

CIVIC INNOVATION SERIES • STATEWIDE SYNTHESIS REPORT  
California Volunteers Neighbor-to-Neighbor Initiative

# Neighbors by Design

What Six California Communities Teach Us About Building Social Connection, Civic Trust, and Community Resilience

Lessons from the Neighbor-to-Neighbor initiative in Richmond, San Francisco, Nevada City, Paradise, Riverside, and Long Beach, California.

|                                     |                                  |                                   |                                    |                                     |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <b>~25,000</b><br>RESIDENTS ENGAGED | <b>~920+</b><br>COMMUNITY EVENTS | <b>15,000+</b><br>VOLUNTEER HOURS | <b>6</b><br>CALIFORNIA COMMUNITIES | <b>50+</b><br>PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|

## Executive Summary

Between 2024 and 2026, six California communities participated in the Neighbor-to-Neighbor initiative, a statewide program administered by California Volunteers and the Governor’s Office of Planning and Research designed to strengthen social connection, civic participation, and community resilience at the neighborhood level. The communities varied dramatically in geography, demographics, size, and the challenges they faced. What they produced in common was a body of evidence that social connection can be intentionally cultivated, that trust grows through repeated interaction, and that local government has a meaningful and practical role in creating the conditions for both.

Taken together, the six communities engaged roughly 25,000 residents across nearly 920 community events and generated more than 15,000 documented volunteer hours. Across every community, post-program data showed measurable increases in the depth of neighbor-to-neighbor relationships, the breadth of civic participation, and community preparedness capacity. In Paradise, 88% of survey respondents reported feeling like a member of their neighborhood, and 87% had exchanged emergency contact information with a neighbor. In San Francisco, the share of neighbors who help each other at least once a month increased by 32 percentage points. In Nevada City, three self-organized preparedness pods formed without any City prompting, the clearest possible indicator of durable community capacity.

These findings should matter to every local government in California and beyond. Not because the Neighbor-to-Neighbor model is the only approach to social connection, but because these

communities demonstrated that the gap between neighbors who live near each other and those who actually know, trust, and show up for each other is one public investment that can be closed.

The major findings of this synthesis report are:

- **Social connection functions as community infrastructure**, its absence has measurable consequences for resilience, preparedness, and civic health.
- **People come for activities but stay for relationships**. Hands-on, side-by-side programming reliably outperforms lecture- and information-based formats as a vehicle for relationship-building.
- **Trust is built through repetition, not singular events**. Recurring series in familiar spaces yield deeper outcomes than one-time activations at the same cost.
- **Resident leadership produces stronger outcomes than institutional outreach alone**. Programs that center residents as co-designers, connectors, and leaders generate trust and sustainability that City-led programming cannot fully substitute.
- **Trusted community partners are not supplementary — they are the primary mechanism for reaching residents who have historically had limited trust in government**.
- **Neighbor-to-neighbor networks directly strengthen emergency preparedness**. Social connection and preparedness are mutually reinforcing goals, not competing ones.
- **Belonging can be intentionally designed**. Structured conversation, shared creative work, bilingual programming, and consistent physical spaces all produced measurable increases in residents' sense of neighborhood belonging.

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## Introduction: Why Social Connection Matters

In the years following the COVID-19 pandemic, local governments across the United States confronted a challenge that no single department was designed to address: the informal social infrastructure of neighborhoods had eroded. The casual acquaintances, shared routines, and spontaneous mutual support that hold communities together had weakened during the pandemic's years of mandated isolation, and they had not automatically returned when public health restrictions lifted.

The research context had been building for years before that. In 2023, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy declared loneliness and social isolation a public health epidemic, noting associations between chronic disconnection and significantly elevated risks of heart disease, stroke, dementia, and premature death. The advisory's clinical framing was new; its social finding was not. Communities with strong neighbor-to-neighbor relationships have long been documented as safer, more civically engaged, more economically resilient, and better equipped to survive both slow-moving crises and sudden disasters.

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That last point is not incidental to the work documented in this report. Every community that participated in the Neighbor-to-Neighbor initiative faced some version of a preparedness challenge: Richmond and San Francisco, with aging infrastructure and growing climate vulnerability; Nevada City and Paradise, with wildfire risk acute enough to be existential; Riverside, with a community bearing some of the heaviest pollution burden in Southern California; Long Beach, adjacent to the nation's most active port complex and facing heat, flooding, and air quality stressors simultaneously. For all of them, social connection was not a soft community-building goal. It was a survival strategy.

This is the context in which California Volunteers and the Governor's Office of Planning and Research launched the Neighbor-to-Neighbor initiative: a recognition that strengthening community social infrastructure was both urgent and addressable, and that local government had a direct role to play in creating the conditions for it.

