

“Pivoting to something else” Case Study

VACV is a 501c3 organization with a mission to equip neighbors in marginalized communities to realize their vision for their neighborhoods, and prepare institutions to respond effectively.

Demographics: VACV was founded by a Black woman; 81% of staff are women. Approximately 46% of VACV staff are Black, 36% are Latina, and 18% are White. The board of directors is 75% people of color. Organizational demographics overrepresent historically underrepresented groups (Black and Latinx). Along the Richmond Highway Corridor (RHC) where VACV engages neighbors, 60% of residents are Black, 21% are White, 100% are Hispanic, and 9% identify as other. The RVA Thrives Steering Committee is 100% Black. VACV works tirelessly to diversify staff and engagement to include more Latinx neighbors. For example, the first two survey processes in 2017 and 2018 represented 900 people along the corridor, and only had a 4% response rate from Latinx neighbors. In 2019, VACV hired three Latina community advocates and the next community survey had a 29% response rate from the Latinx community! The 2019 Housing Summit was bilingual and about 20 of the 65 people there were Latinx. The Housing Working Group is also bilingual.

Culture: VACV is an antiracist organization, whose Executive Director and staff intentionally challenge white dominant culture in the following ways:

- Creating an environment where people can be their full selves and share what is happening in their personal lives as they unfold, including regularly sharing about experiences of racism and oppression, even if it means meetings do not adhere rigidly to an agenda.
- Holding each other accountable. When white staff uphold white supremacy culture norms, this does not go unchecked. White staff are called in and invited to examine what happened and why it is problematic and learn how to dismantle, rather than uphold white supremacy norms.
- Promoting equity for staff by using a non-accrual leave system, offering 4 months paid maternity leave, paying Community Advocates no less than \$20 / hour; paying full health insurance premium for full-time staff; accepting staff working from home prior to the pandemic.

Programming: Since 2017, VACV has successfully listened to and engaged more than 1000 neighbors in marginalized communities along the Corridor through RVA Thrives. This community engagement process started with listening. RVA Thrives asked neighbors: “What

would it look like and take for the Richmond Highway Corridor community to thrive?" To understand community perspectives, VACV hired Community Advocates, people who live in neighborhoods along the Corridor or have lived experience with issues facing the corridor. Community Advocates conducted 100 one-to-one conversations, 50 recorded interviews, and collected 700+ surveys from corridor neighbors to better understand their lived experience and neighbors' vision for the future of their community. Eleven issues rose to the top. In early 2018, a committee of local leaders from 11 neighborhoods formed to scope those issues and start crafting solutions. The RVA Thrives Steering Committee has decision-making authority over which issues to focus on, and how solutions will be crafted and implemented. Since then, neighbors have planned and implemented six community clean up days, two affordable housing summits, and a youth arts and civic advocacy program. Today, the RVA Thrives Steering Committee meets monthly for community-building, fellowship over dinner and training on topics such as community organizing, trust-building, nonprofit fundraising, and advocacy. Neighbors work collectively to decide how they will each engage and mobilize neighbors in their own neighborhoods in response to issues facing the Southside, such as a recently proposed casino development.

The youth arts and civic advocacy program VACV launched in 2019 took more resources and time to operate than expected. It was highly successful; youth, artists and funders want it to continue; yet VACV had to determine whether it would be feasible to continue operating this program given the demands it put on staff. VACV explained this to the funder, and indicated that the program would not continue unless more funding was made available and on a two year timeframe, including a year to plan. Rather than conform to funder expectations, VACV was open and honest about the time and resources it takes to do community engagement and civic advocacy work with youth. The next grant cycle, the funder awarded the organization additional funds on a two-year time frame.