

# Home Improvement

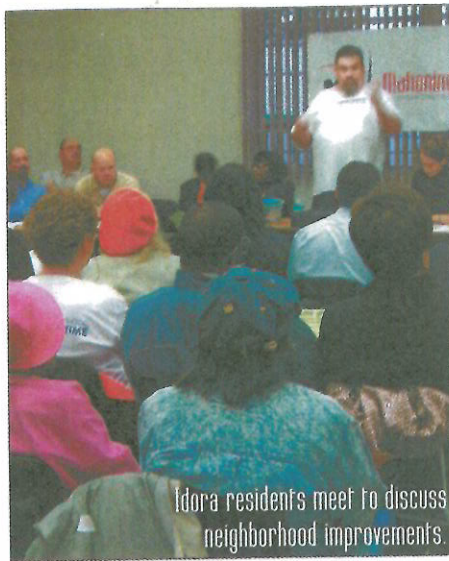
## A YOUNGSTOWN NEIGHBORHOOD CLEANS UP ITS ACT.

When James London moved to Youngstown three years ago, he bought an affordable home in the Idora neighborhood located on the city's southwest side. But he didn't bargain for the crime, the drug dealers or the dearth of full-service grocery stores that came (or didn't come) with it. In fact, 18 percent of homes in the area were vacant, and its five corner stores were well-known breeding grounds for underage alcohol sales, drug deals and prostitution.

"It's easier to buy crack than a fresh tomato on the southwest side of Youngstown," London says. "The neighborhood had no structure, no organization. Everybody just stayed in. The criminals were taking over the corner stores and doing whatever they wanted to do. I said, 'Enough is enough!'"

That's why London initiated the Idora Neighborhood Block Watch with Ian Beniston, Mahoning Valley Organizing Collaborative's director of policy. London is the group's president.

Only a handful of residents attended the first meeting, but within a year, more than 200 people joined the effort to clean up the Idora neighborhood.



Idora residents meet to discuss neighborhood improvements.

"This project gave something for the neighbors to feel hopeful about," Beniston says. "It showed people they could take back their neighborhood."

Organizers collected enough signatures to place on the ballot — and ultimately pass — an initiative to forbid alcohol sales in the Idora neighborhood. It's a move that has definitely caught the attention of retailers in nearby areas.

Many have fixed up their storefronts by painting and adding new signage.

Idora Neighborhood Block Watch continues to grow its membership and elevate its goals. Many of the vacant lots have been cleaned up and now boast gardens. There are efforts to put the land back into productive, tax-paying use. The group is working on a partnership with the corner stores to offer fresh produce and other healthy products. They also hope to attract and retain a full-service grocery store in the neighborhood.

"That means down the road there will be a component to create new jobs," Beniston says.

— NPL