We live in an area that has been designated an extremely high-risk wildfire area. Through the Neighbor-to-Neighbor Grant, we were able to supply a starter emergency go-bag to each residence. The reaction from neighbors has been extremely positive.

— GREENBRIAR NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL MEMBER, RICHMOND

## Understanding the Neighbor-to-Neighbor Initiative

The Neighbor-to-Neighbor program provided competitive grant funding for local governments and community organizations to design and implement neighborhood engagement programs tailored to their communities' specific needs. The program established a shared framework, centering social connection, trust, belonging, and resilience, while allowing significant flexibility in how each community pursued those goals. That flexibility was not a design concession; it was a design feature. A program that worked in post-disaster Paradise would not look the same as one that worked in a multilingual urban neighborhood in San Francisco.

The six communities in this cohort illustrate the range of what Neighbor-to-Neighbor could be:

| COMMUNITY            | LEAD AGENCY                                                               | PRIMARY FOCUS                                             | PARTICIPANTS   | EVENTS |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|----------------|--------|
| <b>Richmond</b>      | City Manager's Office /<br>17 Neighborhood<br>Councils                    | Resident-led N2N social<br>connection + preparedness      | 4,364+         | 120    |
| <b>San Francisco</b> | Dept. of Disability &<br>Aging Services /<br>Community Living<br>Campaign | Older adults; bilingual (English<br>& Chinese) connection | 1,335 sessions | 70+    |

| COMMUNITY          | LEAD AGENCY                                               | PRIMARY FOCUS                                                       | PARTICIPANTS   | EVENTS  |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|---------|
| <b>Nevada City</b> | Office of Emergency Services                              | Wildfire preparedness through neighborhood social connection        | 192+ formal    | 35      |
| <b>Paradise</b>    | Recreation & Park District (27 partners)                  | Post-Camp Fire community rebuilding through arts, ecology, wellness | 11,817         | 620     |
| <b>Riverside</b>   | Dept. of Housing & Human Services / Love Riverside / RCHF | Blue Zones health equity + resident leadership in Arlanza           | 357 documented | 8+ CIPs |
| <b>Long Beach</b>  | Office of Climate Action & Sustainability                 | Climate resilience + neighborhood connection in 4 districts         | ~6,700         | 65      |

Community participation overview, 2024–2026. Paradise figure reflects total program engagement across 27 partners. San Francisco figure reflects participant sessions. Nevada City formal engagement does not include an estimated ~235 additional informally reached residents. Riverside figure reflects documented Arlanza Community Garden CIP attendance.

What these programs share is not a programming model but a conviction: that the social fabric of neighborhoods can be intentionally strengthened, and that local government has both the capacity and the responsibility to invest in doing so. The following findings, drawn from across all six communities, translate that conviction into evidence-based practice.

## Major Findings

### 01 Social Connection Functions as Community Infrastructure

Infrastructure is what communities depend on without necessarily thinking about it, until it fails. Roads, utilities, public safety systems, and stormwater management are understood as public goods that require investment, maintenance, and institutional care. Social connection belongs in this category. Every community in this cohort began with the same diagnosis: residents lived near one another without knowing one another, and the consequences extended well beyond loneliness.

In Nevada City, where wildfire risk is both acute and immediate, the connection between social infrastructure and survival readiness was the program’s explicit premise. At the start of the grant period, only two Firewise communities existed across the entire city, leaving most neighborhoods without coordinated prevention efforts. Residents could not coordinate evacuation or check on vulnerable neighbors because they had not built the relationships that coordination requires. The program’s investment in social connection was, in the most direct sense, a preparedness investment: by the close of the grant period, three new Firewise communities had formed, and three organic neighborhood preparedness pods had emerged, self-organized, unplanned, and self-sustaining.

In Paradise, the link was equally concrete. When 87% of post-program survey respondents reported having a neighbor’s emergency contact information, that statistic registered differently in a

community that had survived California's deadliest wildfire. In Richmond, where pre-program surveys found that 75.9% of residents did not know what disaster resources were available and 77% lacked an evacuation plan, the program treated emergency preparedness not as a separate track but as a natural extension of the neighbor-to-neighbor relationships being built through community events.

The implication for local governments is direct: social connection is not a peripheral program outcome. It is a form of public infrastructure whose absence has consequences as material as any road needing repaving or a pipe needing replacing.

## **02 People Come for Activities but Stay for Relationships**

Across all six communities, the most effective programming was not the programming most explicitly about connection. It was the programming that gave neighbors something to do together. The distinction matters because it shapes design: programs built around shared activity produce different outcomes than programs built around shared information.

