

# CITY OF COLUMBIA HEIGHTS



2016

ALL-AMERICAN CITY  
AWARD APPLICATION

### Community Information

Community name and state: \_\_\_\_\_ City of Columbia Heights, Minnesota \_\_\_\_\_

Your community is applying as a:

\_\_\_ Neighborhood \_\_\_ Village \_\_\_ Town \_\_\_ Tribe  City \_\_\_ County \_\_\_ Region

If applying as a region, name participating communities: \_\_\_\_\_

If applying as a neighborhood, name city: \_\_\_\_\_

Has your community applied before? Yes  No If Yes, which years: \_\_\_\_\_

Has your community been a Finalist before? Yes  No If Yes, which years: \_\_\_\_\_

Has your community been an All-America City before? Yes  No If Yes, which years: \_\_\_\_\_

### Contact Information

All-America City Award contact (primary contact person available throughout competition & follow-up):

Name: \_\_\_ Kelli Bourgeois \_\_\_\_\_ Title (if any): \_\_\_ HR Director / Asst. to the City Manager \_\_\_\_\_

Organization/Government/Other: \_\_\_ City of Columbia Heights \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_ 590 40<sup>th</sup> Ave NE \_\_\_\_\_ City, State, Zip \_\_\_ Columbia Heights, MN 55421 \_\_\_\_\_

Phone (business/day): \_\_\_ 763-706-3609 \_\_\_\_\_ Mobile Phone \_\_\_ 320-267-2453 \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail Address(es): \_\_\_ kbourgeois@columbiaheightsmn.gov \_\_\_\_\_

The applying community will receive a complimentary membership (or membership renewal if an AAC application was submitted last year) to the National Civic League for one year. To whom should this membership be directed?

Name \_\_\_ Walter Fehst \_\_\_\_\_

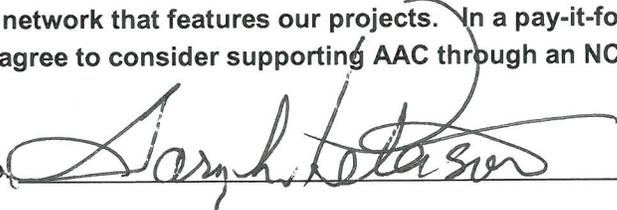
Address \_\_\_ 590 40<sup>th</sup> Ave NE \_\_\_\_\_

City, State & Zip Code \_\_\_ Columbia Heights, MN 55421 \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number \_\_\_ 763-706-3600 \_\_\_\_\_ Fax \_\_\_ 763-706-3601 \_\_\_\_\_

Email  
\_\_\_ wfehst@columbiaheightsmn.gov \_\_\_\_\_

We agree to follow NCL's rules regarding use of the All-America City Award logo, a registered trademark of the National Civic League. We allow NCL and the All-America City Award to share this application and the information enclosed in it with the NCL and AAC networks to promote the work of our community. If we are named an All-America City, we agree to conduct a post-AAC conference call or regional forum for the AAC network that features our projects. In a pay-it-forward spirit, if named a finalist or All-America City, we agree to consider supporting AAC through an NCL membership for a minimum of the next three years.

Signature  \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_ March 8, 2016 \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_ Gary Peterson \_\_\_\_\_ Title: \_\_\_ Mayor \_\_\_\_\_

## Community Statistics and Map

Note: Use the most up-to-date statistics possible for your neighborhood, town, city, county, or region (source suggestions: U.S. Census Bureau, State Department of Economic Security, State Department of Finance, Department of Public Health, and local school statistics).

POPULATION (in year 2010 or most recent): 19,709

Source/Date: Metropolitan Council/American Community Survey - 2014

POPULATION PERCENTAGE CHANGE 2000-2010 (indicate + or -): +5%

Source/Date: U.S. Census Bureau 2000 and 2010

RACIAL/ETHNIC POPULATION BREAKDOWN:

White	64.92%
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	11.89%
Black or African American	13.32%
Asian	4.75%
American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN)	1.28%
Mixed Race	3.44%
Other	0.40%

Source/Date: U.S. Census Bureau/ 2010

MEDIAN FAMILY INCOME: \$48,900

Source/Date: American Community Survey/ 2014

PERCENTAGE OF FAMILIES BELOW POVERTY LEVEL: 17.1%

Source/Date: American Community Survey/ 2014

UNEMPLOYMENT RATE: 4.6%

Source/Date: American Community Survey/ 2014

POPULATION BREAKDOWN BY AGE GROUP (percentages, if available):

19 years old and under	<u>2.84%</u>
20-24	<u>2.94%</u>
25-44	<u>14.61%</u>
45-64	<u>12.4%</u>
65 and over	<u>67.21%</u>

