). Personal interaction and, more importantly, the intensity of that interaction generate increasing levels of social capital in a neighborhood. In turn, social capital induces people to become more involved and take responsibility for the well-being and success of their communities (Portney & Berry, 1999; Saegert, 2006). Neighborhood Alert Centers provide the necessary infrastructure for building this social capital in Little Rock's neighborhoods, and the neighborhood facilitators catalyze and sustain the personal interaction among neighbors that fuels this social capital. Neighborhoods with higher levels of social capital tend to have a higher quality of life for their residents, which translate to other desirable characteristics of neighborhoods (e.g., housing values, home maintenance, safe neighborhoods, etc.).

Given the trust citizens have in facilitators, citizens often seek their assistance for practically any matter. Citizens regularly call upon facilitators to help them navigate local government to acquire needed services and benefits (such as applying for a reduced-rate water bill). Facilitators serve as intercessors between neighborhood residents and various local government agencies. The facilitator does just that – facilitates neighborhood action and acts as a liaison between the neighborhood and local government.

Residents attending neighborhood association meetings typically express general support for and satisfaction with the Neighborhood Alert Center and their neighborhood facilitators. Those residents attending these meetings generally express the sentiment that facilitators are not sufficiently appreciated for all the work they do, especially in emergency situations when, for example, residents are displaced due to a house fire and have to find temporary accommodations, clothing, and food. In other words, residents see facilitators as ombudsmen, especially for specialized services or unique needs (e.g., for elderly residents). Although the evidence is anecdotal, residents perceive facilitators as advocates for dealing with city government and bringing improvements to the neighborhood (such as speed bumps or increased police patrols in problem areas). This ombudsman role for the facilitators "connects" residents to their local government. Facilitators are essentially *the* key contact point between city programs/initiatives and neighborhood residents (Purdue, 2001).

Those residents attending neighborhood association meetings are nearly unanimous in voicing the opinion that they would like to see the COPP officers return to the Neighborhood Alert Center. These residents also want more educational programs and senior citizen services offered at the Neighborhood Alert Centers. As an example of providing complementary services, one facilitator suggests that facilitators be given notary public commissions in order to further serve citizens by being able to notarize paperwork (e.g., code compliance officers' paperwork must oftentimes be notarized).

Assessing Service Trends Across Neighborhood Alert Center Neighborhoods

Understanding how well neighborhoods with Neighborhood Alert Centers have fared over time is somewhat difficult to assess. Due to the current or past presence of code compliance and law enforcement officers, an assessment of activities related to neighborhood appearance and crime can inform how neighborhoods fare over time in these specific service arenas. In assessing code compliance violations, data are tracked for trends from 2007–2013; the following compliance areas are tracked: abandoned vehicles, graffiti, high grass and weeds, housing code violations, illegal dumping, parking in yards, and trash or debris on the premise. These compliance areas are fairly obvious and easy to understand. Violent and property crimes were tracked from 2000–2012 for each neighborhood in the study. Violent crimes consist of murder, manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2013a). Property crimes consist of burglary, larceny, theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2013b). All crimes are measured per reported incident.[2] As can be surmised, these indicators demonstrate the importance of these services provided by the Neighborhood Alert Centers in Little Rock neighborhoods by providing trends for these services over time.

Though not identified formally as a facilitator role, social service functions have entered into the repertoire of facilitator duties. Unfortunately, data for assessing social services are not indexed at a level, geographic or division, to approximate by neighborhood. In lieu of social service data at the neighborhood level, information about social services is reported for the entire county (and by broad area, i.e., north, east, south, and west); while this does not speak to the activity per Neighborhood Alert Center areas, this summary of social services data provides a snapshot of the prevalence of such services in the community at large; this representation provides only an overall impression of social service utilization across the county.