In Long Beach, small hands-on workshops, sewing, mending, eco-poetry, phytogram-making, consistently outperformed larger informational events as venues for relationship-building. In Paradise, watercolor and acrylic painting classes became one of the program's strongest connection accelerators, with participants who arrived to make art leaving with plans to meet again. In San Francisco, structured conversation prompts at neighborhood gatherings transformed attendance figures into relationship formation rates: neighbors arrived as strangers, were asked what they were proud of in their community, and left knowing each other by name. In Riverside, the Arlanza Community Garden became not just an ecological project but a recurring social anchor, a reason to show up, work alongside neighbors, and build the kind of trust that accumulates through repeated shared labor.

This finding has direct implications for program design. Events that attract high attendance but yield only passive participation, lectures, information fairs, general community meetings, are not the same as events that foster lasting relationships. The programs that produced the deepest connections in this cohort were characterized by recurring activity, tangible making or doing, low social stakes, and familiar locations over time. Measuring success by attendance alone will systematically overvalue formats that produce the least durable outcomes.

## **03 Trust Is Built Through Repetition, Not Events**

Every community that produced durable social outcomes invested in recurring programming rather than one-time events. The relationship between repetition and trust formation is not merely intuitive; it is the mechanism by which connection becomes belonging.

In San Francisco, the Health and Wellness programming series, yoga, dance, wellness walks offered month after month in consistent locations, built something that individual neighborhood meetings could not: the accumulated experience of showing up for each other in the same place,

with the same people. Bilingual program days began drawing cross-language attendance not because a single event had broken a cultural barrier but because repeated, low-stakes encounters had made cross-cultural presence feel ordinary. In Richmond, the Health and Wellness Series created weekly programming touchpoints that generated incremental familiarity, knowing faces, names, and small personal details, from which a genuine neighborhood relationship can grow. In Nevada City, City staff identified repeated face-to-face contact as the single most effective outreach mechanism in their older, digitally underserved population, more reliable than any digital channel and more productive than any one-time convening.

Long Beach's post-program reflection was candid about the cost of inconsistency: the program would have benefited from planning overarching themes or series in advance, which would have made programming more cohesive and encouraged repeat participation. The lesson is not that individual events fail; it is that recurring series with clear narrative continuity produce deeper engagement than a calendar of disconnected activities at the same total cost.

For local governments, this finding carries a budgeting and staffing implication: sustained programming is more productive than intensive event-based activation. A smaller number of well-designed recurring series produces stronger community outcomes than a larger number of one-time events.

#### **04 Resident Leadership Produces Stronger Outcomes than Institutional Programming Alone**

In every community where residents were positioned as co-designers, connectors, or program leaders, rather than as audience members or beneficiaries, engagement was deeper, trust formed faster, and outcomes were more durable. Resident leadership is not merely a best practice; it is a distinct category of program design.

Richmond's decentralized model placed all 17 Neighborhood Councils in charge of designing their own programming within a shared framework. The result was programming that genuinely reflected local culture: Atchison Village's composting workshops, Laurel Park's community health walks, Point Richmond's jazz-and-food gatherings. These events would not have emerged from a centrally managed curriculum. Their authenticity drove participation in ways that City-designed programming could not replicate, and the residents who organized them developed civic capacity in the process.

Riverside's Resident Leadership Academy model made resident leadership development the explicit mechanism of program sustainability. Rather than training residents to attend City events, the program trained residents to run neighborhood conversations, design community improvement projects, and advocate for their own neighborhoods' needs. Residents who completed the training became co-designers of the curriculum for the next cohort, a deliberate cycle of leadership transmission that the program expected to outlast the grant period.

In San Francisco, the decision to hire a Bilingual Chinese-English Community Connector, a community member who earned the trust of both English- and Chinese-speaking neighbors, produced cross-cultural participation that no City-designed outreach strategy had previously achieved. The connector was not a translator; she was a bridge, and her presence changed the social dynamics of every event she attended.

## **05 Partnerships Are the Program, Not the Support System**

In every city, the organizations that most effectively extended the program's reach were not the City itself but community-based organizations, nonprofits, and neighborhood groups that already had the trust of specific communities. Treating these partners as implementation contractors rather than co-designers misunderstands what makes them valuable.

Paradise's 27-partner ecosystem is the starkest example of this principle at scale: a recreation district and its partner organizations co-delivered programming across nine neighborhoods in ways that no single agency could have achieved. The ecological nonprofits brought residents who would not have attended a City recreation event. The arts groups brought residents who would not have attended an ecological stewardship event. The overlap, residents who found their way to the program through one partner and discovered others, was the program's most significant community-building mechanism.

