



Comprehensive Community Development

**CASE STUDY**

# Nurturing Community Leadership for Systemic Change

**CODMAN SQUARE NEIGHBORHOOD  
DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION**

**CCD PRINCIPLES HIGHLIGHTED:**



INTENTIONAL  
APPROACH



COMMUNITY  
DRIVEN



LAYERED  
STRATEGIES



GUIDING  
VISION & PLAN



STRATEGIC  
PARTNERSHIPS



COORDINATED  
LEADERSHIP



LAYERED  
INVESTMENT

## KEY INSIGHTS

- Codman Square has significantly increased its organizational capacity by empowering residents to become leaders, resulting in more community-driven initiatives and stronger local advocacy.
- These initiatives have facilitated greater resident involvement in civic processes, with many actively participating in city budgeting hearings and forming strategic relationships with legislators.
- By focusing on leadership development and community organizing, Codman Square has created a solid foundation for sustainable, long-term transformation.

### Crises Become Catalysts for Change

In 2020, Boston's housing crisis reached a pinnacle, characterized by skyrocketing rents and long waitlists against the backdrop of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Coupled with the heightened visibility of racial injustice following George Floyd's murder, these challenges starkly highlighted the urgent need for systemic change. This convergence of crises served as the catalyst for the Codman Square Neighborhood Development Corporation to reimagine the approach to its mission.

### Community Organizing as a Central Strategy

Located in Boston's Dorchester neighborhood, Codman Square has historically worked to improve the community by focusing on real estate development and affordable housing. In 2020, the team began to reevaluate this traditional approach when the housing crisis combined with a commuter rail line expansion in the area raised growing concerns about gentrification and displacement. On top of the racial injustice and health disparities that had come into heavy focus, the team

recognized that while building and rehabilitating homes helped improve neighborhood conditions, they needed to address the underlying entrenched systems perpetuating existing neighborhood conditions. Significant, long-term progress would require dismantling these systems through continuous effort and advocacy—aspects of community development that cannot be accomplished through building structures. To make progress out of response crisis mode, they needed to broaden their capacity by tapping into community members willing and able to take the lead and advocate for change.

Codman Square had always incorporated community organizing into their efforts, but they made it central to their new approach. They developed a comprehensive strategy centered on leadership development, aiming to empower residents with the skills needed to drive systemic change and create lasting impacts.

“Crises are an opportunity for change,” said Marilyn Forman, Director of Community Organizing and Resident Engagement. “This is a really good time for people to understand how to use the resources and the tools given to them to then be a part of the change in the system. Everybody is an organizer in their own right, especially during times of crisis.”

### Leadership Training Academies

Three training academies were created to prepare residents for community leadership: the Anti-Racism Academy; Community Action 101, part of their environmental justice work; and a Resident Leadership Institute (RLI), a 24-hour training program

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—**DARLENE HARRISON**  
*Community Organizer*

designed to teach resident leaders the fundamentals of community organizing, policy advocacy, asset mapping, and facilitating community-building initiatives.

The leadership programs aim to empower residents to understand their influence and actively participate in shaping their neighborhoods. They provide tools for community members to organize and work collaboratively, increase civic participation and advocacy, navigate neighborhood challenges and feel empowered to use their voices in driving collective action.

“People can step into their power, and they are even stronger when they know how to use it,” said Meredith Geraghty, VP of Base Building Strategy. “This is where the educational piece of building leaders and developing the leadership within the community comes in.”



## Advocacy and Engagement Outcomes

The rise in community organizing and engagement as a result of the training programs is evident in numerous ways. Among them;

- Community Action 101 training attendees spoke to state legislators during a lobby day and joined monthly virtual meetings with the Boston delegation to present their concerns. This years-long fight recently saw progress when the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority announced plans to electrify the line in 2027, a key demand from the community.
- RLI participants built a community asset map identifying vacant lots with the potential to become valuable community assets, such as community gardens or dog parks. Participants learned how to identify and involve relevant legislators and key stakeholders, have begun forming relationships with their representatives, and understand who to approach and hold accountable for their concerns.
- Empowered by community training, many residents have actively participated in the City of Boston's budgeting hearings advocating for the allocation of funds to their communities and essential resources.
- Seniors who attended a leadership training program hosted by Codman Square at their housing property voiced concerns to legislators at a community event, which resulted in initiatives for crosswalk installations and pothole repairs.

## The Power of Collective Change

In the wake of the pandemic, community organizing requires greater investment and effort to maintain momentum. Engagement patterns have shifted, making resident leadership crucial at every step and requiring sustained effort to continue progress.

By focusing on community leadership at the forefront of their mission, Codman Square is addressing the immediate housing crises while laying the groundwork for sustainable, long-term improvements. Leaders like Darlene Harrison, a highly engaged community organizer and volunteer, exemplify the significant, positive change that residents can drive when equipped with the right tools and support.

Harrison has attended multiple Codman Square leadership training programs, where she learned her rights as a tenant and how to advocate for herself and her neighborhood. She also learned how to organize community events and used that knowledge to host an event for residents.



She believes the training programs have given her vital support as she strives to empower others. She has become a leader whom many community members come to first for advice.

“I know that in order to change, you have to make the change,” Darlene said. “And it doesn’t take just one person; it takes a group of people to make change.”

Codman Square’s initiative has helped facilitate these groups of change-makers, fostering renewed energy around policy decisions, advocacy for neighborhood improvements, and increased mutual support. This collective action empowers residents to create a vibrant, resilient community that not only meets their current needs but is also designed to thrive well into the future.

## LEARN MORE

- **Learn about** the Codman Square Neighborhood Development Corporation.
- **Read more** about their Resident Leadership Institute.
- **View a summary** of their Advocacy Campaigns.