

In the spring of 2002, the Enterprise Foundation hired the Urban Institute to conduct a resident survey in the Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood of Baltimore, Maryland. The Foundation had been working in the community since the early 1990s, and had invested millions of dollars (and leveraged millions more from governmental and other sources) in the Neighborhood Transformation Initiative (NTI). NTI was designed as a comprehensive approach to addressing social and economic problems in Sandtown-Winchester. Instead of the piecemeal creation of disconnected neighborhood improvement efforts, NTI would address community ills in their entirety—health care as well as housing; education as well as job training; economic development as well as institutional development.

The Urban Institute sub-contracted with The Kellidge Group, Inc. to manage all aspects of survey administration, including staff recruitment, training, supervision, and payments to employees and residents completing the survey.

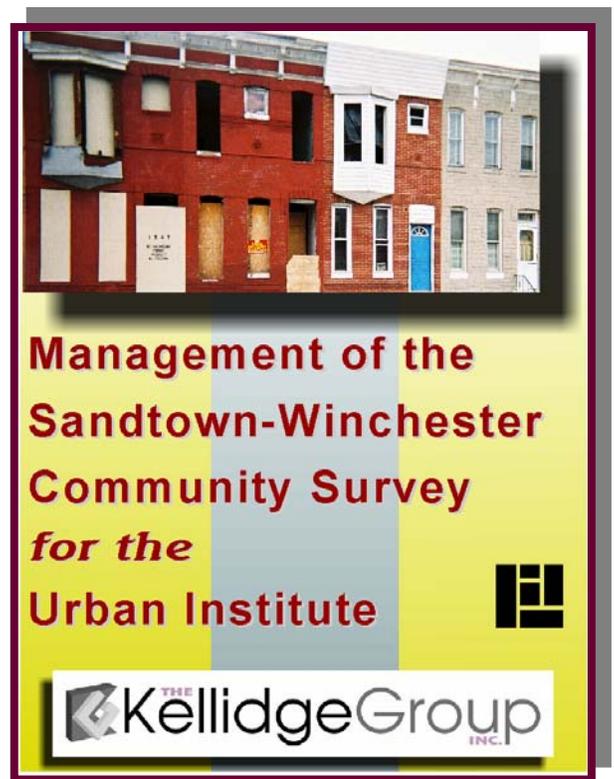
LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE SANDTOWN-WINCHESTER COMMUNITY SURVEY.

The Sandtown-Winchester Community Survey was enormously successful, both in terms of the number of surveys collected and the personal and professional benefits identified by many of those involved. The following aspects of the project could have been managed more effectively.

Lessons on Hiring Staff. There was a widely held belief among residents that access to jobs and services in their community is based primarily on connections. We recommend that staff of participating organizations be ineligible to work on community surveys. We also recommend that staff of participating organizations be enjoined from pressuring project managers into hiring specific individuals. It is extremely important to have selection criteria when assessing applicants, and that those responsible for conducting interviews strictly adhere to those criteria.

Lessons on Employee Monitoring and Dismissals. The commitment to using local residents to collect research data means that your employees will include people with low skills and imperfect work habits. Those hired for the Sandtown-Winchester Community Survey included residents who had been on disability for several years; ex-offenders; persons in recovery for substance abuse; and parents on public assistance. Despite the many financial, social and psychological challenges they face, it is imperative that these employees be held to high standards. Residents' long-term success in the world of work demands that the project reinforce skills and character traits such as punctuality, appropriate dress, truthfulness, teamwork, persistence, self-control, respectfulness, and commitment. We recommend that employees receive a detailed presentation during training on the kinds of behaviors that will result in termination. The list of firing offenses should be enforced without exception. We also recommend that supervisors have individual and group meetings with all staff at least once a week.

Lessons on the Use of Survey Teams. Survey staff were often fearful about conducting surveys on particular streets, notwithstanding the desire by some to interview solo, and the claim by others that they felt “insulted” when outsiders assumed their community was unsafe. We recommend that community surveys always be done in teams, for safety reasons. It may be useful to pair a long-time resident with someone who is newer to the area, or with an “outsider” such as a university student.



Project Summary: The Sandtown-Winchester Community Survey

Lessons on Compensation. We recommend that per-survey payments NOT be used with community surveys. Given that survey teams will often spend an entire day going to successive households without completing an interview, there would be an enormous temptation to fabricate data if they were paid only for completed surveys.

Note that a significant number of resident interviewers did not have bank accounts, and had to use local check-cashing facilities or businesses (such as liquor stores) to cash their checks.

Lessons on the Payment of Resident Vouchers. We recommend the following procedures be used to ensure that only residents from the selected households are interviewed or paid: 1) require proof of residence; 2) require official documents produced by the survey field office; 3) write identifying information on the “Sorry We Missed You” card; and 4) require identification for voucher payments. Finally, the \$25 payment for resident participation was unusually—and perhaps unnecessarily—high. Future researchers offering smaller payments may have difficulty getting Sandtown-Winchester residents to participate in surveys or other research. In hindsight, a \$15 payment might have been attractive enough to residents.

Lessons on Training. In exit interviews, virtually everyone praised the training and felt it had been useful. However, over the course of the survey it became evident that most employees did not read the training manual, as directed. We recommend that the manual be reviewed page by page during training, under the assumption that many employees will not read it on their own.

The residents who served as administrative staff also lacked basic skills, such as the appropriate way to answer the phone, or how to use rudimentary equipment such as a hole punch or paper cutter. We recommend that the training manual include a section on basic office etiquette, and that all employees (both administrative and field staff) be trained in basic office etiquette. We recommend that all employees be given assignments during the training that requires the use of basic office equipment. We also recommend cross-training, so that every employee will have some familiarity with all facets of the project.

Lessons on Relationships Among Staff. Pre-existing relationships became one of the most poisonous issues that confronted the project. Virtually everyone involved had “history” with someone else: they were related, they were friends, they were enemies, they were co-workers, or they were neighbors. This sometimes caused an undercurrent of resentment, with some people believing that someone else was receiving preferential treatment.

At the same time that the complained about other employees, they were extremely reluctant to break the social code by “snitching” on co-workers who were breaking the rules. It was sometimes impossible to rectify a problem because employees were unwilling to tell the survey administrator who was guilty of inappropriate behavior. There also were several older employees in their 50s and 60s who were especially difficult to supervise. They frequently complained that they were “grandmothers” or “had grown children”; they chafed at criticism, real or perceived.

Lessons About the Refreshment Station. It was extremely important to provide refreshments for field staff, because many of them could not afford to buy snacks while they were out in the community conducting interviews. This became less of an issue once employees started to receive paychecks.

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Baltimore, MD
1612 N. Calvert Street
Suite 100
Baltimore, MD 21202
410-727-3462 (phone)
410-727-3463 (fax)

Washington, DC
1025 Connecticut Avenue, NW
Suite 1012
Washington, DC 20036
202-857-9733 (phone)
202-857-9799 (fax)

Corporate Address
Washington Square
Box 65553
Washington, DC 20035
1-866-341-3462 (toll-free)
www.kellidqe.com