In Nevada City, the partnership with Sierra Roots extended the program's equity reach in a way no City department could have replicated on its own. By collaborating with Sierra Roots to develop wallet-sized emergency information cards for unhoused residents, a population almost never served by standard emergency preparedness outreach, the OES demonstrated that inclusive preparedness is achievable when organizations with different trust relationships coordinate around a shared goal.

The practical implication for local governments: invest in partner identification and relationship cultivation before program launch, not as an afterthought during implementation. The quality of the partner ecosystem determines the program's equity and authenticity at least as much as the program design itself.

## **06 Neighbor-to-Neighbor Networks Directly Strengthen Preparedness**

The Neighbor-to-Neighbor initiative was designed to strengthen social connections. What it also produced, in community after community, was improved readiness for the emergencies those communities face.

This is not coincidental. Research on disaster response has consistently found that outcomes in the hours immediately following a disaster depend heavily on the social density of affected neighborhoods: communities where residents know and trust one another mobilize resources faster, share information more accurately, and better account for vulnerable neighbors than those

where residents are strangers. The Neighbor-to-Neighbor initiative's investment in social connection was, in this frame, a direct investment in emergency capacity.

In Nevada City, the three self-organized preparedness pods that formed during the grant period, groups of neighbors checking on each other, coordinating defensible space, sharing resources, and meeting outside of any City-hosted event, represented the program's most significant preparedness outcome precisely because they required no ongoing City facilitation. In Richmond, integrating emergency preparedness into neighborhood social events, go-bag distribution at an annual meeting, FEMA checklists shared at a neighborhood gathering, produced the kind of practical preparedness behavior that formal emergency management workshops rarely achieve with similar populations. In Paradise, a community that had lived through the Camp Fire, 87% of survey respondents reported having a neighbor's emergency contact information, a behavioral outcome that reflects not just program attendance but the internalization of mutual accountability.

## **07 Belonging Can Be Intentionally Designed**

Perhaps the most counterintuitive finding across these six communities is that belonging, often treated as something that either exists in a community or doesn't, responded measurably to specific design interventions. Communities that invested in structured interaction mechanisms, shared creative experiences, bilingual engagement, and consistent physical gathering spaces produced measurable increases in residents' reported sense of belonging, community identity, and civic optimism.

San Francisco's deployment of structured conversation prompts, simple questions like "What is an upside of aging?" and "Share one thing about yourself that would surprise us", at neighborhood gatherings transformed attendance into genuine relationship-building. The prompts worked not because they were therapeutic but because they lowered the social stakes of first encounters and gave strangers a shared task. In Long Beach, the slow fashion programming series created the same dynamic on a larger scale: neighbors arrived not knowing each other, shared a skill, and left with contact information. In Nevada City, the Kenny Alley Suncatchers project, neighbors collaborating to transform a public stairway into a community-made art installation, gave the Excelsior district a visible artifact of shared investment, becoming a source of neighborhood pride and a reason to return.

In Paradise, where 88% of survey respondents reported feeling like a member of their neighborhood despite years of post-disaster fragmentation and displacement, the data reflects a cumulative design outcome: consistent programming, accessible venues, varied entry points, no cost, and 27 partners creating repeated reasons to show up and do something together. Belonging did not happen in Paradise. It was designed.

## Community Innovation Spotlights

While the major findings above reflect patterns across all six communities, each city also produced a distinctive innovation worth examining individually, not simply as a local success story, but as a transferable model for other communities facing similar challenges.

### RICHMOND

#### Decentralized Ownership at Scale

Richmond's decision to distribute full programming authority to all 17 Neighborhood Councils, rather than managing events centrally, produced a citywide initiative that, to each participating community, felt like its own program. The City's role was facilitative: coordinating logistics, connecting councils to resources, and creating cross-council visibility into what was working. Each council's programming reflected its own neighborhood's culture and priorities. The result was a natural experiment in decentralization: Greenbriar, NC, used N2N funds to supply emergency go-bags to every household in a high-risk wildfire zone. Atchison Village integrated CERT-sponsored preparedness with composting workshops. Laurel Park ran health walks. Point Richmond hosted jazz and food gatherings. None of these would have emerged from a centrally designed curriculum, and the resident ownership they generated could not have been created by City staff working alone.

### SAN FRANCISCO

#### Language Access as Social Infrastructure

San Francisco's investment in dedicated bilingual staffing, not translated materials, but human connectors who held trust on both sides of the language divide, produced the cohort's clearest evidence for the relationship between language access and social integration. A Bilingual Chinese-English Community Connector was hired specifically to bridge English- and Chinese-speaking communities in target neighborhoods. Bilingual programming days quickly drew cross-language attendance, and neighbors began attending events conducted in a language not their own, not because the events were translated, but because the social environment felt welcoming. The citywide Meet 6 Neighbors campaign, which placed messaging on 3,000+ MUNI bus ads and generated 7,400 website visits, demonstrated that transit infrastructure can function as social infrastructure when the right message reaches the right audience at scale.