Code Compliance

The information in figure 2 illustrates the number and category of code compliance issues in Neighborhood Alert Center boundaries (City of Little Rock, 2013b).[3] Understanding code compliance issues in these service areas lends insight into the status of these neighborhoods. In other words, a high number of compliance issues does not necessarily indicate problems in the area; yet, excessive code compliance issues (higher than typical) provides evidence that an issue exists. Recognizing the limitations for interpreting the data, an understanding of compliance issues across neighborhood service areas is simply based on the presence or absence of a trend or whether the issue is stabilized. As such, complaints likely serve as indications of self-monitoring occurring in a neighborhood. For example, a high number of code violations may simply mean residents are more vigilant about their neighborhood and its appearance; residents

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[2] These frequency counts are not standardized by population; comparisons across service areas are not recommended.

[3] These compliance data figures are based on code compliance reports (City of Little Rock, 2013b).

**Figure 2**. Code Compliance in Little Rock NAC Neighborhoods, 2007-2013
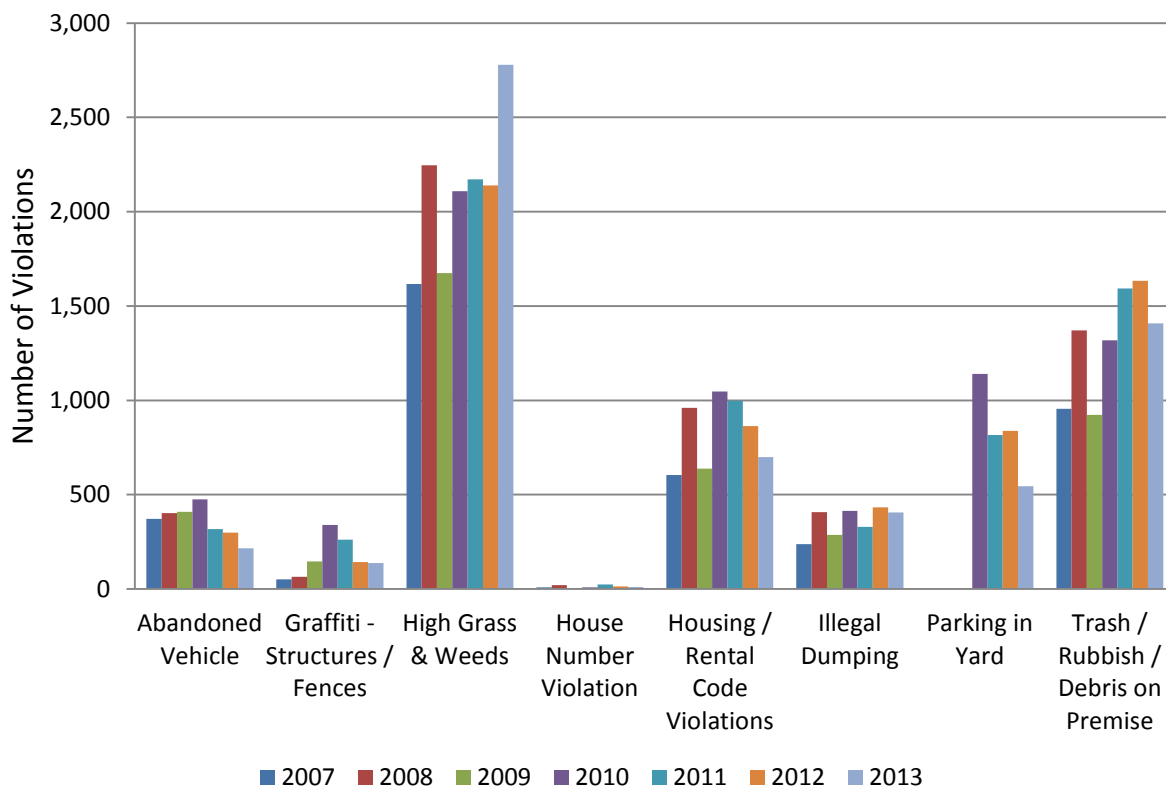
Source: City of Little Rock (2013b)

are communicating and interacting to confront these issues and problems in these neighborhoods. Overall, there appears to be noticeable improvement across Neighborhood Alert Center service areas over the past few years. While some Neighborhood Alert Center service areas have more code compliance issues than others, the most common category of code offenses cited in the Neighborhood Alert Center service areas is high grass/weeds violation.

