

## Residents seeking role in urban turnaround

Encouraging the people who live in underserved 'priority neighbourhoods' to come up with solutions to their problems is the first step to improving their prospects, forum is told

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**LAURIE MONSEBRAATEN**

**DONOVAN VINCENT**

STAFF REPORTERS

In a forum dominated by talk of "community consultation" and "resident engagement," Eva Tavares, a mother of five, got to the heart of the matter.

"I lived in Lawrence Heights for 25 years and when I left to live in another part of the city, I found another life," she told more than 300 people last night at a forum on revitalizing neighbourhoods in need, sponsored by the *Toronto Star*.



"Why didn't we have great playgrounds and programs? Why were our youth walking around without anything to do? I couldn't see this anymore. It hurt me," she said, recounting her decision to return to Lawrence Heights and try to make a difference.

It's no coincidence that neighbourhoods plagued by gun violence, poverty and despair are also those with the worst access to public transit, the fewest recreation centres and the least number of services for newcomers or low-income families, the forum heard.

In the city's inner suburbs, banks and shopping centres are scarce. And essentials like doctors' offices, employment centres and places to learn English are often a crowded bus ride away.

But new attention and funding from government and community agencies aimed at reversing decades of decline in the inner suburbs is bringing hope.

And residents must play a key role in the turnaround.

A community's most important resource is its residents, said Winston Tinglin, director of community engagement for the Toronto Community Social Planning Council.

"The heart and soul of these communities are the residents," said Tinglin, who is overseeing a United Way-funded community revitalization project in Toronto's Weston-Mount Dennis area.

"Engaging residents themselves in designing the solutions to their problems is a huge part of this, as is building resident leadership," he said.

When it happens, residents become energized and empowered and start seeing possibilities, he said.

Weston-Mount Dennis, in the former city of York, is one of 13 "priority neighbourhoods" identified by the city and the United Way for new community programs and services to help combat poverty and the lack of community support.

Residents already have a stake in these communities because they live there, Tinglin said.

If they are given a chance to play a central role in determining what the priorities are and if they are part of discussions with government and local institutions about what is needed, there is a greater chance of long-term success, he told the forum.

But residents need support. They need basic training on how to run community meetings, lobby city hall, apply for grants, form and maintain resident associations and committees.

And they need access to money to pay for things that can act as catalysts for change.

Sean Meagher, project manager for Action for Neighbourhood Change in Scarborough Village, said that community's decision to spend \$80,000 in federal funding for playground equipment sparked a wide range of exciting community initiatives.

The playground equipment not only gave neighbourhood kids something to do, it brought parents together in an informal way and got them talking about other improvements they would like, Meagher said.

The 1999 death of 3-year-old Breanna Davy, killed in the cross fire of an attempted murder in Toronto's Jane-Finch community, prompted the creation of the Black Creek West Capacity Building Project.

Working closely with city officials, residents have formed working groups aimed at building neighbourhood pride, improving job prospects for residents, making better use of green space; improving access to education and enhancing services, said project co-ordinator Christine Davis.

Residents want to create a community archives to document the neighbourhood's rich history. Another group wants to start nature walks along Black Creek. And others are working on establishing a community loan fund to help residents start local businesses, Davis said.

Since gun violence and youth crime are prevalent in the inner suburbs, it's important to include young people in neighbourhood revitalization plans, said Kosal Ky, executive director of For Youth Initiative. The program, run by and for youth has been operating in the Keele St. and Eglinton Ave. W. area for about 10 years and is part of the Weston-Mount Dennis neighbourhood revitalization plan.

Many residents say youth are the problem, Ky said, so let's make them part of the solution. Youth should be part of every aspect of community planning, from policing to economic development, she told the forum.

Ky is excited that the City of Toronto has just approved a new recreation centre for the corner of Eglinton Ave. W. and Black Creek Dr. Youth need a place to gather and to call their own, she said.