NEIGHBORHOOD PROGRESS REPORT
2010-2016

OPERATION BETTER BLOCK
Over the past six years, I have been fortunate to lead Operation Better Block, Inc. as we have expanded our reach and increased our impact in the proud community of Homewood. Our legacy of grassroots engagement, resident empowerment, community organizing, and community development continues to drive all of our efforts, most notably our Cluster Plan.

We began this new chapter of OBB’s story with a few basic affirmations: that the community of Homewood has important assets and intrinsic value; that the residents of Homewood should determine what happens in Homewood; and that Homewood’s revival will be achieved through the promotion of indigenous leaders, homeownership, and economic investment.

When I joined OBB in 2010, the organization had just conducted 1,000 conversations with Homewood residents. True to our nature, staff contacted stakeholders the old fashioned way – by walking the streets, knocking on doors, and convening resident meetings. What we heard informed our ensuing strategies regarding youth development, human services, housing and economic development, and community planning.

Now we are channeling community organizing, resident services, and community development to amplify the collective voice of our community in order to bring major, positive changes to Homewood, creating a new model for urban redevelopment.

Last fall, we unveiled the completed Cluster Plan (Final Consensus Vision Plan for ten sections of the neighborhood, including a Commercial and Institutional Cluster). This process started in January 2014, when we held our first Cluster Plan meeting. Since then we (Operation Better Block staff) have talked with more than 2,500 of the community’s 4,500 adults, collected hundreds of thousands of data points on housing conditions and residents, and engaged 2,600 households in an inclusive, participatory community land use visioning process.

We have and will continue to work hard to obtain the City of Pittsburgh’s recognition of the Cluster Plan as the official land use plan for Homewood so that Homewood residents’ voices can be heard and action taken to elevate their concerns.

While the Cluster Plan is at the core of our redevelopment strategy, our hearts and our programming continue to be engaged in the important human services and youth development work; we have the responsibility and expanded institutional capacity to operate on all cylinders.

This year, we are completing home renovations on Race Street, preparing to begin construction on our second mixed use building on Homewood Avenue, and stabilizing 30 houses for existing homeowners. In short, the future looks bright for Homewood. For six years we have been building momentum; now Homewood is poised to take its rightful place as a vibrant, thriving, culturally dynamic community that is a destination for old and new residents and visitors alike.

We’re proud to provide this comprehensive Neighborhood Progress Report of what we’ve been up to for the last six years, including the personal impact of our efforts on some of our area’s residents, business owners, and young people; their individual voices are a powerful testament to what real community engagement can achieve.

Read on to learn how we are transforming Homewood and Operation Better Block in order to meet Homewood’s 21st century development opportunities and challenges.

Love & respect,

Jerome M. Jackson
Executive Director
The mission of Operation Better Block, Inc. is to strategize, organize, and mobilize block-by-block to benefit the Homewood community.

After the civil disturbances of the 1960s, residents of Homewood-Brushton created Forever Action Together, Inc. (FAT) to stimulate the political, educational, social, and economic life of the community. In 1969, the Housing Committee of FAT was inspired by an article in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette that detailed a summer youth program in New York City that encouraged self-help to overcome neighborhood blight and deterioration.

The Housing Committee’s Carrie Washington and Beverly Frazier traveled to New York City and returned with a modified program model that was supported by a panel of advisors from the community and the Pittsburgh metropolitan area.

In 1970, Operation Better Block, Inc. was born with support from the Allegheny Conference on Community Development, the Program to Aid Citizen Enterprise (PACE), foundations, and local businesses. In 1971, OBB was incorporated, with James Givner as its founding Executive Director and Carrie Washington as Assistant Director. In 1974, OBB become one of several select United Way member agencies in Allegheny County, focusing its energy and resources in Neighborhood and Community Development (NCD).

In 1977, after the untimely death of Mr. Givner, Ms. Washington became the Executive Director of OBB, where she served for twenty-six (26) years. Under her direction, the creation of gender-specific youth programs and the Better Block Development Corporation (BBDC) were achieved. Upon her retirement in 2003, Aliya D. Durham assumed the directorship of OBB. In June of 2010, Jerome Jackson was hired as the new Executive Director of OBB.