As shown in figure 2, specific code compliance violations are more prevalent in some service areas than other areas. As well, in the per neighborhood breakdown of the compliance issues (not shown), certain violations are more prevalent in certain service areas. High grass/weed and trash/debris compliance easily exceed the other compliance factors; these compliance issues, along with illegal dumping, appear to be trending upward over time relative to other compliance issues. All other compliance issues have been trending downward, especially since 2010. Across specific service areas, high grass/weeds is the most reported compliance issue with trash/debris reports mirroring these reported categories, though at a slightly lower frequency.

The findings from these trends also see that the City of Little Rock is making tremendous strides in a few key areas of code compliance – abandoned vehicles, housing code violations, and parking in yards; code compliance complaints for these three areas are trending downward at promising levels. The most dramatic improvement is with "parking in yards," which dropped from a high of 1,140 complaints in 2010 to 545 complaints in 2013 (a change of 52%). Of the Neighborhood Alert Center service areas, there appears to be a normal distribution with regard to code compliance complaints – three service area have low complaint levels, three service areas have high complaint levels, and the remaining service areas (6) have similar moderate levels of compliance complaints.

Figure 3. Property and Violent Crimes in Little Rock NAC Neighborhoods, 2000-2012
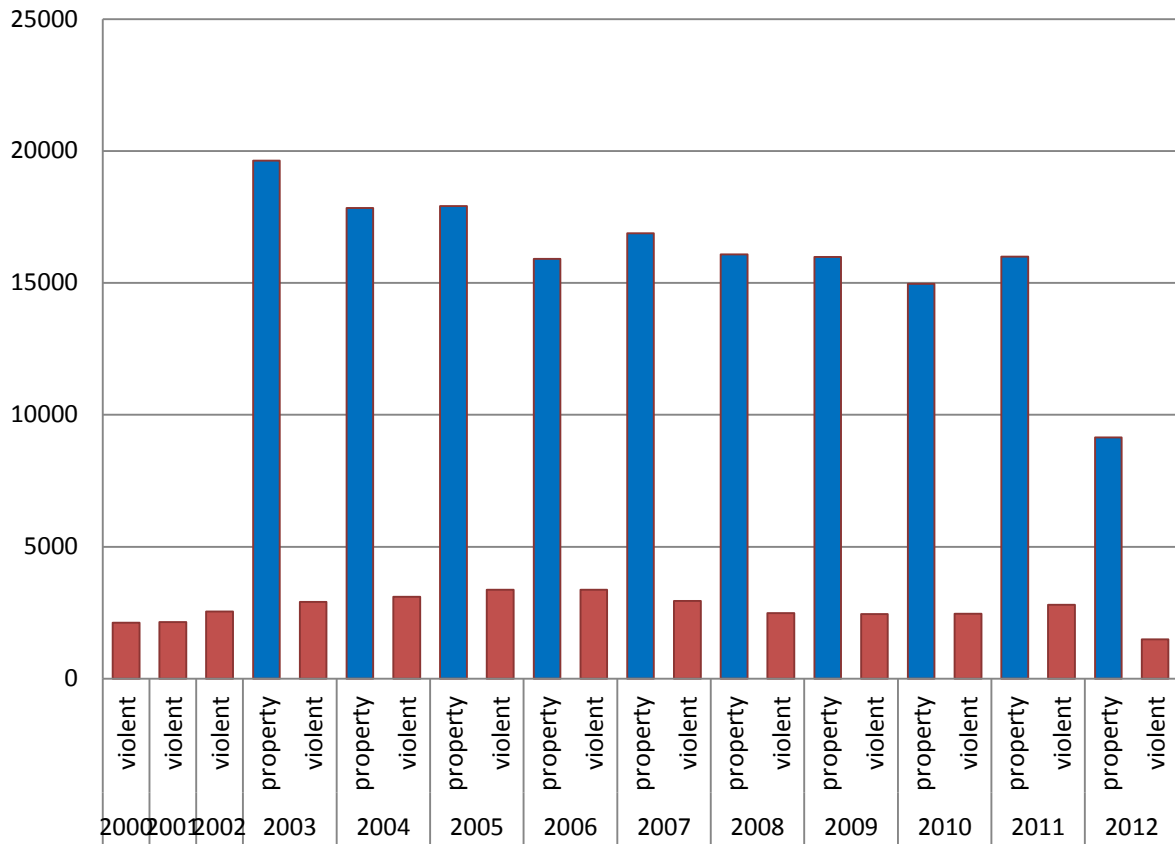
Source: Little Rock Police Department (2013)

