Appreciative Inquiry and Aging in Community
Unlocking the Strengths of our Neighborhoods

Background

At Neighborhood Centers we believe that community development is dependent first and foremost on meaningful community engagement. You cannot design a program or plan a community center without first spending the time to "build" a consensus and commitment within the community itself. Neighborhood Centers' process for doing "appreciative" community development follows the 5-D cycle of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) – Definition, Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny. NCI has been engaging Houston neighborhoods in this process since 2005 and has completed hundreds of AI interviews and several follow-up summits or forums.

Neighborhood Centers has been awarded a 3-year grant from the Administration on Aging starting in 2009 to implement a Houston Aging in Place Innovations (HAPI) project in three Houston neighborhoods – Fifth Ward, Magnolia Park/East End and Sunnyside. Guided by the *Aging Agenda for Houston/ Harris County*, HAPI is a partnership with the Houston Health and Human Services Dept., Harris County Area Agency on Aging, the Care for Elders partnership, the YWCA, Interfaith Ministries and Gateway to Care. By serving concentrations of low-income, minority older adults in as they retire in these neighborhoods, the goal of HAPI is for older adults to achieve their optimal individual levels of functioning and support needed to age in their home neighborhood comfortably.

The 1st objective of the HAPI goal is that neighborhood aging-in-place assets and gaps related to the *Aging Agenda* are measured. To achieve this, we proposed that the first 4-6 months of project year one be devoted to an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and Asset Mapping (AM) assessment of three project neighborhoods, focusing on elder-care issues articulated in the *Aging Agenda*. The AI and AM neighborhood assessments will:

1. engage community residents, service providers, businesses, churches, schools and others in conversations about creating communities that support aging in place;

2. identify neighborhood assets and gaps – including individual, organizational, and community strengths that will form the foundation for building an elder-friendly neighborhood environment;

3. improve understanding of residents' preferences and needs;

4. determine current capacity for healthy aging and readiness to improve personal and neighborhood conditions; and

5. identify neighborhood projects to be facilitated by Elder Care Action Teams.

In conjunction with these neighborhood assessments, NCI will form Elder Care Action Teams (E-CATs) in each neighborhood composed of residents, older adults and caregivers, service providers, case managers and members of community development groups – or formed as an extension of an existing neighborhood development or redevelopment group. Facilitated by the Neighborhood Case Manager, Community Health Worker and Senior Center Specialists, and led by a neighborhood elder as their chair and spokesperson, the E-CATs will:

1. Actively carry out recommendations from the *Aging Agenda* and recent neighborhood assessments such as the HAPI Appreciative Inquiries, by joining existing neighborhood action groups, both formal and informal, to collaboratively address the greatest neighborhood service gaps and facilitate better coordination of all service delivery to elders;

2. Organize and/or participate in local advocacy efforts – such as voter registration, speaking to City Council – to promote *Aging Agenda* issues such as safety and security, housing, transportation and city infrastructure improvements (e.g., street lights, sidewalks); and

3. Evaluate the progress of HAPI strategies in their neighborhood and report status to the Steering Committee and Project Manager, who can make most decisions on their own but also report to NCI Management and a Board Committee for guidance and support.

Other Components of the Neighborhood Aging Agenda Assessment

In addition to the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) component of this overall Neighborhood *Aging Agenda* Assessment, the following steps will be taken:

▪ After the AI interview, respondents will be given a survey questionnaire based on the *Aging Agenda*, and asked by their interviewer to complete it within a day or two and return in a postage-paid self-addressed return envelope; the same questionnaire will be distributed to an equal number of non-interviewed neighborhood seniors directly and through their support networks to provide a comparison group;

▪ Project neighborhood providers of services to seniors will be identified through both conventional means (resource directories) and through the Appreciative Inquiries, and they will be surveyed to determine their connections with other service providers, based in part on the frequency and strength of referrals with other providers; the same survey, along with Appreciative Inquiry findings, will be used to construct Neighborhood Asset Maps for use in identifying and removing barriers to referrals and service access generally; and

▪ Project neighborhood senior center participants, and an equal number of non-participants, will be interviewed to complete the OARS survey. The Older Americans' Resources and Services (OARS) Multidimensional Functional Assessment Questionnaire is a relatively brief, valid, reliable and easy to administer instrument which yields information permitting assessment of overall individual

functional status and service utilization. It provides valid assessments of personal functional status on five dimensions: social, economic, mental health, physical health, and self-care capacity. A services section provides information regarding the individual's current service use and needs.

