

MUNICIPAL INNOVATION CASE STUDY
City of Riverside, California • Department of Housing and Human Services / Neighborhood Engagement Division

When Neighbors Grow Together

Riverside’s Blue Zones Neighbor-to-Neighbor Initiative in the Arlanza Neighborhood

Riverside used a \$1 million Neighbor-to-Neighbor grant to create a resident-led health and connection initiative in five underserved neighborhoods — integrating the Blue Zones longevity framework, grassroots organizing, a Resident Leadership Academy, and a revitalized community garden.

\$1M GRANT AWARD	5 TARGET NEIGHBORHOODS	100+ COMMUNITY IMPACT PROJECTS PLANNED	8 GARDEN CIPS COMPLETED	357 GARDEN EVENT ATTENDEES
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Garden CIP attendance reflects documented outcomes at the Arlanza Community Garden (July 2024–October 2025). Full citywide program data across all five neighborhoods and 100+ planned CIPs was reported separately.

Community Context and Challenge

Arlanza is a dense, working-class neighborhood on Riverside’s west side, a transitional corridor between the city’s post-war urban core and newer residential development to the west. It is also one of California’s most measurably disadvantaged urban communities. CalEnviroScreen 4.0 data places more than half of the neighborhood in the 80th-to-90th percentile for pollution burden. More than half of residents fall within federal low- to moderate-income thresholds.

ARLANZA AT A GLANCE

~80% Latino population
~60% at or below the poverty line
Per-capita income ~\$17,500/year
51%+ renters
Walkscore: 46 (car-dependent)
CalEnviroScreen: top 80–90th percentile for pollution
SB535 designated disadvantaged community
51%+ of residents low-to-moderate income

The neighborhood’s physical landscape compounded social isolation. Without sidewalks on many streets, no established pedestrian or transit infrastructure (Walkscore: 46), and few community gathering spaces, informal neighbor interaction was structurally difficult. Many residents depend

on their children to navigate digital communications and official correspondence, creating barriers to civic participation that standard outreach strategies cannot easily bridge.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated these conditions. Existing parent groups at local schools, including Padres Unidos and the English Language Advisory Committee at Norte Vista High School, collapsed when in-person meetings ended and never recovered. The Arlanza Community Garden, once a neighborhood gathering place, sat unused. Civic trust and organized neighborhood presence had not meaningfully returned in the years following.

What Arlanza had, however, was an emerging set of organized voices. Mujeres Activas en La Salud (MAS), a resident-led health advocacy group facilitated by the Riverside Community Health Foundation, had been meeting monthly to discuss neighborhood health concerns. Riverside County Public Health was simultaneously launching a Blue Zones initiative, a science-based community health model drawn from the world's longest-lived regions, that positioned Arlanza for coordinated investment. The Neighbor-to-Neighbor grant created the opportunity to connect these assets and build from them.

This application represents Arlanza's community voice regarding environmental change, neighborhood health, and longevity linked to a countywide Blue Zones collaborative... By awarding Connecting Neighbors to Neighbors Grant funds to the City of Riverside, California Volunteers can create an investment in planning and empowerment that will transform the Arlanza neighborhood for years to come.

— MAYOR PATRICIA LOCK DAWSON, CITY OF RIVERSIDE

Program Design

In February 2024, the City of Riverside, through its Department of Housing and Human Services and Neighborhood Engagement Division, was awarded a \$1 million Neighbor-to-Neighbor grant in partnership with the Riverside Community Health Foundation (RCHF) and Love Riverside (a nonprofit operating under Healthy Leaders Thriving Cities). The program, titled the Greater Arlanza: Connecting Neighbors to Neighbors – A Blue Zones Integration Project, targeted five sub-neighborhoods: Norte Vista, Terrace, Bryant, La Granada, and Wells.

The program's foundational premise, rooted in Blue Zones research, is that 80% of life longevity is influenced by lifestyle and environment rather than genetics. Given Arlanza's challenges, the initiative focused strategically on changing physical and social conditions to deliver measurable improvements in health and well-being, block by block and neighbor by neighbor.

Program design organized work across four mutually reinforcing strategies:

STRATEGY	DESCRIPTION	KEY DELIVERABLE
1. Community Education	Blue Zone-themed workshops on connectivity, nutrition, movement, and climate action; neighborhood surveys; community kick-off event	5 Blue Zone education sessions + survey data
2. Resident Leadership Academies (RLA)	10-week resident leadership training in each neighborhood, preparing residents to lead community improvement projects	5 cohort graduations; 100+ residents trained
3. Community Impact Projects (CIPs)	Neighborhood-scale beautification, ecological, and service projects co-designed and implemented by residents	100+ CIPs across 5 neighborhoods
4. Arlanza Well-Being Action Plan	Community-authored document integrating resident input, local data, and best practices into actionable neighborhood goals	Delivered January 2026

The Resident Leadership Academy (RLA) model, developed by RCHF through its HEAL Zone work, served as the anchor for capacity-building efforts. Shifting from service delivery to resident empowerment, the program trained local leaders to design and implement neighborhood projects, building enduring civic capacity. Weekly workshops equipped participants with essential skills, culminating in Community Impact Projects directly tied to program goals and measurable outputs.

