

MUNICIPAL INNOVATION CASE STUDY
City and County of San Francisco • Department of Disability & Aging Services and Community Living Campaign

Building Connection Across Language and Culture

San Francisco’s Neighbor-to-Neighbor Initiative for Older Adults

How San Francisco’s Department of Disability and Aging Services partnered with a community nonprofit to address social isolation among older residents — by centering neighbors as leaders, bridging language divides, and embedding low-cost connection tools into everyday neighborhood life.

1,335	730	2,590+	70+	7
PARTICIPANT SESSIONS	NEIGHBORHOOD VOLUNTEERS	VOLUNTEER HOURS	NEIGHBORHOOD EVENTS	CITYWIDE EVENTS

The Challenge

San Francisco is one of the most densely populated cities in the United States. Yet many older residents, especially those dealing with language barriers, physical limitations, or reduced mobility after the COVID-19 pandemic, still feel profoundly isolated. Living close to others does not guarantee connection.

A neighborhood survey conducted before program design identified a gap. Existing civic infrastructure had not closed it. Two-thirds of respondents wanted to know their neighbors better but lacked reliable ways to do so. Many recognized people by face but did not know names or relationships. Language barriers made this harder, and connections were limited even with active neighborhood programming. Regular activities, like senior centers or organized events, did not foster the deep relationships needed for a safe, reciprocal, and resilient neighborhood.

66%	Many
of surveyed neighbors expressed interest in meeting more of their neighbors, but lacked reliable pathways to do so	knew neighbors by sight, not by relationship. Regular programming existed but didn’t reliably produce lasting connection.

The survey also showed a gap between what neighbors wanted and what the formal volunteer system offered. Many people preferred to help informally, lending a hand, sharing a meal, or

checking in, instead of joining organized volunteer programs. The city needed to align with people's instincts. It also had to be designed for informal, relational connections rather than rely on programmatic participation.

San Francisco's Chinese-speaking communities faced a particular structural barrier. In several target neighborhoods, language divides created parallel social worlds. English- and Chinese-speaking residents lived side by side but lacked a shared vocabulary, literal or figurative, to build relationships. Bridging that divide required more than translated materials. It needed intentional design and dedicated bilingual staffing.

Program Design

In response to these findings, the San Francisco Department of Disability & Aging Services (DAS) partnered with the Community Living Campaign (CLC), a nonprofit with deep roots in neighborhood-level organizing. Together, they launched the city's Neighbor-to-Neighbor Initiative. The program operated across five neighborhoods and included a layer of citywide programming. It engaged 25 neighborhood associations, City agencies, and community-based organizations as partners.

The design philosophy rested on a key premise: older adults and adults with disabilities are not just recipients of community services. They are leaders, contributors, and co-creators. The program was explicitly strength-based. It aimed to amplify what neighbors already offered rather than focus on need or deficit. Six key goals defined the program's focus areas.

PROGRAM GOALS

Strengthen social connection and community resilience across neighborhoods

Engage seniors and adults with disabilities as leaders and co-creators, not passive participants

Build on neighbors' existing strengths, interests, and relationships

Create intentional — not incidental — opportunities for connection

Recognize and celebrate everyday contributions to neighborhood life

Directly address language barriers between English- and Chinese-speaking neighbors

Implementation

Implementation unfolded through three interlocking strategies: neighborhood-based programming, intentional connection tools, and a bilingual expansion that became one of the program's most significant adaptations.

— Neighborhood Gatherings in Third Spaces

The backbone of the program was a series of monthly multilingual gatherings. These were held in familiar, informal third spaces such as community rooms, parks, and other shared gathering spots that neighbors already frequented. Programming was flexible and shaped by neighbors. It covered topics that resonated locally, social connection, emergency preparedness, climate action and creative reuse, and health and well-being. Holding regular gatherings was a deliberate policy. Predictability builds trust, and trust is essential for relationships.

— Designing for Interaction, Not Just Attendance

One of the initiative's most replicable insights is the difference between gathering neighbors and truly connecting them. San Francisco's team invested in low-barrier, multilingual tools designed to generate real interaction and not just passive participation:

LOW-BARRIER CONNECTION TOOLS

Neighbor BINGO

Structured conversation prompts

Community potlucks

"Thank You, Neighbor" postcards & prompts

Conversation prompts like "What is an upside of aging?" or "Share one thing about yourself that would surprise us" created structured space for genuine exchange. Postcards gave neighbors a low-stakes way to express appreciation across unfamiliar boundaries. The goal throughout was connection, recognition of shared experience, and the slow accumulation of trust.

...there was an energy in the room that I hadn't experienced before. Folks were gathered in circles talking and learning about each other, in response to prompts like: What is an upside of aging? Share one thing about yourself that would surprise us. What are you proud of? Thought provoking and connection building. Bravo!

— SAN FRANCISCO PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

— Bilingual Expansion: A Structural Response to Language Barriers

Survey feedback made one point clear: language barriers were not a minor concern. They limited who could participate and benefit. In response, DAS and CLC expanded Chinese-language and bilingual programming. They used grant funding to hire two new staff: a Community Connector Coordinator and a Bilingual Chinese-English Connector.

The bilingual model started in three neighborhoods. Results were better than expected. Attendance at bilingual days exceeded that of other neighborhood programming. Neighbors began attending across-language days, not just those in their primary language. What began as bridge-building led to more: cross-cultural presence and spontaneous relationships.