Homewood is a community at the edge of the City of Pittsburgh’s East End, approximately five and one-half miles east of Downtown Pittsburgh. As defined by the Department of City Planning, Homewood is composed of three neighborhoods: Homewood North, Homewood South, and Homewood West. Homewood’s history spans the development and changes in industrial and postindustrial Pittsburgh.
BELIEVE, LISTEN, TAKE ACTION.
EMPOWERING THE COMMUNITY since 1970.

As we successfully mobilize the community to confront and meet Homewood’s 21st-century challenges, the board and staff remain inspired and indebted to the passion, work ethic, and activism of OBB’s first generation of leaders.

These women and men, and the hundreds of committed volunteers and community champions who followed them over the decades, kept hope alive for Homewood’s residents and business owners.
1,000 CONVERSATIONS

In 2009, OBB leveraged its history and deep roots in the community when it set out to conduct 1,000 conversations that would establish a renewed sense of mission and focus. The organization listened as residents detailed ongoing concerns about crime, activities for children, vacancy, blight, and abandonment, and the lack of economic activity in the neighborhood. These labor intensive and insightful conversations served as our lodestar as we sought to strategize and “make real” the aspirations and hopes of our community.

Part of our efforts involved working with students from Westinghouse High School and the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work to evaluate and map over 1,000 properties in Homewood. These efforts proved crucial to focusing our future efforts.

JUNIOR GREEN CORPS

JGC targets youth who face economic, educational, or personal barriers such as deficiencies in basic literacy skills, parenthood, and minor legal issues. Through strategic partnerships with other organizations, we provide our youth with access to the green industry and an opportunity to create a better tomorrow.

The program provides structured activities that impact the student's physical environment, equip them for leadership roles in the community, and give them with an opportunity to explore green collar jobs and careers; we provide a path to financial security while preparing the next generation of green-thinking Homewood leaders.

Focusing on revitalizing the Homewood community through education and engagement in environmental issues unique to this area, the JGC promotes environmentally responsible land use through creating and maintaining urban gardens, cutting down overgrown vacant lots, cleaning up illegal dumpsites through the help of Allegheny CleanWays, and educating students on sustainable uses for land. As part of the program, participants receive a stipend, academic support, and real-world workforce skills.

210 participated in the program
40 attended college or trade school
5 completed their degrees
50 hold part-time jobs

BRIDGE TO BENEFITS

Blight remediation and youth programming only began to address the major systemic problems facing Homewood. As OBB continued to develop its revenue streams in 2011 with the receipt of a state Neighborhood Assistance Program grant, the organization also looked for ways to help relieve some of the deep poverty and resource shortages faced by many residents. An analysis revealed that many families and individuals in Homewood were eligible for benefits they did not receive but that could close significant gaps for them.

Bridge to Benefits was created to help any Homewood resident complete the requisite processes needed to receive critical services such as housing vouchers, nutrition assistance, Social Security, Medicaid, and disability insurance.

This program helps to identify, educate, qualify, and enroll financially struggling families to receive public benefits. Many of Homewood's residents are deprived of basic necessities because they are not receiving the benefits that might be available to them. Bridge to Benefits exists to help close this gap. The goal was to connect residents to available community services and public benefits through a community-wide education campaign and strategic door-to-door outreach. By utilizing the mobile Benefits Banks ® enrollment, OBB completes enrollments, makes referrals, and performs case management duties. The overarching goal is to help residents access available services and benefits and avert financial crisis while moving toward financial stability and self-sufficiency.

1,201 participated in benefits

367 signed up for services
128 received emergency assistance
76 signed up Rebuilding Together
289 not eligible for services
70 attended budget/counseling
268 income taxes completed
He was looking for a job and found his future.

When you first meet Keshawn Brooks, you are immediately struck by his presence. There is a maturity, poise, and quiet strength about him. Soft-spoken yet loudly passionate about Homewood, this is one 19-year-old who is clearly going places.