### NEVADA CITY

#### Preparedness Through Connection

Nevada City's Office of Emergency Services designed the program as an explicit emergency preparedness strategy rather than a community engagement supplement, a conceptual move

with significant implications for how wildfire-vulnerable communities think about resilience. The Wildfire Defense Days model combined social connection with measurable physical outcomes: 35 tons of hazardous fuels removed, three properties assisted through volunteer labor, three Firewise communities formed, and, most significantly, three self-organized neighborhood preparedness pods that continued operating without City facilitation. Mayor Petersen’s “Year of the Neighborhood” proclamation amplified the OES’s grassroots work by giving it a civic identity that transcended a single program or grant period.

#### PARADISE

##### **Arts as Recovery Infrastructure**

Paradise’s Recreation and Park District demonstrated that in post-disaster communities, arts and creative programming are not supplementary to recovery. They are recovery. Watercolor classes, paint parties, craft events, and ecological stewardship projects created low-stakes, side-by-side working conditions that fostered relationships faster than any civic engagement format. The Good Fire Festival combined beneficial fire demonstration with community celebration and pyrotherapy, intentional exposure to controlled fire to reduce the anxiety and trauma responses that many Paradise residents carry. By treating ecological education and emotional recovery as a single programming goal, the program met residents where their experience actually was, rather than where planners might have assumed it was.

#### RIVERSIDE

##### **Health Equity Through Neighbor Empowerment**

Riverside’s Blue Zones integration reframed community engagement as a health equity intervention: residents were not invited to attend City events but to invest in their own longevity through neighborhood connections, better nutrition, and active living. The Resident Leadership Academy model built civic capacity by design, graduating residents into community improvement project leadership. The Arlanza Community Garden transformation, from a pandemic-abandoned lot to a food-producing, mural-bearing community gathering space with rentable garden plots for low-income families, produced visible, lasting evidence of collective investment that the neighborhood could maintain, return to, and show to others.

#### LONG BEACH

##### **Climate Action as Connection Strategy**

Long Beach’s decision to house the program in the Office of Climate Action and Sustainability rather than a traditional community engagement function was itself a design innovation. By framing neighborhood connection as a climate resilience strategy, and climate action as a

reason to gather, the program gave environmental programming a social dimension and gave social programming an environmental purpose. The program also contributed one of the cohort's most honest practitioner documents: a candid account of how ICE enforcement activity suppressed participation in surrounding neighborhoods, and how grant restrictions on food costs limited equitable engagement in low-income communities. That candor is its own contribution to the field.

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## What Worked: Recurring Success Factors

Several strategies emerged consistently across all six communities as drivers of positive outcomes. These are not coincidences; they represent a transferable set of implementation principles grounded in what actually happened across multiple contexts and populations.

### — Recurring programming in familiar physical spaces

The communities that fostered the deepest relationships consistently scheduled programming at the same locations over time. Parks, community centers, libraries, and restoration sites that already carried some community identity outperformed new or unfamiliar venues. Familiarity compounds: neighbors who meet monthly in the same park become acquaintances; those who meet weekly become friends. Every community that documented this finding described it as something they had to learn through experience rather than something they had designed from the start.

### — Hands-on, side-by-side activity formats

Across all six communities, the formats that produced the strongest connection were those that gave neighbors something to do together rather than something to hear together. Sewing and mending, tree planting, garden restoration, painting workshops, ecological stewardship, and community celebrations all created the working conditions in which conversation and trust form naturally as byproducts of shared attention rather than as an explicit goal. These formats also proved more accessible to residents who were hesitant about formal civic engagement, attending a mending café carries fewer institutional connotations than attending a neighborhood meeting.

### — No-cost programming as equity design

Every community that explicitly removed cost as a barrier to participation reported stronger engagement from communities facing economic constraints. Multiple programs noted that the inability to provide food, transportation assistance, or childcare at events, due to grant restrictions, limited equitable participation. The implication is both practical and political: funders who require inclusive engagement while prohibiting the costs that make it possible create a structural contradiction that program teams cannot resolve through better outreach.

### — Trusted community partners as primary reach mechanism

In every city, the organizations that extended reach most effectively were those that already held community trust, not new partnerships built for the program, but existing relationships that the program chose to center and resource. City Fabrick in Long Beach, Mujeres Activas en La Salud in Riverside, the Community Living Campaign in San Francisco, Sierra Roots in Nevada City, all of these organizations had accumulated trust that a City-branded program could neither replicate nor merely leverage.

