THE GREATER FOUR CORNERS ACTION COALITION

A Beacon of Hope  22 Years of Organizing Our Community

367 Washington Street, Dorchester, MA 02124
617.436.0289 phone  617.825.3308 fax

www.gfcac.org
DID YOU KNOW? The Greater Four Corners area extends from Park Street in the south to Columbia Road in the north and Glenway/Bernard Street in the west to Geneva Avenue in the east.

POPULATION OF DORCHESTER: 92,115

RESIDENT POPULATION BY ETHNICITY

- African-American: 37%
- White: 28%
- Latino: 14%
- Asian/Pacific Islander: 9%
- Mixed/Other: 12%

29% OF THE FOUR CORNERS POPULATION LIVES UNDER THE POVERTY LEVEL

RESIDENT POPULATION BY AGE

- 24 years of age or younger: 43%
- Over 65 years of age: 8%

Cover: Iris Dupont, chair of the Mount Bowdoin Betterment Association, a GFCAC member, helps with a neighborhood clean-up.

This report was made possible by the generous financial support of the Barr Foundation. Graphic design by One Visual Mind.

U.S. Census 2010
RECLAIMING A NEIGHBORHOOD: The Growth Of The Greater Four Corners Action Coalition

Two decades ago, urban gardening and green spaces would have been seen as fine but unattainable — even unimaginable — goals for people living in the Four Corners section of Boston’s historic Dorchester neighborhood.

After all, life back then in this area that runs from Park Street north to Columbia Road and east from Glenway/Bernard Street in the west to Geneva Avenue was marked by rampant violence fueled by drugs and gangs. Residents were afraid to go out to church. Visitors feared coming into the neighborhood. Drivers ran stop lights rather than stop and risk getting held up. And as if crime and drugs were not enough, people in the area suffered some of the city’s highest rates of HIV, asthma, diabetes, hypertension, obesity, and domestic violence.

Far from even being able to think about new businesses to create stability and jobs, Four Corners was facing massive disinvestment, with businesses closing and buildings falling into disrepair. But for all this and more, people in the neighborhood didn’t fall into total despair about themselves and their community. They sought to see beyond the chaos and the crime. Determined to take back their neighborhood, several local churches, non-profit agencies and community organizations came together in 1991 to create the Four Corners Public Safety Action Project, a forerunner to what is now the Greater Four Corners Action Coalition and to a neighborhood that is now able to think less about drugs and violence and more about positive growth — and even urban gardens.

Residents take charge of their community

This decades-long story had to begin at the very grass roots. Working with other organizations, the Project helped bring people together to talk about how criminal activities were allowed to breed and spread in their own community. We don’t have a real neighborhood, people came to realize. We rarely speak to each other. Our neighborhood lacks amenities. Even open stores look closed. Residents came to realize that the only way they could take charge of their neighborhood was to create a true community, but how could that even begin to happen when people were afraid just to leave their homes?

So residents formed neighborhood crime watch groups. New neighborhood associations joined forces with existing groups. No longer willing to live in fear on their own streets, the Project and residents took to the streets and organized marches and worked with local law enforcement agencies to rid their neighborhood of gangs with names like the Four Corners Pirates. The Project, Boston Police Department, and the Bowdoin Street Health Center joined forces to institute a gun buyback program.

All these individual pieces — the meetings, the marches, the crime watch and other organizing efforts — helped bring people together to build a cohesive community. The efforts began to build momentum. Residents helped police identify and shut down a notorious drug den. Businesses that had previously allowed drug dealing on or near their property were encouraged to remedy the situation. No longer afraid to go out, people were now speaking to each other. Stores were open again. Now the people on street corners were residents waiting for buses, not drug dealers waiting for customers.
Taking on other issues
Lowering the level of violence was a success in itself, but people at the Project and others living in Four Corners knew that far more work was needed to make theirs a real and strong community. The focus began to shift to other debilitating issues, such as health care. As resident activists teamed up with local health centers to conduct research into the causes and magnitude of the health problems facing families in the Four Corners area, they soon understood that health issues were closely related to the environmental factors in the community, especially pollution from buses and cars and toxic fumes in homes from building materials and paints.