Yes, you can actually sense all this from the initial handshake. While his eyes are alive and welcoming, it’s clear he has seen some things no 19-year-old should ever witness.

“Five years ago I was looking for a summer job, a neighbor told me about this new program at OBB, and I got lucky -- I got accepted as part of the Junior Green Corps,” says the Westinghouse High School graduate. “Little did I know it would change my life.”

Operation Better Block established the Junior Green Corps in 2010 to provide Pittsburgh youth, ages 14-18, with structured activities that impact their physical environment, equip them for leadership roles in the community, improve their academic achievement, and provide them with an opportunity to explore green collar jobs and careers.

In the midst of a running discourse on soil remediation, the ratio of trees to houses in Homewood (“too low, not enough”), a recent University of Pittsburgh air quality study, food deserts, and the proper method of water drainage, Keshawn talks about the mentoring he received -- and ended up giving to others through his five years with the program -- and how OBB provided him with the tools and training for his future.

“I’m heading off to Cheyney University [a historically black university in Philadelphia]. Last week I was packing for school and I came across a photo of me and six guys on the high school football team.”

His eyes briefly cloud over. He looks away.

“Six other guys. You know what? Three are in jail and three have been shot. Without OBB I’d be in one category or the other.”

“OBB not only changed my life, it saved my life.”

Keshawn is majoring in forensic science.
Convinced that a more holistic approach was needed in order to affect real change in the neighborhood, OBB began to look at other neighborhood-wide strategies that would have real impact. Realizing home ownership as a foundation for healthy families and thriving communities, OBB launched its Homeowner Stabilization Program in 2012.

That same year, the organization launched a pilot program called T11, which asked residents to think about what the Homewood of the future might look like. The program, which amounted to the inception of the Cluster Planning Process, was complemented that year by a grant from Neighborhood Allies, or the Pittsburgh Partnership for Neighborhood Development as it was then known, that funded a visioning process for collecting and articulating residents’ ideas about Homewood as an African American cultural destination.

**HOMEOWNER STABILIZATION SERVICES AND PROGRAMS**

**FORECLOSURE INTERVENTION AND ASSISTANCE**
Residents can be the subject of legal actions initiated by a collection agency (for taxes, water bills, mortgages, etc.) which may lead to the foreclosure of these residents’ homes. With the support of our legal consultant, we are able to intervene by contacting the party and working with them on behalf of the resident to mitigate the situation and develop an agreement that allows for the resident to remain in their home.

**TANGLED TITLE LEGAL ASSISTANCE**
Often time, a homeowner lives in the property but the title may actually be in a deceased family member’s name. This inhibits that current resident from accessing, necessary services for the home itself. Our legal consultant provides the expertise which includes public records research and meetings with residents to determine where title is vested and the current interests in the property (typically due to the death of the record owner) in order to determine a strategy for conveying title to the resident, as well as drafting PA inheritance tax returns, and notice to the Estate Recovery Program and Applications for Probate, when the record owner has left a will. This ultimately allows for the deed to be recorded in the current resident’s name which stabilizes and secures their interest in the property.

**LEGAL SERVICES AND HOUSING COUNSELING**
Many Homewood residents were unaware of the myriad of programs and services available to them through OBB’s assistance. As the programming began rolling out and more needs emerged, OBB curated the services based on the expertise on the team and the experiences of the homeowners. Property tax reductions and payment plans, assessment appeals, budget and credit counseling, and pro bono legal counseling around the areas of foreclosure intervention, title issues, power of attorney, and will preparation are now available to Homewood residents.

**Homeowner Stabilization for 2014-2016**

- **INTAKES**: 24
- **FORECLOSURE INTERVENTION**: 5
- **TANGLED TITLE**: 26
- **ESTATE PLANNING**: 9
“I never missed a single mortgage payment but almost lost my house.”

After a long day of volunteering at her beloved Bethany Baptist Church, Ms. Tonia walked her usual four-block route home, checked her mailbox, and was looking forward to putting her feet up for a few minutes before fixing dinner for her sister and nephew.