Crime and Public Safety

Crime and public safety are issues of particular importance to these neighborhoods, both for the direct manifestation of crime itself and for its indirect consequences. Whether people feel safe in their community comprises an essential feature of healthy and thriving neighborhoods and is related to other efforts at neighborhood improvement. Residents who feel unsafe in their neighborhood are sometimes less likely to come together to solve problems (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Residents who have the means to move out of areas they consider unsafe may do so, as may local businesses. Potential investors also consider safety in making economic development investment decisions (Greenberg, Verma, Dillman, & Chaskin, 2010).

Crime, both property crime and violent crime, are of special concern to residents in these neighborhoods. Fear of crime can stimulate and accelerate neighborhood decline by encouraging residents to withdraw physically and psychologically from community life, resulting in a commensurate decline in a neighborhood's social capital (Skogan, 1986). On the other hand, as social capital in these neighborhoods increases, violent crime is likely to decrease in these neighborhoods (Burchfield & Silver, 2013).

The aggregate number of property and violent crimes in these Neighborhood Alert Center's service area is displayed in figure 3. These data represent only those crimes reported in these neighborhoods and then only when a reported crime matches an address that falls within a particular Neighborhood Alert Center's service area. The total number of reported crimes within

Table 5. Total Number of Referrals Accepted for Investigation, Pulaski County

Region	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013*
East	7	1	322	432	533	526	382
Jacksonville	20	10	442	771	774	817	577
North	35	21	621	903	958	1,057	818
South	3,178	3,206	1,571	1,009	972	949	721
Southwest	3	1	624	603	672	721	506
Total	3,243	3,239	3,580	3,718	3,909	4,070	3,004

*As of October 31, 2013
Source: Arkansas Department of Human Services (2013)

the Neighborhood Alert Center boundaries, both violent and property crimes is 194,581 from 2000 to 2012 (Little Rock Police Department [LRPD], 2013).[4] From these data, there is a definite downward trend in crime, albeit a gradual trend. For property crime, there was a slow, steady decrease from 2003 to 2012. A similar pattern is evident for violent crime, which increases from 2000 to 2006, then begins a gradual decline through 2012. Overall, crime rates for most of these service areas are on the decline; though some areas are experiencing greater rates of decline than others, nearly every service area is experiencing a reduction in crime.

Social Services

A final assessment, though by proxy only, is the service area's social services. Using these figures as illustrative of the issue's potential presence in Little Rock neighborhoods, the number of child-welfare investigations initiated by the Arkansas Department of Human Services, Division of Children and Family Services is presented in table 5. These figures of importance are for only those cases occurring in southern Pulaski County, which encompasses all Neighborhood Alert Center service areas (and more). These social service data trends present information on child welfare issues that provides viable information for understanding likely future service considerations for the Neighborhood Alert Center service program, especially when recognizing these services are becoming part of the neighborhood facilitators' responsibilities. Other service areas that need to be considered for future planning for the Neighborhood Alert Center service program are general public health and gerontological services, particularly as elderly homeowners age in place.