### — Intentional design for interaction

Programs that relied on attendance to generate connection consistently underperformed programs that designed specific interaction mechanisms, such as conversation prompts, structured creative activities, community recognition, and shared physical transformation of a space. These mechanisms made first encounters less awkward, sustained engagement across sessions, and produced the emotional experience of belonging rather than merely the logistical fact of attendance.

## Outcomes: Selected Evidence Across Communities

The following table presents key quantitative and qualitative outcomes drawn from program surveys and reports across the participating communities:

| OUTCOME MEASURE                                   | COMMUNITY      | FINDING                        |
|---------------------------------------------------|----------------|--------------------------------|
| Got to know more neighbors in the past year       | Paradise       | <b>84% agree</b>               |
| Feel like a member of their neighborhood          | Paradise       | <b>88% agree</b>               |
| Hopeful about the future of their neighborhood    | Paradise       | <b>89% agree</b>               |
| Have a neighbor's emergency contact information   | Paradise       | <b>87% (81/93)</b>             |
| Neighbors help each other at least 1x/month       | San Francisco  | <b>79% (+32 pts)</b>           |
| Got to know more neighbors                        | San Francisco  | <b>85% post-program</b>        |
| Firewise communities established                  | Nevada City    | <b>3 new communities</b>       |
| Organic preparedness pods formed (unplanned)      | Nevada City    | <b>3 independent pods</b>      |
| Hazardous fuels removed (Wildfire Defense Days)   | Nevada City    | <b>35 tons</b>                 |
| Residents who knew disaster resources available   | Richmond (pre) | <b>24.1% (gap: 75.9%)</b>      |
| Residents with evacuation plan (pre-program)      | Richmond (pre) | <b>23% (gap: 77%)</b>          |
| Events vs. target (participation overperformance) | Long Beach     | <b>6,700 vs. 1,500 planned</b> |

Selected outcomes from program surveys and reports, 2024–2026. Survey data from Paradise (n=93) and San Francisco (n=program participant surveys). Pre-program figures from Richmond baseline survey.

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## Challenges and Honest Lessons

The Neighbor-to-Neighbor cohort produced significant positive outcomes. It also produced some of the field's most candid documentation of the challenges that any city undertaking this work should anticipate.

### — Measuring social connection remains genuinely difficult

Sign-in sheets count attendance. They do not count relationships. Every program in this cohort grappled with the gap between what could be measured and what actually mattered. Post-program surveys captured important shifts in belonging, trust, and mutual aid behavior, but they required intentional design, consistent administration, and yielded self-reported rather than observational data. The field needs better tools for measuring what it is actually trying to produce. Several programs noted that organic outcomes, the neighborhood pods in Nevada City, the informal mutual aid networks in Paradise and San Francisco, were among the most significant yet hardest to count.

### — Grant restrictions limited equity outcomes

Long Beach most explicitly documented a structural contradiction embedded in the program's design: the grant prohibited expenditures on food, childcare, and transportation while requiring inclusive engagement in low-income communities for whom these barriers are most consequential. The State's own planning documents identify food, transportation reimbursement, and childcare as best practices for equitable community engagement. Programs that are asked to apply these standards but are denied the costs to implement them face a real equity limitation that honest reporting should surface rather than smooth over.

### — ICE enforcement activity suppressed participation in immigrant communities

Long Beach's program documented that heightened U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement activity in surrounding neighborhoods led to lower event turnout, hesitancy to sign in, and underreported engagement. This is a political reality that no programming innovation can fully overcome. Programs serving immigrant communities should design data practices that minimize participants' exposure, partner with organizations that residents do not associate with the City's official presence, and explicitly communicate who does and does not have access to participation data.

### — Digital outreach does not reach the residents who most need connection

Virtually every program in this cohort found that in-person outreach, door-to-door canvassing, flyers in community spaces, direct partner mobilization, outperformed digital channels in the most underserved communities. Nevada City noted this specifically for older residents with limited internet access. Long Beach identified it as a cross-cutting lesson in communities with mixed digital literacy and infrastructure access. Designing engagement programs primarily around social media and email systematically disadvantages the residents who most need the connection the programs are meant to provide.

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### — Thematic coherence accelerates repeat participation

Long Beach’s post-program reflection noted that a calendar of individually strong but thematically unconnected events produces lower repeat attendance than a coherent series with a recognizable identity. Residents who understand they are part of a continuing program return; those who experience each event as a one-time activation do not. Planning narrative continuity across events, deciding what the program is “about” before designing activities, is an underrated design choice that has a significant impact on long-term engagement.

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## Lessons for Local Governments

The following ten lessons are drawn directly from the evidence produced by the six participating communities. Each includes a replication recommendation intended to be practical for city managers, public engagement staff, nonprofit leaders, and community organizations.