This typically quiet day on a quiet street was about to be upended; a letter from her mortgage holder was demanding a loan-maturation payment of $20,815.74. Due immediately. Foreclosure threatened.

Back in 2000 she had refinanced her home (“the foundation of our family”), enticed by the mortgage company’s promise of lower monthly payments. It was 15 years in the making, but Ms. Tonia was the latest in a long line of citizens victimized by a predatory lender.

According to debt.org, predatory lenders “typically target minorities, the poor, the elderly . . . since home loans are backed by a borrower’s real property, a predatory lender can profit not only from loan terms stacked in his or her favor, but also from the sale of a foreclosed home, if a borrower defaults.”

The 60-year Homewood resident had never missed a single mortgage payment. She dropped the letter from her shaking hands, clasped them together, and prayed “Lord, please keep this family together.”

Ms. Tonia married faith with action and met with Operation Better Block at its next community meeting. The organization provides pro bono legal assistance and housing counseling to residents in need. With its attorney fighting on her behalf, the lender eventually released the lien from her mortgage and forgave the five-figure balance on its so-called “balloon loan.”

“I looked it up later,” says Ms. Tonia. “It turned out this company misled a lot of people like myself and had to forgive a lot of these payments.”

“I'm so thankful for Operation Better Block -- I don't know how on earth I would have done without them," she says. "I wake up every morning with tears of joy that I can keep this home.”
2013

HOMEWOOD STATION

Any thriving cultural district needs a strong business corridor at its heart and a family friendly atmosphere. OBB, along with S+A Home and Oxford Development, looked to North Homewood Avenue, which serves as one of the major gateways to the neighborhood, as the site for its first new large-scale development. The new construction for the Homewood Station senior residence, which sits at the very entrance to the business district and features four commercial space on its ground floor, took place in early 2013. The 41 apartment-unit building was the first Low Income Housing Tax Credit project in Homewood.

TOTAL INVESTMENT

$12 M

SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL

Homewood houses several schools and is home to more than 2,000 children. In order to nurture children and young families as well as the neighborhood’s senior citizens, OBB also worked on designating Safe Routes to School for children. Creating community buy-in over children’s safe passage to and from school laid the groundwork for creating a more attractive environment for families to live in.

Homewood Children’s Village (HCV) engaged Faison Elementary School teachers and parents to start Walk to School Day events to encourage more students to walk to school. Simultaneously, we worked with residents surrounding Faison to petition for more crossing guards and better traffic control. Through our partnership with HCV, we were able to get the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to conduct a walkability audit for Faison free of charge. This audit provided us with a list of action items that enabled the City of Pittsburgh to improve student safety.

KIVA TRUSTEE

OBB became a Kiva Trustee in 2013 with our first borrower being The Wheel Mill. Kiva is a social underwriting, international nonprofit that connects businesses and entrepreneurs to 0% interest loans through crowdfunding. Rather than requiring credit or collateral, Kiva assesses character and trust networks; this is done through trustees, which are people or organizations that publicly vouch for interested borrowers in their community.

OBB went on to endorse three other loans and in 2016 became a third tier trustee. This is the highest trustee level, signifying that our borrowers have an extraordinary repayment rate for their loans. Through these loans combined, OBB has made an impact of $19,500 and will continue to invest in small business and entrepreneurs in Homewood.
When it comes to his commitment to Homewood, it’s clear that he means business.

The Brown Insurance Agency was the first commercial tenant to take up residence in the new Homewood Station building, a point of pride for this Homewood native, serial entrepreneur, and community champion.

“I remember speaking with [OBB Executive Director] Jerome Jackson when this beautiful new building was just plans on paper,” says Mr. Brown. “I said ‘I want in!’ It’s been my passion to bring opportunity to the community I come from and the community I care for.”

Speaking from the insurance company’s brightly lit waiting area, care and pride of place infuse the scene. The spotless plate-glass windows reveal a professional in his prime, brimming with a business man’s confident demeanor, masking the end-of-day fatigue of one used to grueling 70-hour work weeks.