Community Engagement Strategy

— A Partner Ecosystem Built on Existing Trust

The program's engagement model was deliberately built around organizations that already had trust with Arlanza residents, rather than attempting to build new institutional relationships from scratch. RCHF brought two decades of community health work and over 1.6 million direct service encounters in the Riverside area. Love Riverside had mobilized volunteers for 7 years and had recently coordinated monthly food distributions to 19 senior apartment complexes, reaching more than 2,000 households each month. MAS provided an existing resident-led infrastructure within the Arlanza community itself.

Together, these partners bridged the gap between the City and historically underserved residents. The City administered the grant and provided infrastructure, RCHF contributed public health expertise and the RLA model, and Love Riverside led volunteer and neighbor engagement. Each partner focused on their strengths to deliver the program without duplicating efforts.

— Bilingual Design and Third-Space Anchoring

Given that Arlanza is approximately 80% Latino and many residents navigate institutional information through family members rather than directly, all programming was designed to be delivered bilingually in English and Spanish from the outset. RCHF staffed key activities with bilingual community health educators using tablets to collect resident input and contact

information in real time. This was not a translation add-on; it was a structural feature of every workshop, event, and outreach activity.

Third spaces, community centers, parks, schools, and the community garden, served as the physical anchor for all programming. Each of the five neighborhoods had at least one designated third space for recurring activities. Consistency of location, like consistency of staff, builds the kind of incremental familiarity that makes a neighbor feel comfortable returning. The program explicitly prioritized underutilized spaces, treating their activation as both a means and an end: each revitalized gathering place became a visible signal of neighborhood investment.

Implementation

— The Arlanza Community Garden: A Documented Model

Of the program’s planned 100+ Community Impact Projects across five neighborhoods, the most fully documented implementation example is the Arlanza Community Garden in the Bryant Neighborhood, the same garden that the RFP had flagged as a site for “Reimagining and Revitalization.” The garden had sat largely unused since the pandemic began, visible but inactive in the middle of a densely populated residential block. Its transformation over 18 months illustrates the program’s theory of change in practice.

Implementation unfolded through eight events between July 2024 and October 2025, each building on the last:

DATE	EVENT
July 2024	Arlanza Community Garden Cleanup
September 2024	Re-Envisioning the Arlanza Community Garden
October 2024	Arlanza Community Garden Cleanup #2
March 2025	Nutrition Fair at the Garden
May 2025	Arlanza Community Garden Beautification Project
June 2025	Healthy Food Demo & Distribution at the Garden
October 2025	Art Mural & Projects at Arlanza Community Garden
October 2025	Community Garden Beautification & Art Projects

357 total attendees across all 8 events. Partners: Arlanza Community Gardeners, Blue Zones Riverside, Alvord USD, Riverside Food Hub, Riverside Community Health Foundation, Mothers Nutrition, Riverside CC College CORPS, Athens Services, National Charity League Riverside, Riverside Parks & Recreation.

The process began with listening, not a launch event, but a community conversation about what residents actually wanted the space to become. From those early sessions, a shared vision emerged. Alvord Unified School District high school students built new raised garden plots, which residents can now rent at minimal cost. A storage container was acquired for tools, making

ongoing maintenance practical without City staff presence. The program's culminating events brought neighbors together to paint a large community mural, transforming an underused corner into a visible expression of neighborhood identity and pride.

Several gardeners now grow produce for donation to local food pantries, providing fresh food to community members in need. A Nutrition Fair and Healthy Food Demo introduced residents to the Blue Zones nutrition framework, fostering a broader understanding of healthy eating. The revitalized garden now serves as a food-producing, neighbor-gathering, and community-owned space, as reflected in increased resident use and positive feedback.

It is so good to see the garden active again and see my neighbors enjoying it.

— ARLANZA NEIGHBORHOOD RESIDENT

— Community Impact Projects Across Five Neighborhoods

Beyond the garden, the program planned and began implementing a range of CIPs across all five Arlanza sub-neighborhoods: beautification projects, tree plantings at Bryant and El Dorado Parks and Challen Park, neighborhood disaster preparedness workshops, a community health fair at Bryant Park, CPR and first aid training at the Bryant Community Center, and park revitalization at Rutland Park and El Dorado Park. Financial literacy workshops and a community celebration event were organized at the Greater Arlanza level to build cross-neighborhood connections. Each project was designed to engage at least 20 residents and to serve as a practical tutorial in community project development, teaching participants how to plan, fund, and implement small-scale neighborhood improvements that could sustain beyond the grant period.

Outcomes and Impact

The Arlanza Community Garden documents a set of layered, interconnected outcomes that simultaneously reflect the program's multiple goals. At the most immediate level, 357 residents attended eight community events at a space that had previously been inactive. That is a direct measure of re-engagement with a neighborhood third space.

At the relational level, the garden generated new neighbor-to-neighbor connections organized around shared work rather than shared proximity. Residents who arrived to learn gardening stayed to plan a mural. Families who attended a nutrition fair became contributors to the local food pantry network. A physical space that had signaled neglect now signals collective investment, a mural, productive garden beds, and a tool storage container that requires no City maintenance to remain functional.