Program Recommendations

To meet their full potential, the city needs to make the Neighborhood Alert Centers and the neighborhood facilitators who work in these locations more of a priority in their efforts to serve the citizens of Little Rock. To do so, city officials need to equip, support, and fund Neighborhood Alert Centers and facilitators at a level necessary to ensure their success. Based on this assessment of the Neighborhood Alert Center program, accompanying data, and interviews, the following recommendations were presented to the City of Little Rock's city manager, mayor, and board of directors for their consideration. Because these recommendations were made, the City of Little Rock has considered them, and the status of each is as noted in table 6.

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[4] Data on both violent and property crime for the period between 2000 and 2012 are based on LRPD crime statistics (LRPD, 2013).

Table 6. Status of Report Recommendations

Recommendation	Status
Create a defined administrative official/designee to connect Facilitators to their central division and with whom s/he can work with directly and consult regularly for guidance and direction.	The Department of Housing and Neighborhood Programs has a clear departmental structure that is understood across the department; all Resource Specialists report to a single Supervisor in the Department.
Rename the Neighborhood Alert Center facilities.	The centers have all been renamed "Neighborhood Resource Centers" and signage updated.
Provide a new job title to the Neighborhood Facilitators.	The job title has been changed to "Resource Specialist" and was effective City-wide in 2015.
Recognize changed service provision needs for neighborhoods and changing duties based on these transformations.	Community Oriented Police Services and Community Oriented Police Officers have been assigned for coverage at most Neighborhood Resource Centers. Staff is investigating the installation of computer kiosks at Neighborhood Resource Centers for use by residents. Resource Specialists have partnered with the American Cancer Society to receive training to become Community Health Advisors. All Resource Specialists have obtained Notary Public commissions.
Cultivate organizational culture to impress upon Neighborhood Facilitators that these are "mini-City Halls" and they are "community ambassadors" for neighborhood service areas.	Customer service training has been provided by Next Level Training. Also, Resource Specialists disseminate information regarding other Departments within the City when appropriate.
Provide assistance to Neighborhood Facilitators through volunteer associations.	This effort is ongoing and varied. The Department is reviewing a possible partnership with the "Arkansas Workforce Center at Little Rock" to allow centers to be utilized as job training sites.
Expand centers to unserved areas.	One Resource Center was moved to a new location and another was re-opened after being closed for several years.
Provide Neighborhood Facilitators with discretionary budgets.	Resource Specialists are provided a budget to carry out specific activities and are given the autonomy to purchase items while working with neighborhood volunteers. Resource Specialists have more autonomy now than prior to the study.
Provide continued training to Neighborhood Facilitators.	Training efforts are ongoing, primarily in the customer service arena, to Resource Specialists.
Rotate Neighborhood Facilitators to other areas.	Resource Specialists have increased their efforts to collaborate, but a full rotation is not being pursued.

Source: E. Cox (personal communication, March 1, 2016)

Conclusion

This assessment project illustrates the blending together of practitioner experience and expertise with academic researchers' knowledge in an applied setting; though often wished for, it is not often accomplished successfully. Yet, one of the roles of an urban university such as UALR is to foster closer, mutually beneficial, relationships with the community it serves (Cox, 2000). As with its peer institutions, UALR has committed itself to greater engagement in the Little Rock community and has thus become "integral to the social, cultural, and economic well-being of the community" (Friedman, Perry, & Menendez, 2014, p. 1). Friedman et al. (2014) underscore the importance of universities to communities' well-being, "[u]nderstanding that their fortunes are tied in part to those of their neighbors and physical surroundings, many have expanded their efforts to engage new partners and address pressing community issues (p. 1)." Institutions of higher education play active roles in shaping the physical and social environments of their communities. As urban universities are "grounded in place," their commitment to a place is long-term and manifests itself in many ways by contributing, as in this case, to the stabilizing of fragile neighborhoods, creating a sense of place in these neighborhoods, promoting safety and security, and engaging issues of importance across communities (Friedman et al., 2014, p. 16).

