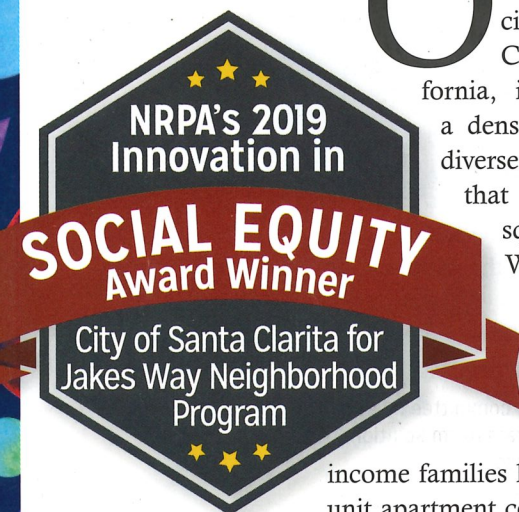


# Jakes Way Community: Creating Access, Overcoming Barriers

City of Santa Clarita wins 2019 Innovation in Social Equity Award

By Lindsay Collins



**O**n the east side of town in the city of Santa Clarita, California, is Jakes Way, a densely populated, diverse neighborhood that spans four-square blocks. Within those four blocks are majority non-English speaking, lower-income families living in multi-unit apartment complexes. Due to language, transportation, financial and cultural barriers, the residents of Jakes Way gen-

erally have limited interaction with city staff and local services. Plagued by gangs, graffiti and crime, the community, in some years, has also experienced more arrests per capita than any other area in Santa Clarita.

With no city park or recreation facility within reach for residents of the neighborhood, the city recognized the need to bring recreation and enrichment opportunities to Jakes Way. But, the question remained as to how to provide these opportunities without the necessary infrastructure in place. Thankfully, city staff were not content with letting these roadblocks stand in their way — if there was not

a space for recreation activities to take place, they would create one where it would be most accessible to residents.

The city of Santa Clarita's Recreation and Community Services Department approached the property manager of the largest apartment complex in the area about transforming a vacant apartment into a mini-community center to be used for afterschool programs, and the use of the playground area for events. The manager agreed and the apartment space now features recreation activities, a homework help area, library and meeting room. Now community members can easily access the resources they need.

## Addressing Access

At the outset of the project, city staff identified three primary goals: enhance quality of life, provide recreation and enrichment for youth and families, and build trust with residents to increase participation in city programs and services. To start, the city needed to provide a

Children in the Jakes Way neighborhood visit the apartment complex to take part in summertime activities.



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF CITY OF SANTA CLARITA



space that was physically accessible to the community, as many members have transportation barriers that limit their access to local city parks and facilities.

"What makes our program innovative is we removed barriers facing residents by utilizing a non-traditional location to provide the resources they need right where they live," says Hope Horner, community services administrator for the city of Santa Clarita. But, the space was only the first step toward overcoming barriers. Once residents had access to the programming, the next challenge was encouraging participation in all of the services offered. Through recreation opportunities that draw people in, such as arts, sports and music, the city is now able to make contact with

hard-to-reach residents to offer additional supportive services from local school staff, Sheriff's Deputies, healthcare workers and other service providers. "In the middle of an apartment or playground, parents can register their children for school, take a diabetes prevention workshop or practice conversational English, while their child finishes their homework, paints a mural or plays soccer," says Horner. "This interaction builds trust and increases the chances that residents will participate in health activities, get to know their neighbors, receive supportive services, report crime and speak up about issues affecting their quality of life."

## Community Engagement

In 2013, bilingual city staff en-

Members and partners of the Jakes Way neighborhood committee meet to plan events and brainstorm solutions to community issues.

couraged residents of Jakes Way to form a neighborhood committee, which has become the driving force for change in the community. The group regularly meets in the apartment to discuss community issues, brainstorm solutions and plan neighborhood programs and events.

City staff has also worked alongside volunteers, school representatives and nonprofit staff to reach the goals they had initially set out to achieve, with more than 25 agencies partnering to offer services over the years, including the California Tutoring Academy, the Santa Clarita Child and Family Cen-



ter, Cal Arts, local churches, Golden Valley High School staff and the Domestic Violence Center, among others.

### Positive Impacts

"I've seen the positive impacts of this program with the kids," says Shannon Celaya, a Jakes Way outreach program volunteer. "They are doing better in school and their parents now have a way of asking us for help on certain subjects or concerns that they can't or don't know how to address due to language barriers." This sentiment is supported by research conducted during the

Recreation activities in the apartment are readily available for children and teens in the community.

summer of 2018, which noted three findings: the playground area became a safe space for families to play, residents became empowered to speak up to apartment managers about neighborhood issues and parents formed a social network with each other in the heart of the neighborhood for the first time.

"I also feel as if the neighborhood is cleaner and safer," says Celaya. "I haven't spotted graffiti on the premises in a while, and if it is spotted, it's immediately removed. The community does feel stronger and more united as one." Again, the numbers support Celaya's feelings. Graffiti has been reduced by 25 percent in the area, and part one crime — the FBI's designation

City of Santa Clarita staff gather with partners and residents of Jakes Way at a council meeting.

for serious crimes that plague society — was down 20 percent overall in Santa Clarita in 2018 compared to 2017, and one has to think that the efforts in Jakes Way had a part in reducing those numbers.

The city of Santa Clarita attests that the sustainability of the project is thanks to the community partners, who are dedicated to helping the agency accomplish its goals. The Park Sierra apartment complex community manager, Sara Nemit, says, "Some people told me there was nothing we could do for this community. I wanted to change that...my objective is to work with the city and others to bring a sense of community to the residents at Park Sierra, and let them know they are not forgotten or overlooked. They know they matter, and their homes and families matter."

To learn more about the city of Santa Clarita's Jakes Way Neighborhood Program, visit [www.santa-clarita.com/outreach](http://www.santa-clarita.com/outreach).

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