Source/Date: U.S. Census Bureau/ 2010

PERCENTAGE OF HOME OWNERSHIP: 65.3%

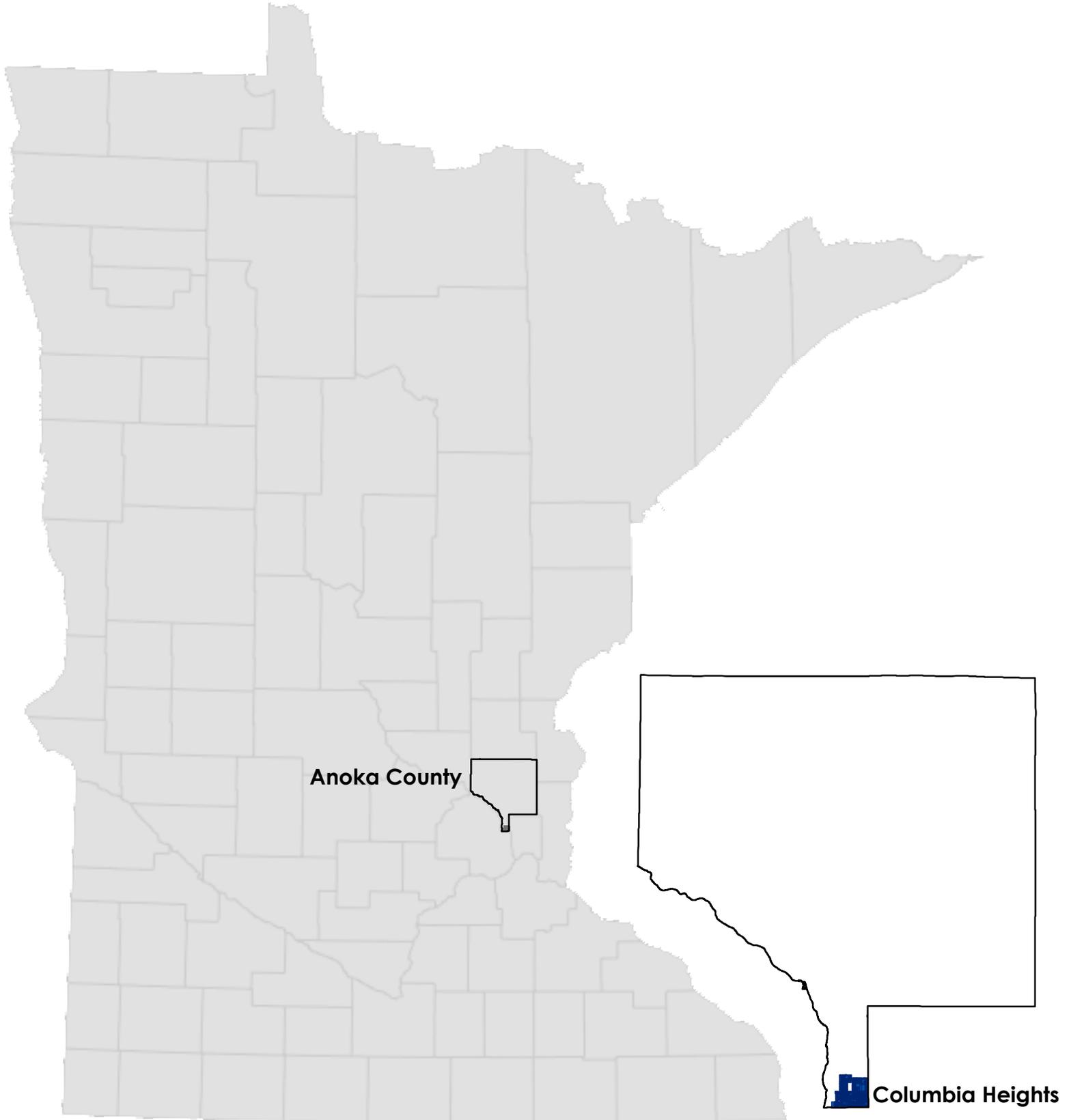
Source/Date: American Community Survey/ 2014

WORKFORCE DISTRIBUTION -- Name the three largest employment sectors (include military services and/or installations, if any) in your community and provide the percentage of total employed in each:

