

Informal Networks: A New Arena for Planning Intervention

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Informal networks are family, friend, and neighbor connections that provide critical support services to individuals in the community. These networks often go unnoticed by planners and are more invisible than other forms of service delivery. Planners can promote and link informal networks to formal services to help individuals and families support each other and strengthen communities.

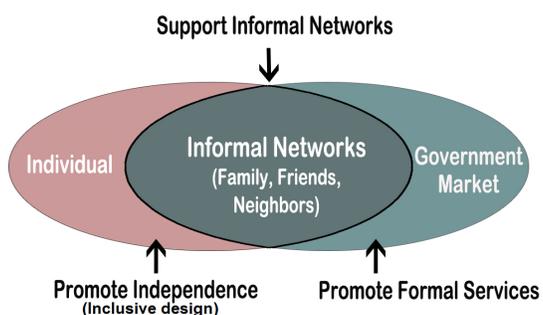
What is an Informal Network?

Planners usually focus on service delivery, infrastructure, and the built environment. Despite their importance to community members, planners pay almost no attention to family, friend, and neighbor networks. **Informal networks are an untapped resource that presents unique opportunities for planning intervention.** Everybody relies on networks!

An informal network can be as simple as paying a neighborhood kid to shovel your driveway, to more organized networks like car sharing or neighborhood referral agencies. These informal networks are influenced by the age, gender, class, ethnicity, or the years that an individual has been a member of the community. These characteristics lead to differences in how individuals engage with informal networks can present both challenges and opportunities for planners.

By harnessing the power of informal networks, planners can enable individual independence while strengthening communities.

Planners' Three Roles



Source: Warner et al. 2013, (Overview)

The Role of Informal Care Networks

A "care network" is a common form of informal network. Parents often utilize informal networks of family, friends, or neighbors to watch children. By providing supportive neighborhood connections and easier access to service supports like snow shoveling or shopping, informal networks can enable elders to safely and comfortably age in place.

Informal networks can support multigenerational planning initiatives by:

- Strengthening community connections, which can enable individual independence for both children and elders.
- Creating care networks for the elderly and children, which decreases pressure on caregivers or the "sandwich" generation.
- Making communities safe for children and elders by creating a naturally occurring "Neighborhood Watch" through fostering connections and communication among neighbors.
- Encouraging intergenerational interaction (which has multiple benefits for a person's health).
- Complement and enhance the effectiveness of formal service delivery, which can alter the role of government intervention and the costs of caring for elders and children.

Planners can facilitate and foster family, friend, and neighbor networks to help encourage the development of supportive communities that are more livable for everyone.

Engaging Informal Networks Across Difference

Everybody has networks, but engagement with informal networks varies across race, class, geographic location, and age. When facilitating and supporting these family, friend, and neighbor connections, planners must be aware of how these informal networks vary across different communities.

The roles and importance of informal networks *vary across the life cycle* as community members find support through different types of informal networks at various stages in life.

Examples:

- Young professionals starting their careers take advantage of neighbor-to-neighbor carsharing.
- Busy parents often rely on the support of informal networks (neighborhood babysitters, cooperative preschools and nurseries) for affordable child care.
- Elders depend heavily upon informal networks as they age. Maintaining social relationships has positive health effects, reduces mortality and helps elders live happier and longer lives.

Informal networks are the most critical yet also the most fragile for members of the lower socio-economic class. As individuals fall upon hard times, the role of supportive informal networks becomes more important but despite their importance, informal networks can become more tenuous for individuals who rely on their support the most.

Recognizing the importance of informal networks in poor neighborhoods, the *Asset-Based Community Development Institute at Northwestern University* has worked to develop a framework for reinforcing and strengthening informal networks in low-income communities. [McKnight](#) et al. (1996) use the Grand Boulevard Community as a case study to explore the role of informal networks in low-income communities.

Planners can use money from Community Development Block Grants to help strengthen informal networks. [Savannah's Grants-For-Blocks](#) program used CDBG funds to award mini-grants of up to \$500 dollars to help community groups implement neighborhood improvement and beautification projects. By legitimizing the role of neighborhood associations and giving residents agency, this effort encouraged civic engagement and collaboration in the community.