Getting Started with Appreciative Inquiry

What follows is the Houston Aging in Place Innovations (HAPI) adaptation of Neighborhood Centers' framework and steps to facilitating an appreciative, strength-based community or neighborhood assessment and engagement effort. It is an outline and "how-to guide" that is designed to identify and leverage within each HAPI project neighborhood – also known as Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs) – their community's existing strengths and resources to make their neighborhood a place of renewed hope and opportunity for residents aging in place. These steps are summarized as follows:

1. Identify scope of inquiry – what do we hope to find out?
2. Develop interview protocol, summary sheet and process for compiling interview data
3. Identify and train interviewers for each neighborhood
4. Determine who you want to interview
5. Set target dates for completing interviews and holding Neighborhood Action Forums

The HAPI Appreciative Inquiry Process and Timeline

HAPI Appreciative Inquiry and Asset Mapping Process Model		Project Month						
Project Stage	**Outcomes**	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Definition	3 NORCs selected: 5th Ward, Magnolia Park/ East End, Sunnyside	■						
	Neighborhood-based *Aging Agenda* survey designed	■	■					
	Neighborhood Service Provider survey designed	■						
	Basic neighborhood Asset Maps (AM) completed		■	■				
Discovery	Appreciative Inquiry (AI) questions finalized, interviewers selected	■	■					
	AI participants identified, recruited, assigned and interviews begun			■	■			
	AI interviews completed, compiled by neighborhood and summarized			■	■			
	Neighborhood *Aging Agenda* survey completed and analyzed				■			
	Enhanced AMs completed from Service Provider survey and AI				■			
Neighborhood Action Forums and E-CATS Launch								
Dream	NAFs planned and organized, participants selected and recruited			■	■			
	NAFs completed and results summarized into collages and reports					■	■	
	Neighborhood E-CATS developed					■		
Design	Establish 'Design Teams' with E-CATS foundation						■	
	Neighborhood *Aging Agenda* Action Plans completed						■	
Destiny	E-CATS organize, select leadership, set objectives						■	■
	E-CATS plan, organize, and implement neighborhood projects							>
	Monthly Activity Level	4	4	5	6	7	6	3

Definition
Defining the community of focus and determining what you hope to learn

Each of the three HAPI neighborhoods has its own history, traditions, current conditions and both official and informal leadership that residents depend on for guidance and support, especially the elderly. These are some of the oldest neighborhoods in Houston, consisting mostly of very modest single-family homes built a generation ago, with few apartment complexes.

Fifth Ward – settled in 1866 as the first Freedmans African-American neighborhood in Houston. Its 2000 population of 23,784 was 17% (3,995) age 60+, 30% of household heads were age 65+ and 57% of those age 55+ had income under 150% of poverty. Of the 2,463 households headed by someone age 65+, 60% are owner occupied and 40% are renters.

Magnolia Park/ East End – first settled in 1909, this was one of the first Mexican-American neighborhoods in Houston. Its 2000 population of 22,512 was 11% (2,535) age 60+, 19% of household heads were age 65+ and 44% of those age 55+ had income under 150% of poverty. Of the 1,139 households headed by someone age 65+, 81% are owner occupied and 19% are renters.

Sunnyside – first settled in 1915, after World War II it was redeveloped as Houston's first African-American suburb. Its 2000 population of 25,242 was 21% (5,280) age 60+, 33% of household heads were age 65+ and 43% of those age 55+ had income under 150% of poverty. Of the 3,086 households headed by someone age 65+, 79% are owner occupied and 21% are renters.

Focus on the *Aging Agenda* of Houston and Harris County

In addition to defining the community of focus, it is also critical to determine what we want or need to learn about the community we are seeking to engage, as this will guide the questions we ask. At Neighborhood Centers, we have chosen to focus on discovering the current strengths of the communities we work in as well as learning about best practices for community engagement and hopes that residents have for their communities' future. As such, our interview protocols are comprised of questions designed to draw out these responses and encourage new thinking and reflection in these areas by local residents.

The focus of the HAPI project is on the *Aging Agenda for Houston and Harris County*, completed in 2008 by a collaboration led by City of Houston Health & Human Services Dept. (HHSD), identifies needs, articulates visions and recommends actions to improve the health and well-being of elders. Organized into **eight domains** of long-term care, the vision statements capture what is most needed.

1. **Health and Well-Being** – accessible and integrated health, medical and mental health services that improve the quality of life for seniors.

2. **Access to Quality Car**e – family/ informal caregivers of seniors are trained and have all supports needed to provide quality care; both they and paid in-home care providers are more competent and reliable.

3. **Basic Needs** – nutritious, affordable food and home utilities payment support.

4. **Housing** – adequate, affordable housing.