“I spent the earlier part of my career in social services, counseling at-risk youth and working with transitioning incarcerated people back into society,” says Mr. Brown. “I will be always be committed to those causes, I’m just approaching it now from a different viewpoint.”

A product of Westinghouse High School and Saint Vincent College, Mr. Brown believes in the transformational power of business to improve Homewood and the lives of its residents.

“More businesses in this community means more jobs, more money, and providing more opportunities,” says the veteran of many business ventures. “Take this insurance business: The better it does, the more mentoring and job training I can provide for more young people— they can get their [insurance] licence, master a trade, make some money and make a contribution to this neighborhood.”

Lauding the fact that OBB “has been on the scene trying to help Homewood for all these years,” Mr. Brown is bullish on the potential of the organization’s intensive Cluster Planning to guide the community’s redevelopment.

“I want to see more businesses, more kids playing in our streets, more homeownership — so we can all thrive together. When you have a stake in your community and your voices are heard and amplified, that’s how we build momentum.”
CLUSTER PLANNING PROCESS

By 2014, some of OBB’s efforts in the previous years were beginning to mature and pay dividends. Pittsburgh’s Animal Rescue League decided to relocate to a brand new facility in the neighborhood, while OBB was called upon to help inform the nascent Pittsburgh Land Bank. In collaboration with GTECH, the JGC planted its first and City of Pittsburgh’s largest Sunflower Lot, which uses the natural characteristics of the flowers to remediate the lead content of soil.

The seminal event for OBB in 2014, however, was the launch of the Cluster Planning Process. The process was introduced in response to the widespread construction and development activities taking place across Pittsburgh, especially in neighboring Larimer and East Liberty. Homewood, with its access to the East Busway and major thoroughfares and a plentitude of vacant, contiguous, affordable, flat land is a natural next step for developers expanding out from the revived commercial and business hub in East Liberty. The central goal of the Cluster Planning Process was to guide the change that is coming to Homewood in manner that reflects the interests of Homewood residents. The detailed land use vision for Homewood’s future that emerged out of the process is based on the needs and desires of existing, present-day community stakeholders.

"THERE IS NO DEVELOPMENT THAT IS FOR US, THAT IS NOT LED BY US."

- Executive Director Jerome Jackson

The process engaged approximately 2,500 adult residents by identifying nine distinct residential areas and business and institutional core - the Clusters - and working with residents and business owners in each of those areas of the community. Building on neighborhood assets, the Cluster Plans embody a vision for what should happen to vacant property, what types of development are right for different parts of Homewood, where houses should be renovated, mothballed, or demolished, and where new ones should be built, as well as where new businesses, industrial uses, or parks should be located.

The network of green spaces, gardens, parks, and even farms, is a significant feature of the Plans that will help transform Homewood into the cultural and food destination neighborhood it aspires to become.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT BY THE NUMBERS

Homewood residents and stakeholders were invited to public planning meetings to offer opinions, provide information, and share their hopes for each Cluster.

While the Cluster Planning Process was continuing through 2014 and 2015, OBB was able to leverage the initiative to build new assets and partnerships. The organization received an important grant from The Pittsburgh Foundation to help streamline data collection, something that was to prove pivotal in creating our new database, while OBB entered into a Strengthening Communities Partnership with the Allegheny Conference and received Neighborhood Partnership Program funds from the state. By the time the Cluster Plans were unveiled in November of 2015, OBB was in a strong position to move into a new phase of Homewood’s organic revitalization process.
Intentional About Change

“If people have hope things can change, they can,” says Ms. Denise, an almost lifelong Homewood resident (“I didn’t move here until the third grade”).

Operation Better Block helped her and her neighbors turn hope into action by successfully applying for a Love Your Block grant. Run by the City of Pittsburgh in partnership with Peoples Gas and Home Depot, the program annually awards $1,000 grants to 20 community groups. Paired with the assistance of city employees, the program helps communities to help themselves.

What was once a trash-filled vacant lot has been transformed into an inviting flower garden and community gathering space, enhancing the appearance and safety of their street.

“This is about residents regaining pride in their neighborhoods and communities,” she says.