Charlotte Caplan, a past administrator of Grants-for-Blocks, described the success of this program, **"The real benefit is not just in the projects themselves, it is in the collaboration they inspire. People get to know their neighbors, they get involved in their neighborhood associations and come to city meetings. They have been given a voice."**

Informal networks are also crucial in helping new immigrants adjust to life in the United States. [Valdivia](#) et al. (2012) studied the impact of social networks on the creation of cultural capital, and the accumulation of English and Spanish language skills and education in Latino communities in the United States. Informal networks help Latino newcomers develop effective and broad connections to access resources and support one another. These networks help individuals build strong social connections that new immigrants use to find jobs in rural communities, support businesses, and maintain a lifestyle that allows them to succeed in the United States. Policies that facilitate networks and integration with the broader community can increase opportunities for wealth creation and access to knowledge.

Despite differences across communities, all informal networks provide individuals with support systems that help manage the challenges of everyday life. **Everybody has networks and these family, friend, and neighbor connections make communities more livable, enjoyable and sustainable places for all!**

Opportunities for Planners

Today, there is a wide range of tools and initiatives that use the power of informal networks and technology to benefit society and promote integrated service delivery across generations.

In an era of fiscal stress, private initiatives like membership-based organizations, internet networks, possibilities for co-production, or shared services can all be harnessed by planners to reinforce and strengthen the linkages between the individual community members, the market, the government and informal networks. The following place-based examples use transportation, information sharing, community building and care support to illustrate just a few of the many ways that planners can use informal networks to benefit communities.

I. Transportation

Neighbor-to-Neighbor Carsharing: An Inexpensive Alternative to Car Ownership

Neighbor-to-Neighbor carsharing is an alternative type of carsharing that utilizes informal networks to provide access to cheap transportation for drivers. Instead of leaving their cars sitting unused in a garage, individual car owners can rent their vehicles to other members of the community. Car owners can set their own price per hour or day and rent their vehicle whenever they're not planning on driving. People who need a car can sign up to rent the vehicle with the approval of the owner.

All the cars are covered by a liability insurance policy that protects owners against claims from third parties for injuries and property damage. Car owners can make an average of \$1000 per month and drivers can rent cars for as little as \$5 per hour. Neighbor-to-neighbor carsharing programs can provide elders, who may drive less and less as they age, with the opportunity to both make some extra money and foster new connections in their community. At minimal cost planners can implement this transportation program to provide community members with a convenient alternative to direct car ownership. Planners can advertise carsharing, exhibit its social, environmental and economic benefits, ensure its legitimacy and link it to other community transportation systems.



 **Ryan's Jeep 1997**
Portland, OR



 **Corey's MDX 2006**
Berkeley, CA

Source: relayrides.com

Neighbor-to-Neighbor Carsharing Examples

[RelayRides](#) - Started in neighborhoods around Boston and San Francisco, it is available nationwide from major cities to rural towns.

[Getaround](#) - Found in San Francisco and the Bay Area, Portland, Chicago, and in San Diego.

[Wheelz](#) - Found in San Francisco, Berkeley, Palo Alto, Los Angeles, Claremont and Pasadena.

Non-Profit Transportation Services: ITN America

Another unique approach to smart community transportation specifically designed for the needs of seniors is [ITN America](#). ITN America is the first national non-profit transportation network for America's aging population that "marries the power of information technology and the strength of local, grassroots support to create an efficient and financially sustainable solution to the transportation needs of seniors and their families".

ITN is a membership-based vehicle cooperative that uses cars instead of vans or buses to pick up clients at their doors and take them anywhere in the service area. Seniors and visually impaired adults can use this 24/7 service to schedule their rides, alone or with others, to destinations of their choice. **ITN offers affordable fares that are typically lower than a comparable taxi ride and it provides arm-through-arm, door-through-door service and help with packages.** Clients and their families plan and pay for transportation that effectively replaces the need to own a private car through this vehicle cooperative.

ITN is an example of a privately funded initiative that can provide community members with a transportation option without imposing additional costs on fiscally stressed local governments.

ITNAmerica provides its affiliate communities with a sustainable business model to follow and inclusion in national corporate sponsorship and grant programs.

ITN related initiatives:

- Programs to help low income seniors pay for their rides
- Cooperation with merchants, health care providers and other community organizations that share the costs to provide transportation services for their members/customers
- Training of volunteer drivers who receive transportation credits for their volunteer efforts. Car trade / car donation programs that are the primary ways ITN acquires vehicles for service.