5. **Transportation and Mobility** – affordable, reliable, safe transportation options for seniors and neighborhoods with safe pedestrian and motorized mobility.

6. **Safety and Security** – protection from fire and crime, home safety hazards, elder abuse and mistreatment, and financial fraud.

7. **Civic Engagement, Volunteerism and Employment** – older adults have many opportunities for civic engagement, employment and volunteerism as they choose.

8. **Spirituality, Culture, Recreation, Lifelong Learning** – elders have culturally appropriate social, recreational, education and religious opportunities to enhance their quality of life.

Discovery
Conducting a community inquiry process through one-on-one interviews and larger Neighborhood-Community Action Forums

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Once the community and topics of inquiry have been defined, the next step is to develop a set of interview questions that can be used as a guide for conducting a structured dialogue with the elderly and other stakeholders in the HAPI project neighborhoods. The selection of questions to be used is critical because these questions will begin to shape how community members see themselves and their community. According to Appreciative Inquiry theory, people and/or organizations move in the direction of the questions they ask, therefore it is important that the topic of investigation is well-defined and that interview questions solicit positive responses focused on discovering root causes of success and best practices. *See Attachment 1: HAPI Appreciative Inquiry Questionnaire*

Interviewees. While there is no magic number of interviews that "should" be conducted, based on our experience in similar Appreciative Inquiry interviewing, a rough total of 50 interviews in each project area neighborhood would be sufficient to establish a finish line – when additional interviews are increasingly unlikely to differ very much from already

completed interviews. Because we seek to learn about the broader strengths our communities possess, we are purposeful about interviewing a wide cross-section of community members so that we capture many different perspectives.

The following chart depicts the anticipated interview participation in each of the three HAPI project neighborhoods.

#	%	Project Neighborhood Appreciative Inquiry Sample Component
15	30	Senior Center participants – NCI and YWCA
15	30	Home-bound seniors – Interfaith Ministries and YWCA Home Delivered Meals, SASS
10	20	Family and informal caregivers to the above populations – NCI, IMGH, SASS, YWCA
5	10	Senior services providers working in the neighborhood at least one year
5	10	Resident neighborhood development/ re-development leaders, activists, clergy
50	100	Total Interviews per neighborhood

Interviewees are identified and recruited by senior center staff, home delivered meals staff and volunteers, and other social service organization staff who are familiar with the neighborhood, its residents, and the formal and informal leadership structure that is found in every neighborhood. Recruitment is finalized when the interviewee signs an interview approval and release form that includes basic contact information – full name, address, primary and back-up phone numbers. From these forms a neighborhood interview list is created.

Interviewers. Individuals to conduct interviews could include HAPI Steering Committee members, staff and volunteers from the organizations they represent, student volunteers or interns, and senior center participants. Seniors recruited as interviewers should also be considered as candidates for membership on neighborhood Elder Care Action Teams (E-CATS). Interviewers are identified and recruited by HAPI project staff and other NCI staff who are familiar with the Appreciative Inquiry process. It is preferable that most interviewers either be residents of, or workers in the neighborhoods to which they will be assigned, and that they are at least familiar with the neighborhood. They also should have the time and motivation to conduct and complete their interviews on an expedited schedule.

About 5-10 interviewers may be needed per neighborhood, with each interviewer responsible for 3-10 people to interview and to summarize their responses in writing. Most of the interviewers assigned to the Magnolia Park neighborhood will need to be fluent in Spanish and be able to record in English. Each Appreciative Inquiry interview can be expected to take 60 to 90 minutes to complete, depending on the comfort-level, alertness and talkativeness of the interviewee, with another 30 to 45 minutes needed afterward to complete the written record. Interviewers will attend a training session,

provided by experienced NCI staff, that lasts about two hours and includes practice interviews and recordings.

Interviews. After training, interviewers are assigned to their interviewees. The interviewers then telephone their interviewees, introduce themselves, explain again the purpose of the requested interview, and schedule an appointment at a time and place most convenient to the interviewee. It is necessary that the one-on-one interview be conducted in person – not over the phone – and privately, although for the elderly the presence of a spouse or other caregiver may be very appropriate to facilitate communication and memory recall. At the conclusion of the interview, the interviewee is given the Aging Agenda Survey Questionnaire with a postage-paid return envelop and is asked to complete and mail in the questionnaire within a day or two. After leaving the interview, the interviewer should complete the summary recording within the same day or at the earliest time possible in order to capture as much of the essence of the interview as possible.