While Ms. Denise had been aware of OBB’s work over the years, this first-hand encounter inspired her to learn more about the organization and bolstered her resolve to become more engaged in its community development activities; now she is a Board Member.

“Know the process and get involved,” says the proud mother of two adult children. “Change takes time but it does happen if we are intentional about change. That’s why the organization’s Cluster Planning Process is so important to guiding future development efforts -- it was planned, purposeful, intentional.”

She stresses the importance of recognizing that most residents can and want to contribute -- but often feel that they are held back and out of the loop (“someone else can do this, someone who knows how all this works”) and that OBB empowers people to work together and make sure that “we are accountable to each other and that our elected officials are accountable to us.”

“What keeps me motivated is HOPE,” she says in a voice rising with emotion. “And let’s face it, I’m old. We need our younger people to have that HOPE as well. They need to get involved and make a difference.”

“WHAT KEEPS ME MOTIVATED IS HOPE.”
CLUSTER ASSOCIATIONS

Momentum and enhanced community connections continue. Every month we send mailers, make phone calls, and canvass door-to-door to ensure residents the opportunity to be heard at their monthly Cluster Association meetings. These reciprocal exchanges of information and resources continue to foster camaraderie and inculcate resident leadership. OBB has earmarked grant funds for every cluster to implement projects identified in the Cluster Vision. This is also the table at which new development projects are proposed to the neighborhood.

JAMES T. GIVNER BUILDING

This new development will facilitate the relocation of existing businesses and the attraction of new ones on a block that serves as one of the primary gateways to the neighborhood; a welcome extension of development from the Homewood Station Senior Apartments further into the Business-Institutional Corridor.

During the Cluster Visioning process, community members expressed the need for more food, both restaurants and grocery stores, and additional retail options. The two-story James T. Givner building will feature four ground floor commercial units. The second floor will host seven one-bedroom apartments, one of which will be wheelchair accessible. Nine parking spaces will be in the rear of the building.

PARCEL-RESIDENT TRACKING DATABASE

OBB's enterprise-scale Parcel-Resident Tracking Database is a significant investment -- rare among peer community groups -- that is vital to guiding and prioritizing economic development. It greatly expands our capacity and undergirds how we are transforming our Cluster Plans into reality. The database includes existing characteristics such as cluster, ownership, vacancy status, tax delinquency status, type of structure and more than 90 additional property condition indicators. Data sources include property condition surveys conducted by OBB staff, residents, and consultants, UCSUR, the City of Pittsburgh Department of Finance, and Permits, Licensing and Inspections.

RACE STREET

Operation Better Block acquired 4 vacant homes for renovation. The homes will be developed by Operation Better Block and will utilize a workforce development program for stabilizing and rehabbing the homes for resale. Operation Better Block will sell the homes upon completion, and all proceeds will be recycled to continue the homeownership program. These four homes are all along the four blocks of Race Street, one of the most stable and engaged blocks in the neighborhood.

OCCUPIED RENOVATIONS

In partnership with Rebuilding Together Pittsburgh, homeowners received upgrades to their homes so that they are safe and up to standard at no cost of the resident. Homes receive various levels of renovations including roof repair/replacement, vital updates to electrical systems, and installations of safety equipment like grab bars and railings. The houses completed with major renovations allow elderly or disabled homeowners to remain in their home and remain current on taxes thus stabilizing Homewood as a community. Without OBB’s engagement, the vast majority of these home rehabilitation projects would not be possible. Rebuilding’s operations do not permit the organization to provide services when the title of the home is not clean or when back taxes are an issue. OBB provides the interface to pre-qualify area residents for Rebuilding’s programs.
OPERATION BETTER BLOCK, INC.

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OPERATING BUDGET

CONTRIBUTED INCOME SOURCES

EXPENSE COMPOSITION

SPECIAL THANKS
Resident portraits by Sandige Photography Group owner and founder Ahmad Sandige. The lifelong Homewood resident’s studio is located at 528 North Homewood Avenue in the Homewood Station Building.
www.sandidgephotography.com

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