### LESSON 1

#### **Social connection is infrastructure investment.**

**Evidence.** Nevada City: social connection produced three Firewise communities. Paradise: social connection produced 87% emergency contact exchange. San Francisco: connection produced neighbors shopping for groceries for sick neighbors. Richmond: connection surfaced preparedness gaps that formal emergency programs had missed.

**Why it matters.** Cities that treat social connection as a peripheral concern make a category error. Social infrastructure enables the effectiveness of every other public investment a city makes in climate resilience, public health, emergency management, and civic capacity.

**Replication.** Include social connection as an explicit goal in climate action plans, emergency management frameworks, and public health equity strategies. Fund it accordingly. Measure it deliberately.

### LESSON 2

#### **Design for interaction, not attendance.**

**Evidence.** Long Beach: hands-on workshops outperformed informational events as relationship-building venues. Paradise: painting classes outperformed community meetings. San Francisco: conversation prompts transformed attendance into relationship formation.

**Why it matters.** Attendance metrics are easy to measure but misleading as success indicators. A mending class with 20 participants can produce more lasting relationships than a community meeting with 200.

**Replication.** Audit your current programming for interaction design. Ask: does this event give neighbors something to do together? Does it create natural conditions for follow-up contact? Reorient events that are high-attendance but low-interaction.

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**LESSON 3****Recurring series outperform one-time events.**

**Evidence.** San Francisco: Health and Wellness series produced deeper connection than individual neighborhood meetings. Richmond: weekly Health and Wellness programming generated incremental trust over time. Nevada City: repeated face-to-face contact was the most effective outreach tool.

**Why it matters.** Trust is built through time and repetition. A single event cannot produce what a consistent series can. Recurring formats also generate the kind of familiarity that makes community members more likely to introduce each other to new participants.

**Replication.** Prioritize program continuity over breadth. A smaller number of well-designed recurring events will produce stronger relationship outcomes than a larger number of one-time activations at the same total cost.

**LESSON 4****Resident leadership is the sustainability strategy.**

**Evidence.** Richmond: Neighborhood Council autonomy produced programming no City staff could have designed. Riverside: Resident Leadership Academy graduates became the next cohort's curriculum designers. Nevada City: organic preparedness pods formed without any City prompting.

**Why it matters.** Programs that position residents as co-designers and leaders produce outcomes that persist after grant funding ends. Programs that position residents as audience members do not. Resident leadership is not a participation metric; it is a capacity outcome.

**Replication.** Build resident leadership development into program design from the beginning. Identify residents who can become connectors within 90 days of program launch. Create explicit pathways from participation to facilitation.

**LESSON 5****Partner selection is program design.**

**Evidence.** Paradise: 27-partner ecosystem delivered programming no single agency could achieve. Nevada City: Sierra Roots extended preparedness to unhoused residents. San Francisco: Community Living Campaign's existing trust made rapid program entry possible.

**Why it matters.** Community-based organizations that already hold neighborhood trust extend program reach in ways City-branded outreach cannot replicate. The quality of the partner ecosystem determines the equity and authenticity of the program.

**Replication.** Before designing programming, map which organizations already hold trust with the communities you intend to serve. Resource and center those organizations. Do not treat partnership as an add-on to City-led programming.

**LESSON 6****Language access is a trust strategy.**

**Evidence.** San Francisco: bilingual staffing produced cross-cultural participation that translated materials had not. Riverside: Spanish-language RLA model produced full community engagement

in an 80% Latino neighborhood. Long Beach: multilingual marketing translated into measurably broader reach.

**Why it matters.** Programming in a community's language is a signal that the community is the intended audience. Translation of materials is insufficient; bilingual staffing changes the social dynamics of every interaction.

**Replication.** Budget for bilingual staff, not just translated materials. Hire from the communities you intend to serve. The return on investment in bilingual connectors exceeds that of almost any other single program element in multilingual communities.

#### LESSON 7

##### **Acknowledge structural barriers candidly.**

**Evidence.** Long Beach: documented ICE enforcement impact on participation. Multiple cities: identified food, transportation, and childcare as equity barriers. Nevada City: recognized digital access gap in older population.

**Why it matters.** Programs that document only successes cannot improve. Programs that acknowledge structural barriers provide the honest assessment that practitioners in other cities need to plan effectively. Candor is a form of professional contribution.

**Replication.** Include frank challenge documentation in program reporting. Design data practices that protect participants in sensitive contexts. Advocate to funders for removal of restrictions that work against the equity goals programs are asked to achieve.

#### LESSON 8

##### **Invest in physical assets, not just events.**

**Evidence.** Long Beach: toolkits, watering trailer, library sewing machines. Nevada City: Evacuation Maps, North Pine Pocket Park. Riverside: Arlanza Community Garden transformation. San Francisco: Kenny Alley Suncatchers installation.

**Why it matters.** Events leave memories; infrastructure leaves capacity. Physical assets created during a grant period continue to serve the community after it ends. They also provide visible evidence of collective investment that reinforces community identity.

**Replication.** Allocate a portion of every community programming budget to assets that remain: toolkits, equipment, public art, community maps, restored public spaces, digital resources. Ask 'what remains?' at the program design stage, not the conclusion.

#### LESSON 9

##### **Executive framing legitimizes grassroots work.**

**Evidence.** Nevada City: Mayor Petersen's "Year of the Neighborhood" proclamation accelerated resident engagement. Riverside: Councilmember and Mayoral support letters signaled institutional commitment. Long Beach: City Manager's letter of commitment established executive ownership.

**Why it matters.** Executive framing signals to residents that their participation matters to the institution, not just to the program staff. It can meaningfully accelerate adoption and provides political cover for programs that need departmental coordination.

**Replication.** Seek explicit mayoral, council, or city manager framing for community connection initiatives. A proclamation costs nothing. Its signal value to residents, partners, and other departments is significant.

#### LESSON 10

#### **Measure what actually matters.**

**Evidence.** San Francisco: post-program surveys on belonging, trust, mutual aid behavior, emergency preparedness. Paradise: comprehensive survey capturing belonging, connection, hopefulness, and neighbor contact information. Nevada City: organic pod formation as sustainability indicator.

**Why it matters.** Programs that do not measure outcomes cannot demonstrate impact, improve their design, or make the case for continued investment. Programs that measure only attendance leave the most important outcomes undocumented.

**Replication.** Design outcome measurement tools before program launch. Prioritize behavioral outcomes alongside attitudinal self-reports. Build the measurement into program design, not as a compliance task but as a learning tool.

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## **Conclusion: The Case for Investing in Belonging**

What the Neighbor-to-Neighbor initiative demonstrated across six California communities and roughly 25,000 residents is that social connection is not something that happens to communities. It is something communities can choose to build. The infrastructure of belonging does not materialize on its own. It requires design, investment, persistence, and the institutional commitment to treat it as the serious public good that it is.

The conditions that these six communities faced were not unusual. Social isolation following a global pandemic, disconnection in high-density multilingual neighborhoods, vulnerability in communities bearing disproportionate environmental and economic burdens, fragmentation in communities still recovering from disaster, these are not exceptional circumstances. They describe much of California and much of the United States. What was exceptional was the decision to deliberately address those conditions with public resources at the neighborhood level, through programs built on the simple premise that neighbors who know each other are more resilient than those who don't.

The evidence supports that premise, and then some. In San Francisco, a neighbor does grocery shopping for a sick neighbor because they met at a yoga class. In Paradise, 84% of residents report having gotten to know more neighbors in the past year, in a community that had lost everything six

years earlier. In Nevada City, three neighborhood preparedness pods are checking on vulnerable residents and coordinating defensible space work without any City facilitation. In Richmond, a neighborhood annual meeting that once drew a dozen residents now draws more than 45. In Long Beach, a mending café teaches neighbors to repair clothing and, in doing so, teaches them to show up for each other.

None of this happened automatically. Each of these outcomes was produced by a specific decision: to hire a bilingual connector, to fund a recurring wellness series, to give a Neighborhood Council authority over its own programming, to plant trees with neighbors rather than for them, to design an event around conversation prompts instead of information delivery. Social connection does not emerge solely from proximity. It requires intention.

For local governments, the question is no longer whether social connection deserves public investment. The evidence from these six communities makes that case. The question is how to make that investment wisely, by building on trusted partnerships, designing for recurring interaction, positioning residents as leaders rather than audiences, creating assets that outlast the grant period, and measuring the outcomes that actually matter.

The Neighbor-to-Neighbor initiative's clearest lesson is its simplest: when government creates the conditions for neighbors to meet, they do. When they do, communities become better able to care for themselves. That is a result worth replicating, scaling, and sustaining.

## ABOUT THIS REPORT

This synthesis report was prepared by the Davenport Institute based on case study documentation, slide decks, program reports, and survey data submitted by six California communities participating in the Neighbor-to-Neighbor initiative administered by California Volunteers and the Governor's Office of Planning and Research.

**PARTICIPATING COMMUNITIES** City of Richmond • City and County of San Francisco • City of Nevada City • Town of Paradise / PRPD • City of Riverside • City of Long Beach

**PROGRAM RESOURCES** California Volunteers ([californiavolunteers.gov](http://californiavolunteers.gov)) • Governor's Office of Planning and Research ([opr.ca.gov](http://opr.ca.gov))