Communities that affiliate with ITN include:

Charleston, SC; Chicago, IL; Portland, ME; Orlando and Sarasota, FL; Los Angeles, San Diego, and Monterey, CA; Lexington, KY; Enfield, Middlesex, Middletown, West Hartford, Westport and Fairfield County, CT; the Quad Cities of Iowa; Cincinnati, OH; Las Vegas, NV; Racine, WI; St. Charles, MO; Memphis, TN; Boston, MA; Detroit, MI.

II. Social networks grounded in place

Online social networking has become a popular and useful way to stay connected to friends and family who live in different places. Most of these online social networks are used to maintain relationships across distance. Another type of online, place-based social networking is becoming more popular in communities across America. These new social networks are “hyperlocal”—online networks grounded in place and used by neighbors in a specific geographic area. These place-based social networks combine Facebook, Craigslist, community bulletin boards, and referral agencies all in one.

Social networks grounded in place build stronger communities



Source: nextdoor.com

Examples of these initiatives include [Nextdoor](#), [HomeElephant](#), and [Neighbortree](#). These online networks allow communities to create geographic-based neighborhood websites to facilitate communication among neighbors, strengthen local ties, and build stronger neighborhoods. **The sites allow residents to share information, advice, recommendations, and announcements.** Posts in these online networks include everything from announcements for local events, school fundraisers to plumber and babysitter recommendations to

information regarding recent crime activity, upcoming garage sales, neighborhood watch alerts, and notices for lost pets. These networks provide an online community board to keep all neighbors aware of any neighborhood activity. Recently, police departments and fire departments integrated their service with “Nextdoor” so they can work with neighbors to create safer neighborhoods. Police departments in Dallas, San Jose, and Orlando have started to use [Nextdoor’s Virtual Neighborhood Watch](#) to communicate with homeowners.

Nextdoor is free for users, neighborhoods and cities. It is privately funded by several Venture Capital Firms and individual investors. **The business model works with local businesses to provide special offers to neighbors and this advertising covers all local costs.** This enables communities to support their local businesses, build neighborhood connections and save money. Planners can give these local online networking sites legitimacy so residents will feel safe to join them.

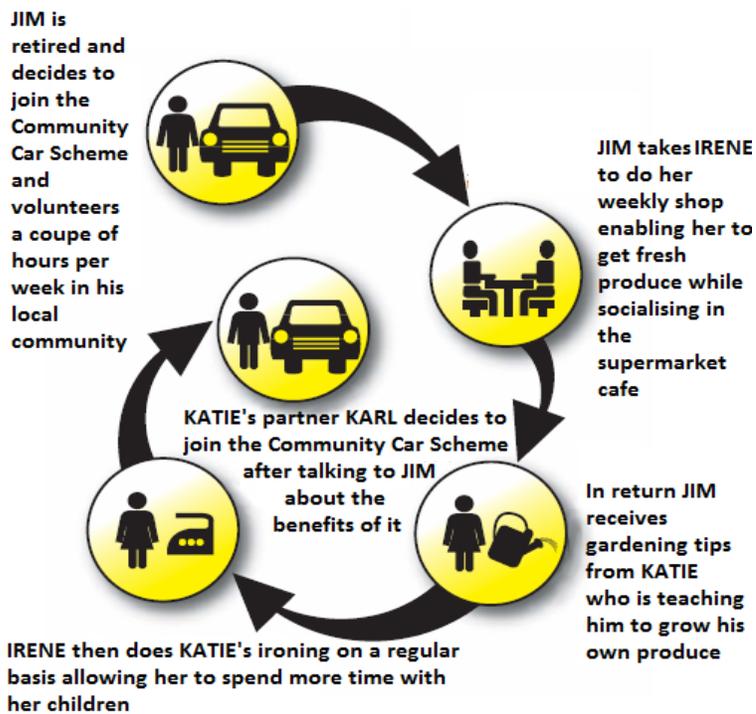
In **Redwood City, California**, a very diverse city of mixed ages and income, Nextdoor has fostered connections between neighbors and has encouraged residents to build a stronger community.

Residents have used Nextdoor as an online network that serves as a neighborhood skills and asset database. Residents submit their skills, talents, or assets that they can contribute to the neighborhood. For example, a resident may list a ladder they could lend for cleaning gutters. One resident listed that she was a nurse and could help in case of a medical emergency. In Redwood City, Nextdoor has encouraged residents to use their own resources to strengthen their community.