Neighborhood Action Forums
Dream, Design and Destiny

Neighborhood Centers uses a two-stage approach to the community discovery process: one-on-one interviews and community forums. We have found one-on-one interviews to be a great way to build relationships and gain initial understanding of community strengths, hopes and aspirations. Conducting interviews has proven to be an invaluable tool for our community-based staff to strengthen and/or build new relationships with community stakeholders - relationships which are often vital to the success of their on-going community development work.

Once the initial round of one-on-one interviews has been conducted, we organize a neighborhood community forum whereby those who have previously been interviewed are invited to participate alongside members of the community-at-large. The forum utilizes a more focused interview protocol to engage participants as a community in identifying what their collective strengths are and in developing a vision for what their community would look like at its best.

While the one-on-one interviews are useful in providing a big picture view of the community and in building individual relationships, the larger community forum provides a mechanism for engaging a greater number of people in the process itself and allows for momentum to be created around a shared vision of the future. The forum allows everyone to have the opportunity to interview and be interviewed – providing opportunities for neighbors to meet and learn what each other value and aspire to and reinforcing relationships and connections across all sectors of the community. The forum

is where the neighborhood Elder Care Action Team emerges and begins taking on its identity, purpose and goals.

During the community forum, paired interviews are combined with small group work to identify the neighborhood's collective strengths, root causes for success and most valued characteristics – those things that represent the true essence of the community – that its members want to ensure continue to be an integral part of its future (these are referred to as the "positive core" in Appreciative Inquiry theory).

Dream
Creating a collective vision of what the neighborhood would look like at its best

Once the community's strengths and root causes for success are identified, the next step is to begin to imagine or "dream" about what the future would look like at its very best. What makes Appreciative Inquiry unique is that these dreams are grounded in the reality of the best practices already identified – so while a truly extraordinary vision may be developed, it is still achievable because it is based on extending existing best practices.

We approach creating these collective visions for neighborhoods at their best by integrating "dream" activities into our community forums. Participants are guided through an imaging exercise in which they individually begin to envision their community in new, different and better ways. They then share these visions in small groups and work together to create a collage (using magazine images and original artwork) that represents their collective vision. Once the collages are created, each group shares its vision with the rest of the participants. Because we work in mixed language communities, and with participants that often have lower literacy levels, we have found the collage activity to be a great success. Participants are able to increase their creativity when they are not confined to using words to express themselves. It also allows for individuals who have never before been asked or included in discussions about what they want for their community, to have a voice and share their visions.

Design
Creating a structure for making the vision a reality

The next step is to take the images of the future that have been created and put them into a format and structure that allows them to be acted upon. We have done this by recruiting a smaller group of volunteers (10-20) from the community forums to work as a "design team" to analyze the collages, identify areas of priority and put the visions for these priority areas into statements (also known as provocative propositions).

In the HAPI Project, this design team would be the foundation of the neighborhood Elder Care Action Teams. Each team's task is to interpret the images in the collages – along

with all the other information gathered during the neighborhood's Appreciative Inquiry and Asset Mapping process – and translate them into written statements that can be used as a guide for action planning. Vision and goal statements should be created for highest priority areas identified and be written in alignment with the Aging Agenda. Leveraging the community's existing strengths and pushing beyond past and present efforts should be emphasized. They should be compelling and descriptive enough to be able to serve as broad guides for neighborhood project design and implementation. Another function of the design team is to begin to brainstorm community action initiatives for each of the priority areas. These draft initiatives for each project neighborhood are then reviewed by the HAPI Steering Committee as recommendations for moving forward.

Destiny
Implementing and sustaining the vision

With the design team's work completed, it is now time to make the visions and goals a reality. This can be done a number of different ways, depending on the level of engagement and the number of committed community participants. And in the HAPI Project this is where the neighborhood Elder Care Action Teams start to develop more definitively, to take on their own identity within the larger project, and take on organizational and leadership structure.

One of the ways in which Neighborhood Centers sustains community engagement is by continuing through the Appreciative Inquiry cycle by holding annual check-ins or review sessions to share accomplishments, identify ways to take our achievements to greater heights and engage new participants in the process. Through these sessions we are able to revisit the continued relevance of our community visions and goals by exploring the impacts of new trends in our communities on those visions and capturing new wishes for how to make our engagement process more effective.

Community Voices Reports

Community Voices reports are a tool Neighborhood Centers has used to report and share the findings of our community engagement processes. Following each of our appreciative community engagement efforts, we have published brief reports on the strengths and hopes of each community and then disseminated them widely. We have found these reports to be an excellent tool for shifting and reframing the way in which our communities are seen both internally and externally.

Attachment 1: HAPI Appreciative Inquiry Interview Questionnaire

Attachment 2: HAPI Neighborhood *Aging Agenda* Survey Questionnaire