With the interdependence of urban universities and their surrounding communities, relationships between an urban university and its community must be complementary and symbiotic. An urban university is a permanent economic fixture in the community; as such these institutions are significant contributors to a city's economy (Steinacker, 2005). Leaders of urban universities are realizing that their institutions must be active participants in their communities (Shaffer & Wright, 2010). This assessment provides an example of how the university and community, through the collaboration of academics and practitioners, can cooperate to provide an insightful and meaningful evaluation study with practical implications. The changes implemented by the city point to the benefits of enlisting an outside evaluation to generate viable, feasible recommendations about the program.

Through this collaborative research relationship, researchers were able to accommodate the assessment needs of the city. For example, the utility of the comparative city service assessment proved especially important to practitioners for demonstrating other strategies currently in use as well as providing substantive evidence for many of the recommendations stemming from this program assessment. As well, the incorporation of city officials and employees into the assessment process permitted researchers to target the assessment accordingly. In so doing, the assessment focused on the program, its employees, community constituents, and the intra-organizational dynamics of the program.

Based on this collaborative/cooperative approach, the assessment was able to provide information to support these recommendations and reinforce the need for these centers as well as the realization that these centers are essential to Little Rock neighborhoods. In fact, one of the more tangible "discoveries" emerged because of this tailored approach to assessment, i.e., the City of Little Rock enjoys an organized neighborhood association network largely due to the functions and services provided through the Neighborhood Alert Center program. Finally, these recommendations were offered as viable, implementable strategies, and, to its credit, the City of Little Rock has largely acted on most of these recommendations that likely will improve, enhance, and sustain this valuable city service and program.

Disclosure Statement

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Author Biographies

Hunter Bacot is a professor of public administration at the University of Arkansas Little Rock. His research interests are environmental policy and state and local politics and policy. He has published in various political science and public administration journals on environmental policy, elections, legislative affairs, and urban policy and management. He has a BA in political science from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, a MPA from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, and a PhD in political science from the University of Tennessee.

Christopher Diaz is a legislative analyst with the Arkansas General Assembly's Bureau of Legislative Research. He previously served as a research associate with the Institute of Government at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. He holds a BA in government from the University of Texas at Austin and a PhD in political science from Texas A&M University.

Bruce T. Moore is the City of Little Rock city manager. Prior to that appointment in 2002, he served in a variety of capacities with the City of Little Rock, including assistant to the mayor and assistant to the city manager. He is a member of the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), Arkansas City Manager's Association (ACMA), president of the National Forum of Black Public Administrators (NFBPA) Board of Directors, Henderson State University Board of Trustees, Little Rock Regional Chamber Board of Directors, Downtown Little Rock Partnership Executive Board, and the St. Vincent Health System Board of Directors. He has been the recipient of the Just Communities of Arkansas Humanitarian Award, one of Arkansas Business' "40 Under 40," and the United States Army Commendation Medal/Operation Desert Storm. He has completed the Senior Executive in State and Local Government Program at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. He has an MPA from Arkansas State University and a BS from Henderson State University.

Bryan Day is the executive director of the Little Rock Port Authority. Prior to assuming this position in 2014, he spent 20 years working for the City of Little Rock. With the City of Little Rock, he served as the assistant city manager and director of Little Rock Parks and Recreation. He is a board member on the Arkansas Oklahoma Port Operators Association and the Inland Rivers, Ports and Terminals Association. He participates in the National Waterways Council, the Southeast Economic Development Council, and the Inland Rivers, Ports and Terminals Association. Bryan serves as a member of the St. Louis Federal Reserve Transportation Advisory Council, the Arkansas District Export Council, and is active in the local community, having served on numerous boards and commissions. He received his BA and MPA from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock.