

MUNICIPAL INNOVATION CASE STUDY
City of Richmond, California • 2024–2026

Rebuilding the Neighborhood

Richmond’s Neighbor-to-Neighbor Initiative

How a resident-led engagement program strengthened social connection, civic trust, and emergency preparedness across 17 neighborhoods — in one of the Bay Area’s most complex and historically underserved cities.

4,364+	120	10,277+	17
RESIDENTS ENGAGED	EVENTS HOSTED	VOLUNTEER HOURS	NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS

The Challenge

Richmond, California, is a majority-minority city of roughly 115,000 residents, shaped by generations of industrial employment, deindustrialization, and persistent socioeconomic inequality. Its 17 distinct Neighborhood Councils represent communities with deep cultural roots, and real vulnerabilities.

A pre-program survey of 509 residents documented a troubling readiness gap:

75.9%	77%
of residents did not know what disaster resources were available to them	did not know their evacuation zone or have a household emergency plan

At the same time, residents expressed a genuine appetite for connection, interest in arts, culture, and volunteering, but lacked reliable, city-supported pathways to build relationships with their neighbors. The pandemic had deepened pre-existing isolation. Research has made clear what practitioners already know: the strength of a neighborhood, its capacity to survive a crisis, support its most vulnerable members, and sustain civic participation, depends less on formal services than on whether neighbors actually know each other.

In Richmond, the question was not whether connection mattered. It was how to build it at scale.

Program Design

In 2024, Richmond’s City Manager’s Office, in partnership with the Richmond Community Foundation as co-fiscal sponsor, launched the Neighbor-to-Neighbor (N2N) Initiative, a resident-led, neighborhood-level grant program designed to strengthen social connection, civic trust, and emergency preparedness simultaneously.

The core design principle was **trust through flexibility**. Rather than deploying a standardized programming model citywide, the City empowered individual Neighborhood Councils to define their own programming within a shared framework. Each council received grant funding and City staff support to expand existing community traditions and pilot new engagement approaches that reflected their neighborhood’s unique culture, history, and resident needs.

Programming was organized across five focus areas:

FOCUS AREA	EVENTS (APPROX.)	SHARE OF PROGRAM
Social Connectedness & Cultural Events	~50	42%
Recreational Activities & Health/Wellness	~42	35%
Educational Workshops	~14	12%
Emergency Preparedness & Training	~10	8%
Volunteer Opportunities	~4	3%

Source: Richmond N2N Initiative program data, 2024–2026. Event counts are approximate based on reported distribution.

A dedicated Health and Wellness Series, featuring recurring offerings like Yoga and You, Xtreme Hip Hop, and Hiking for Pancakes, provided low-barrier, consistent touchpoints that drew residents in through enjoyment rather than civic obligation. Cross-sector partners, including Contra Costa Health, Kaiser Permanente, Richmond CERT Teams, the Richmond Main Street Initiative, and the City’s own Recreation and Economic Development Departments, ensured that events connected residents not only to each other but also to available public services and resources.

Implementation

From June 2024 through January 2026, the initiative ran across all 17 Neighborhood Councils, generating 120 events and engaging more than 4,364 residents, while leveraging over 10,277 volunteer hours.

The most effective model combined ongoing programming series with signature anchor events. Where wellness classes ran week over week, they built something that a quarterly neighborhood meeting rarely achieves: the trust that comes from showing up for each other repeatedly. Greenbriar, NC’s annual meeting, historically attended by roughly a dozen residents, drew more

than 45 neighbors when integrated with N2N-supported programming, including education on homeowners' insurance and tenant rights.

I was able to walk around to greet and chat with residents from a couple of streets away from my house, people I do not ordinarily get to see. One neighbor brought a huge bag of lemons from her backyard tree to share with everyone. I heard several neighbors comment that this was the most informative neighborhood gathering we've ever had.

— GREENBRIAR NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL RESIDENT

Emergency preparedness was threaded deliberately throughout. Atchison Village, NC, paired CERT-sponsored emergency preparedness gatherings with vermicomposting workshops, drawing residents across multiple interests. Greenbriar, NC, used N2N grant funds to supply starter emergency go-bags to every household in their neighborhood, which sits in a designated high-risk wildfire zone near the Hayward Fault. Resident response was, by all accounts, enthusiastic, particularly for the FEMA checklist included to guide go-bag preparation.

Across Neighborhood Councils, the City's role was facilitative rather than directive, coordinating logistics, connecting councils to City resources and partners, and building cross-council visibility into what was working.

Outcomes

The program's outcomes included engaging over 4,364 residents through 120 events and 10,277 volunteer hours across all 17 councils. These numbers mark a significant reach for a municipally administered initiative of this type. More importantly, the initiative fostered new personal connections and strengthened relationships, thereby contributing directly to neighborhood resilience.

Residents at a Panhandle Annex autumn event met neighbors they had never spoken to; several of those families have since formed informal babysitting and dog-sitting networks. A Point Richmond Spring Fling brought together two residents who discovered their grandparents had both arrived in Richmond in 1908, strangers reconnecting a history more than a century old.

I think the Emergency Preparedness event was a great bonding experience for our neighborhood. We learned a lot about preparedness, with many local organizations sharing resources. Our 2024 holiday celebration also fostered a sense of gratitude and connection within our community.

— PANHANDLE ANNEX NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL MEMBER

Health and wellness programming emerged as a consistently trusted entry point across demographics. As one Laurel Park Zumba coach put it: “It’s amazing seeing such a diverse community come together for health.” N2N Yoga classes were among the most-cited responses when residents were asked to name their favorite community experience of the past year.

Qualitative feedback from councils showed three consistent outcomes: residents met new neighbors for the first time; existing relationships became closer; and residents increased their awareness of City services, emergency resources, and informal neighborhood networks. Compared to pre-survey data, where 77% lacked an emergency plan, multiple councils reported that residents could now cite specific preparedness resources, name their CERT contacts, and had initiated conversations with neighbors about emergency plans.

Lessons for Other Cities

Four implementation principles emerged consistently across Richmond’s 17 Neighborhood Councils:

01 Recurring programming builds relationships that one-time events cannot.

The Health and Wellness Series demonstrated that consistent, low-pressure programming creates conditions for the incremental trust-building that a quarterly neighborhood meeting rarely achieves. Practitioners should distinguish between activation, bringing people out once, and relationship formation, which requires repeated, low-stakes contact over time.

02 Neighborhood-level autonomy increases both participation and ownership.

By giving Neighborhood Councils meaningful discretion over how to deploy their grants, Richmond produced programming that residents genuinely wanted. Atchison Village’s composting workshops, Laurel Park’s health walks, and Point Richmond’s jazz gatherings would not have emerged from a centrally designed curriculum. Flexibility is not a design weakness; it is a feature.

03 Social infrastructure and emergency preparedness are mutually reinforcing.

Communities that know each other are more resilient. Richmond’s model, embedding preparedness education into social events rather than delivering it as a standalone program, improved information retention and reduced the stigma that often limits participation in emergency preparedness in lower-income communities.

04 Cross-departmental collaboration extends relevance and reach.

Engagement with the City’s Economic Development Department, Recreation Department, and institutional partners like Kaiser Permanente and Contra Costa Health widened the program’s

relevance and connected residents to services they would not otherwise have encountered at a neighborhood gathering.

Looking Ahead

The City of Richmond has identified several sustainability priorities for N2N: continuing the Health and Wellness Series as a core engagement vehicle; expanding arts and cultural programming in partnership with local artists and organizations; and diversifying funding through grants, general fund allocations, fee waivers, and philanthropic partnerships. Building Neighborhood Council capacity to lead inclusive programming independently of City facilitation remains a longer-term goal.

The ambition extends beyond sustaining a grant program. Richmond is working to build a durable infrastructure of neighborhood relationships, one that strengthens the city's capacity for social, civic, and emergency resilience across the long term.

Conclusion

Richmond's Neighbor-to-Neighbor Initiative offers a replicable model for cities seeking to address social disconnection without building new bureaucratic structures. Its animating question, what do residents already want to do together, and how can the City support that?, led to a flexible, neighborhood-driven grant program that combined resident autonomy with City coordination and institutional partnership.

The program did not solve the loneliness crisis. It built something more tractable: a set of relationships, routines, and shared experiences that make neighborhoods more likely to hold together when things get hard. For city managers and civic leaders grappling with community resilience in the wake of the pandemic, Richmond's experience suggests that sometimes the most durable infrastructure is not built from concrete or code. It is built from the accumulated trust of neighbors who have learned to show up for each other.

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