III. Timebanking and Reciprocal Exchange Economy

Timebanking is a means of reciprocal service exchange in which time is substituted for currency. Members of the community use their skills to help others by exchanging hours instead of money. Members earn “time dollars” by performing a service like driving a neighbor to the grocery store, and then then can spend those time dollars on some other service, like having someone fix a gutter or tutor a child.

An example of how Timebanks work



Source: <http://www.helpdirect.org.uk/preston-south-ribble/other-projects/time-banks/>

Timebanking provides a new kind of mutual insurance scheme and is a proven way to build and sustain a local, practical, and supportive informal network in the community. In some situations timebanks are created by the community with a specific aim such as to create networks of companionship and support for isolated and lonely members of the community.

Timebanks are membership based and do not require local government funding. Planners can play a role in creating, organizing, and advertising timebanks in order to promote long-term community sustainability and strengthen neighborhood networks.

Timebanks are increasingly connected with [health care](#) organizations. The Visiting Nurse Service of New York, Elderplan, a New York health insurance company and hospitals such as the Lehigh Valley Health Network, based in Allentown, Pa., run their own time banks. Lehigh Valley Health Network began its Community Exchange time bank as a way for senior citizens to feel more connected to the community and empowered patients to recover at home. **Health organizations use time banks because they believe these networks benefit patients and cut the cost of health care.** [TimeBanks USA](#) offers a searchable directory of time banks by name, city, state, or country.

D. Care Networks and Social Networking

Social networks can promote independence for a wide range of individuals who may be dependent on their families for support in daily living. For example, young adults with autism rely heavily on the support of their families for advice on employment, relationships, self-care, and daily living. Researchers at the Georgia Tech College of Computing developed the concept of an online social network called [SocialMirror](#) that allows young adults with autism to ask questions and get advice from a trusted network of family, friends, and caregiving professionals. For example, before an upcoming event, the individual with autism could upload a picture and ask if he or she is dressed appropriately.

Through design of this online network the researchers found that parents and caregivers agreed on the value of a social network to distribute the labor associated with providing support to an individual. A counselor noted that an extended trusted network was desirable because an individual's needs become more complex as he or she assumes independence. A 'trust committee' service is a collective stable group of supportive people who can provide advice. The social networking system allows the trust committee to have access to the individual who needs help at anytime and anywhere. "If you can harness all the people that care about that individual, that is really powerful. Everybody is tuned in at a given time" ([Hong](#), 2012).

SocialMirror is designed to help young adults with autism achieve a more independent lifestyle. This program is a powerful example of how **an online social device can leverage a network of caregivers.** Similar online networks could be leveraged to help young parents or elders as they age. SocialMirror illustrates the power of technology to foster informal networks that can enable individual independence.

Conclusion

In this time of fiscal constraint, the role of planners in promoting, designing and advertising new ways of using informal networks for multigenerational purposes is substantial. Utilizing these informal networks in the provision of services can offer more support to individuals and create communities that are more livable for everyone across the life cycle.

Planners can share information. By recruiting and introducing initiatives such as ITN America, Nextdoor, SocialMirror etc that follow alternative business models and don't burden local governments with additional costs, planners can use the power of informal networks to promote community development and support individuals of all ages.

Sharing information and enhancing interaction between the individual and informal networks can help planners meet community needs and develop new ideas for alternative solutions. Creating interaction between public services and these networks, as in the example of the cooperation between the police and Nextdoor, can have multiple benefits for the community.

Planners can stimulate participation. By introducing these ideas to the public, planners confer a legitimacy that reinforces peoples' participation and trust. An initiative that is being promoted by a planning professional is much more likely to be trusted by the community. Technology's role is significant as it allows a new way of interaction between the individual and informal networks.

Planners can follow statistics based on peoples' participation, study and analyze the reasons that people don't participate and try to find new ways to engage them.

Many of these initiatives do not require local government funds. By supporting informal networks, planners help communities mobilize local resources to meet the needs of all residents across the entire life cycle, and help promote community development, integrate services, and build political support for new approaches to service delivery.

RESOURCES

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Health care (timebanks) :<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/20/the-payoffs-of-time-banks/>
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Nextdoor's Virtual Neighborhood Watch: <http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/nextdoor-social-network-connecting-neighbors-reinvents-neighborhood-watch/story?id=18470589#.UU8F6hwpiSp>

RelayRides: <https://relayrides.com/all-cities>

Savannah's Grants-For-Blocks: <http://www.pps.org/reference/savannasmall/>

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