Reflecting this evolution from crime prevention to neighborhood revitalization, the Project changed its name in 1995 to The Four Corners Action Coalition. Four years later, the organization renamed itself again, this time to reflect not only an expanded mission, which now included transportation justice, healthy homes, and the greening the community, but its expanded geographic area of focus. Newly named in 1999, The Greater Four Corners Action Coalition remains, 15 years later, a center for community organizing and support. As issues and the approaches to resolving them continue to evolve, the Coalition is helping to support positive and impactful change. Just as crime prevention was the key to neighborhood stabilization in the 1990s, the Coalition today is collaborating with community groups and other partners on a range of issues that reflect current challenges. A community cannot be healthy if its people are not or if they live in fear of losing their homes. The work of the Greater Four Corners Action Coalition is about not just programs, but people.
HEALTHY HOMES = HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

The link between the health of families and the strength of a community is especially clear in the Four Corners area. Dorchester has one of the highest rates of asthma, with one 2010 study finding more than one of every five Dorchester residents suffering from the disease. With research showing the clear correlation between asthma and indoor and outdoor air pollution, GFCAC made healthy home standards and cleaner public transportation top priorities.

After listening to residents’ concerns about new developments being built with poor-quality materials and little or no green space, GFCAC joined the Bowdoin Street Health Center, the Boston Urban Asthma Coalition, and Lead Action Collaborative to form the Healthy Homes Collaborative. Together, the groups developed guidelines for healthy, green, affordable homes, focusing on housing standards that include:

- Toxin-free building materials
- Proper ventilation to prevent accumulation of moisture
- Energy-conserving windows and green roofs to keep homes cool in the summer and warm in the winter and adequate insulation to complement energy conservation
- Energy-efficient home appliances
- Surfaces that can be easily wiped clean
- Carpet-free floors to prevent mold, mildew, and dust mites
- Smoke-free homes
- Integrated pest management, making sure all pest entrance points are properly sealed
- Low-flow water systems in kitchens and bathrooms, including washing machines and dish washers.

GFCAC was one of the first organizations in the region to focus on developing healthy and green homes standards and to push for the adoption of those standards by public and private developers.

SPREADING THE WORD ABOUT HEALTHY HOMES

Standards alone weren’t enough; the Healthy Homes Collaborative also wanted the public to better understand the correlation between the high incidence of asthma and the unhealthy air quality in the Four Corners. Healthy Homes piloted a major organizing and advocacy campaign that persuaded the Codman Square Neighborhood Development Corporation, a major developer of public and private affordable housing, to adopt the Healthy Homes standards for all of its new construction.

One Codman Square success story is a multi-family co-operative housing complex built on Washington Street using the latest healthy homes and green homes standards. The development of such high-quality homes in a low- to moderate-income community composed mainly of people of color is a major accomplishment.

GFCAC’s accomplishments are having a regional impact: many community groups from other areas are working to implement the healthy and green housing standards developed in the Four Corners area in their own communities.
URBAN FARMING FOR A HEALTHIER COMMUNITY

Healthy homes are a critical step, but so too are more healthy diets and food options. As concerns mount over the accessibility and quality of meals in cities, urban agriculture is becoming a practical solution to give communities more choice, all while helping address greenhouse gas emissions from large-scale agriculture.

GFCAC Board member and pre-school teacher Sharon Higgins knows that finding affordable healthy fresh foods in the Four Corners area is a challenge. And like many other Four Corner residents, her daughter suffers from asthma. So Sharon is helping members of the community make the connection between asthma, pollution, and the lack of green spaces, such as urban gardens, in the community. She spends much of her time planting trees, developing green spaces, and working with schools and community groups to create urban gardens. As a teacher, she works with students and others, helping them to understand that trees and plants help improve air quality by taking in carbon dioxide and putting out oxygen. Creating more green areas has an impact not just on Four Corners, but on the broader challenge to combat climate change.

Urban farming isn’t just about creating more green spaces and growing local food, important as those goals are. The social organization required for most urban farming projects can also forge stronger community bonds by creating “stakeholder interactions” that give individuals a sense of responsibility and productivity. By harnessing two sources of capital — social capital and the existing built environment — urban farming uses the inherent strengths of cities to solve some of their most serious problems. And the economic benefits realized through urban farming are localized, thus keeping dollars circulating through the community.