At the civic level, the RLA model was designed to produce residents capable of leading community conversations, not just attending them. Arlanza residents who completed prior RCHF leadership training contributed to revising the curriculum for new cohorts. The program's design was explicitly

built toward a community-authored Arlanza Well-Being Action Plan, a resident-driven document that could position the neighborhood for future competitive sustainability funding and serve as a governance tool independent of any single grant cycle.

The program's partner model also produced institutional outcomes. Love Riverside, RCHF, and the City's Neighborhood Engagement Division deepened working relationships across a complex multi-sector collaboration. Alvord Unified's participation, aligned with its 2022 Community School Initiative, created a durable pathway between school infrastructure and neighborhood civic life. As Superintendent Mucerino noted in his letter of support, the district's "cradle to grave commitment" to the Arlanza community positioned it as a long-term partner in civic capacity building, not a one-time grant collaborator.

Lessons for Other Communities

01 A wellness framework can reframe neighborhood engagement as a quality-of-life investment.

Framing the program around Blue Zones, longevity, wellbeing, and community health, rather than around civic deficits or social services changed the terms of participation for Arlanza residents. The question became: what does a neighborhood that supports a long, healthy, connected life look like? That reframe invited residents into a conversation about aspiration rather than need, and made the RLA curriculum feel immediately relevant to daily life. Cities with dense, underserved communities should consider whether a wellness or quality-of-life frame might lower participation barriers more than a civic engagement or disaster preparedness frame.

02 Community-designed physical spaces are the most durable outputs.

The Arlanza Community Garden's transformation produced something that outlasts the grant: a functioning, community-maintained third space with a visible identity (the mural), practical infrastructure (the tool storage container and the raised beds), and ongoing purpose (food production and donation). Physical spaces that communities design and build together carry forward a kind of social contract, a reason to return, maintain, and protect. Cities should assess which underutilized physical assets in disadvantaged neighborhoods are candidates for resident-led transformation and invest in the listening process that allows community vision to drive the design.

03 Resident leadership training is the sustainability strategy.

The RLA model, a 10-week, bilingual leadership training program that graduates residents to lead their own neighborhood projects, is the program's most replicable and durable component. Rather than creating dependency on a grant-funded team, the program deliberately built local human capital: residents who know how to plan a project, conduct a meeting, navigate city systems, and

recruit their neighbors. The sustainability of community outcomes after the grant ends depends on whether this kind of capacity was actually built, not on whether the original program continues.

04 Food and gardens are unusually effective connection catalysts.

The garden's success as a programming anchor reflects what community organizers have long known and what urban planners are rediscovering: food production in a shared space creates recurring reasons to return, natural entry points for conversation, tangible shared labor, and visible outcomes. For communities facing food insecurity, a productive garden addresses a concrete need while simultaneously building social infrastructure. Cities with dormant or underused community garden assets should treat them as high-value civic infrastructure rather than peripheral amenities.

05 Partner ecosystem design matters as much as program design.

Riverside's program worked because each partner brought something the others could not provide: the City provided administrative capacity and municipal authority; RCHF provided public health expertise and community trust built over 20 years; Love Riverside provided volunteer mobilization infrastructure and neighborhood presence; MAS provided a resident-led base within the community itself. No single organization was attempting to do it all alone. Local governments designing community engagement initiatives should map their partner ecosystem with the same rigor they apply to their program design, asking not just who is available, but who is trusted, what they can uniquely contribute, and how those contributions fit together.

Conclusion

Riverside's Neighbor-to-Neighbor initiative offers a model for how a mid-size city can use a community grant not simply to fund events, but to build the resident capacity, physical infrastructure, and institutional partnerships that allow a neighborhood to sustain its own civic life after the funding ends. The Arlanza Community Garden is a tangible, returnable, resident-made emblem of that ambition: a mural that was blank, garden beds that were empty, and a gathering place that was silent are now filled with neighbors who grew them into something.

The Blue Zones framing was not just branding. It gave residents a way to understand neighborhood improvement as a personal investment in their own well-being and longevity, not an obligation to the city or a beneficiary relationship with a nonprofit, but a practical path to a longer, healthier, more connected life. That reframe is transferable to any community where standard civic engagement approaches have struggled to generate participation.

For city managers and community engagement professionals, Riverside's most practical lesson may be the simplest: start with what the community already has, an existing advocacy group, a dormant public space, a trusted nonprofit partner, a school with a community mission, and build

from those assets with resident-designed programming, consistent physical spaces, and a deliberate plan for transferring leadership to the community before the grant runs out.

PROGRAM INFORMATION

LEAD AGENCY City of Riverside, Department of Housing and Human Services – Neighborhood Engagement Division

CORE PARTNERS Riverside Community Health Foundation (RCHF) and Love Riverside (Healthy Leaders Thriving Cities)

TARGET AREA Greater Arlanza Neighborhood (Norte Vista, Terrace, Bryant, La Granada, and Wells sub-neighborhoods)

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