— Spotlight: Kenny Alley Suncatchers

In the Excelsior district, neighbors and the Excelsior Action Group shared a goal: to transform Kenny Alley, a public stairway, into something beautiful. Over several months, residents upcycled beads and other materials into handmade suncatchers. These were installed along the alley as a permanent, community-made art piece. The project celebration brought together neighbors, community organizations, and District 11 leadership. This project shows a broader principle: creative, visible shared work sustains engagement longer than events alone.

Like being wrapped in joy.

— CAYUGA NEIGHBOR, ON THE KENNY ALLEY SUNCATCHERS INSTALLATION

— Citywide Outreach and the Meet 6 Neighbors Campaign

A citywide outreach campaign ran alongside neighborhood programming. It extended the initiative's reach and built its public identity. The Meet 6 Neighbors campaign was its centerpiece, a pledge-based effort encouraging San Francisco residents to introduce themselves to six neighbors. The campaign generated 7,400 website visits. It placed messaging on more than 28 transit shelters and station ads, ran ads on over 3,000 MUNI buses, ran ads in five local newspapers, and earned a feature story in the San Francisco Chronicle. Notably, the bus ads sparked spontaneous conversations among neighbors, turning transit infrastructure into an unexpected site of social connection.

Outcomes

Post-program data showed measurable shifts in the depth and frequency of neighbor-to-neighbor relationships, not just awareness or attendance, but actual behavior change:

OUTCOME MEASURE	RESULT	CHANGE
Residents who got to know more neighbors	85%	—
Neighbors who help each other at least 1x/month	79%	+32 pts
Neighbors who ask for help at least 1x/month	70%	+9 pts

Source: San Francisco N2N participant survey data. "Help each other" and "ask for help" measured at frequency of at least once per month.

A 32-point increase in mutual aid was the program's biggest quantitative outcome. Neighbors helped each other at least once a month. This suggests the initiative improved reciprocity, not just familiarity. That reciprocity builds resilient neighborhoods.

Qualitative feedback reinforced the quantitative results. Participants reported deeper cross-language relationships, more pride, and a new sense of belonging. Bilingual programming saw higher attendance and more cross-community presence than any other part. This proved that dedicated bilingual staff was more valuable than just providing translation services.

When I was sick, 2 neighbors did grocery shopping for me.

— SAN FRANCISCO PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

Community is everything in a disaster. This is the type of scenario we plan for, and it worked.

— SAN FRANCISCO PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

Lessons for Other Cities

San Francisco's experience offers six transferable principles for cities designing neighborhood-level engagement programs:

01 Neighbors are the program — not just the audience.

Centering older adults and adults with disabilities as co-designers, leaders, and contributors, rather than just beneficiaries, transformed the programming. It deepened community buy-in. Neighbor-powered programming creates the ownership needed for long-term engagement, even after a grant ends.

02 Connection requires intentional design.

Gathering neighbors in the same room does not automatically create a relationship. Adding structured conversation prompts, postcard exchanges, and participatory activities made a difference. These transformed attendance into a real connection. Designing for interaction is what separates a community event from real community infrastructure.

03 Low-cost tools can have an outsized impact.

Neighbor BINGO, conversation prompts, thank-you postcards, and community potlucks needed very little in the budget. Their impact on the depth of interaction was much larger than their cost. Cities do not need expensive programming to build social infrastructure. They need thoughtful design and easy entry points.

04 Language-accessible programming is structural, not supplementary.

In multilingual cities, language barriers do not diminish with proximity or time. San Francisco's decision to invest in bilingual staffing, not just translated materials, produced attendance gains and cross-cultural participation that no other program element matched. For cities with significant linguistic diversity, bilingual coordination is a core infrastructure investment.

05 Creative visible projects sustain engagement beyond the event.

The Kenny Alley Suncatchers project illustrates the durability of shared creative work. A one-time event is forgotten; a transformation of shared public space is returned to, talked about, and pointed to with pride. Cities looking for lasting community engagement should consider projects that leave a visible mark on the built environment.

06 Citywide outreach amplifies and legitimizes local work.

The Meet 6 Neighbors campaign created a public frame that gave individual neighborhood activities a larger civic identity. Transit advertising, newspaper placement, and social media coordination extended reach far beyond direct participants, and the bus ads became a site of spontaneous social connection. Visible public outreach legitimizes and amplifies grassroots work.

Conclusion

San Francisco's Neighbor-to-Neighbor Initiative demonstrates what is possible when a city department and a community partner share a clear-eyed theory of change: that social connection is not a soft outcome but a form of infrastructure, one that determines whether neighbors show up for each other when it counts.

The program's most instructive contribution is its insistence on intentional design. Across five neighborhoods and a citywide campaign, it showed that the distance between neighbors who know each other by sight and neighbors who do each other's grocery shopping when someone is sick is not insurmountable. It is bridgeable, with consistent scheduling, low-barrier tools, bilingual staffing, and deliberate space for conversation.

For city managers and department leaders grappling with isolation, aging populations, and the post-pandemic erosion of civic trust, San Francisco's model offers a replicable framework: start with a survey, design for interaction rather than attendance, invest in language access as infrastructure, and trust that creative shared work leaves something lasting. The neighborhood is the unit of resilience. Knowing your neighbors is the policy.

PROGRAM INFORMATION

LEAD AGENCIES San Francisco Department of Disability & Aging Services (DAS) and Community Living Campaign (CLC)

FOCUS POPULATION Older adults and adults with disabilities in English- and Chinese-speaking communities

PARTNERS 25 neighborhood associations, City agencies, and community-based organizations across 5 neighborhoods

FUNDING California Volunteers / Governor's Office of Planning and Research, Neighbor-to-Neighbor Initiative