In 2012, GFCAC collaborated with City Growers and Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative to develop an urban farm in the Four Corners area. The groups recruited and trained youth from the community to operate the farm. It was a life changing experience for all.

Jahriffe MacKenzie, another GFCAC member, sees all the connections. The owner and operator of an organic landscaping business in the community, he convinced the owner of a vacant lot to allow him to create an organic farm, which now meets the yearly vegetable needs for 25 families. Besides providing fresh vegetables to members of the community garden, area gardens donated over 7,000 pounds of healthy produce to Boston food pantries. This focus on organic urban gardening has generated a plan for a new food co-op in Dorchester.

CREATING GREEN SPACE

GFCAC envisions green spaces beyond urban gardens. For example, The Fairmont Indigo Coalition, which GFCAC convened to organize for local commuter train service, has proposed a greenway that would run from Uphams Corner in the northern part of Dorchester to Hyde Park in the south of Boston. Such an exciting project is not normally seen in an inner city. GFCAC has identified nine locations in the Greater Four Corners area for the proposed corridor, which would integrate the urban wild being established two blocks from the GFCAC office with existing parks and new parks created on vacant lots along the way.

The greenway would include biking and hiking trails as part of the goal to get more people out of their cars while improving the overall quality of life for Four Corners residents and having a positive impact on climate change.
The greenway will include biking and hiking trails as part of the goal to get more people out of their cars while improving the overall quality of life.
CLEAN TRANSPORTATION FOR CLEAN AIR

Environmental concerns are also health concerns. Air pollution from the high number of cars and buses passing through the Four Corners neighborhood is a major cause of asthma. And lacking local commuter rail stops in the Greater Four Corners, the only mode of public transportation available to residents was a fleet of highly polluting diesel buses. So for decades, GFCAC has worked to reduce reliance on autos and promote use of cleaner fuels for buses. This long effort is now paying off.

In the more immediate term, GFCAC helped form the Clean Buses for Boston Coalition, which waged a successful campaign to clean up the buses used by the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) and the public school system. Diesel-powered buses were retrofitted with filters to lower emissions. In addition, due in part to pressure from Clean Buses, the MBTA purchased new buses that run on compressed natural gas. The 23 Line, which runs through Dorchester to Ruggles Station, was the first line in the state to use retrofitted buses, and the first to convert to all (CNG) buses. In addition, all school buses are also now fueled by natural gas.

Though less polluting, gas-powered buses do not shorten how long it takes to get from Four Corners to downtown. A trip that would take 12 minutes on a train took almost an hour by car or bus. Because buses were often crowded and waiting for them meant getting wet and cold in the winter, people were turning back to their cars, poisoning the air during rush hour gridlock, further exacerbating the community’s high rates of asthma as well as global warming.

GFCAC saw that the only way to reduce the number of cars on the road and the resulting ill health effects on people in the community was a more efficient, cleaner public transportation option. So GFCAC’s and the community’s attention turned to the Fairmount commuter train that passed through the community but didn’t stop there. A coordinated community-wide commuter rail campaign kicked off in 2002. GFCAC worked with other organizations, including the Codman Square Neighborhood Development Corporation, Lena Park Neighborhood Development Corporation, the Fairmount Community Development Corporation, Project R.I.G.H.T., Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, Alternatives for Community and Environment, and Four Corners and Uphams Corner Main Street to form the Fairmount Indigo Coalition.

After ten years of demonstrations, rallies, and other efforts, the Fairmount Line’s Talbot Avenue Station opened on November 12, 2012 to serve the Codman Square area. The second station, Four Corners Geneva, opened on July 1, 2013, marking the successful end of GFCAC’s 20-year struggle. The New Market stop opened at the same time and a stop on Blue Hill Avenue in Mattapan Square is set to open in 2015.

The community has pushed for the diesel engines currently in use on the Fairmount line be retrofitted to reduce pollution from the diesel fuel and is calling for the use of newer diesel multiple unit cars in order to make the Fairmount Line a rapid transit service on a par with the Red, Orange, Green, and Blue lines.

ADVOCATING FOR FOUR CORNERS T RIDERS

The creation of stops on the Fairmount Line was a success, but GFCAC and the Fairmount Indigo Line Coalition continue to organize for better service and lower fares for MBTA riders. Plans are in place for a joint advertisement/media campaign to increase ridership from the two new stations in the Greater Four Corner community and to encourage people to leave their cars home and ride the train, cutting their commuting time in half. GFCAC’s advocacy for transit users is part of its ongoing work around transportation equity. Four Corners is, for example, a founding member of the On the Move Coalition, a transit equity and transportation justice coalition.
fighting to maintain levels of MBTA services at a reasonable cost for people in transit-dependent neighborhoods such as Four Corners.

**KEEPING PEOPLE IN THEIR HOMES**

If people cannot afford to stay in their homes and community, all the years of organizing by GFCAC would be undermined. And the foreclosure crisis threatened to do just that, threatening decades of community-building efforts. In 2008, with Dorchester having the third highest foreclosure rate in the state, GFCAC stepped in to help.

As a member of the Massachusetts Alliance Against Predatory Lending and the Coalition of Occupied Homes in Foreclosure, GFCAC sought to halt the rash of foreclosures in and beyond the Four Corners area by helping residents organize for policy change and for legislation to support homeowners and tenants. GFCAC holds workshops and trainings on homeowner and tenant rights and offers bilingual training to encourage residents to write letters and engage their elected officials. For example, some mortgage lenders try to scare homeowners and tenants into moving by shutting off water and electricity, changing locks, or neglecting the property. But when homeowners and tenants know their rights and refuse to be coerced, lenders may settle rather than invest the time and resources to go to court to obtain an eviction order.

Similarly, GFCAC is working with Boston Inspectional Services to train residents to perform Citizen Housing Inspections of neglected, bank-owned properties and report any sanitation and building code violations they find.

Real people are benefiting from these and other efforts. Nelly and her husband, a retired veteran, were facing
foreclosure. The mortgage company had changed the locks in their home and insisted that they vacate. Nelly had spent a lot of money on lawyers, to no avail. As she had done for others, GFCAC organizer Mayra Duran was able to help Nelly and her husband keep their home by helping them understand their rights as homeowners and guiding them through the legal process.

Mayra accompanied Nelly and her husband to court, where they received a 90-day reprieve. Because of declining home values in their neighborhood, Nelly and her husband owed more than the current value of their home. Mayra then put them in touch with Boston Community Capital, which purchased the home from the bank and sold it back to Nelly and her husband at current market rates. The GFCAC provides such services to help people stay in their homes at no cost — it’s part of its commitment to stabilizing and revitalizing the Four Corners area.

Another example of how GFCAC helps keep people in their homes — and a community together — is Mallerrie McCoy. A GFCAC member, she rents in a building foreclosed on in 2007. The building’s ownership passed from bank to bank, and it is now partly owned by a bank that tried to evict the tenants. As a member of GFCAC, Mallerrie knew that banks themselves cannot evict tenants; only a judge can order that step. Mallerrie has not only refused to leave, she has educated the other tenants of their rights.

This work by GFCAC to help keep people in their homes is just part of the organization’s long commitment to stabilize and revitalize the Four Corners area. That has been the mission for more than two decades. What began as mainly an effort to reduce crime has grown into a much broader and multifaceted organization, but all tied to the central goal of building a stronger, more sustainable neighborhood. GFCAC remains a beacon of hope in a community that has emerged from a pall of violence into an era of hope and opportunity.
HOW TO GET INVOLVED

Want to learn more about the Greater Four Corners Area Action Coalition? Want to get involved?

- Visit our web site: www.gfcac.org
- Contact GFCAC Executive Director Marvin Martin at Marvin@GFCAC.org.
- Or call us at 617.436.0289

GFCAC is about a community – and its people.
GFCAC Lead Organizer Pamela (Mela) Bush, center, is joined by Gov. Deval Patrick, former Boston Mayor Thomas Menino and other community members and dignitaries to officially open a new Fairmount Commuter Rail station in Dorchester.