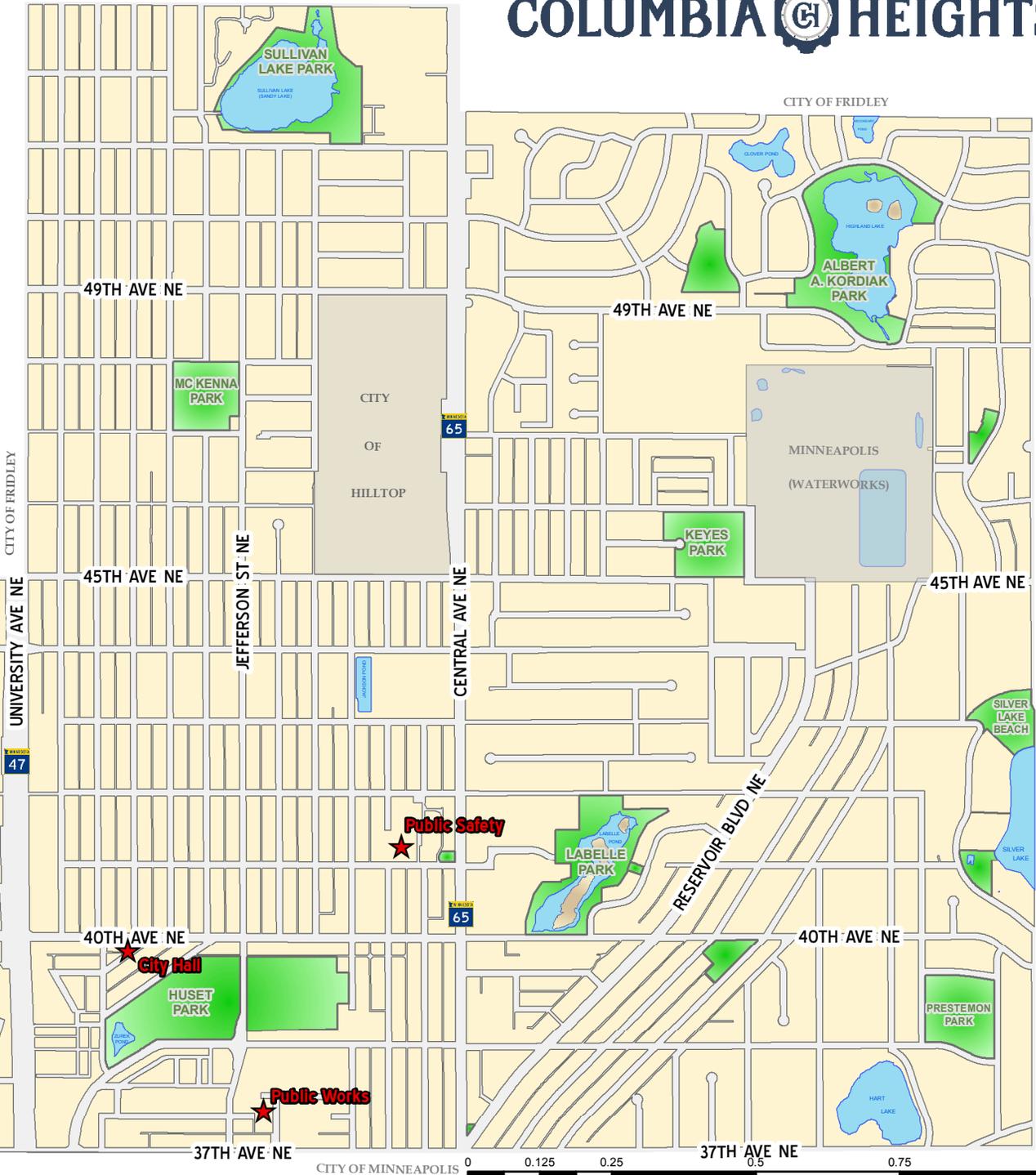
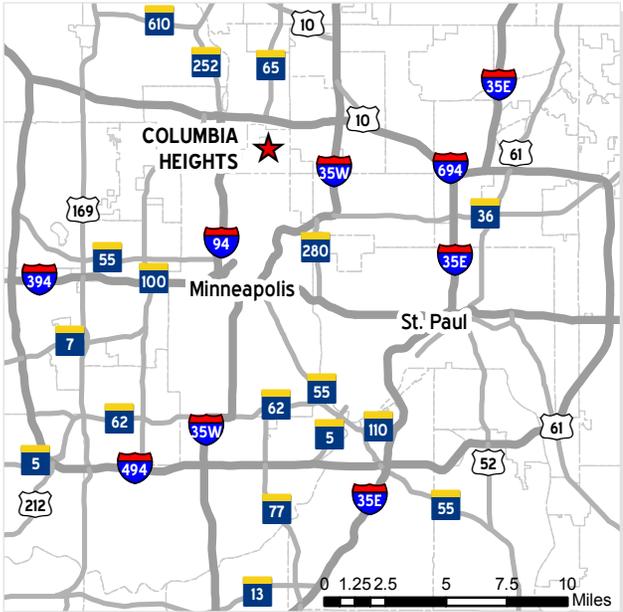
<u>Health Care and Social Assistance</u>	<u>24%</u>
<u>Retail Trade</u>	<u>12%</u>
<u>Educational Services</u>	<u>10%</u>

Source/Date: American Community Survey/ 2014

**MAP** -- Please attach a state map (8.5" x 11") with your community clearly marked  
Please see the attached community location maps.



# COLUMBIA HEIGHTS





## Columbia Heights, Minnesota: An All-America City

Our successes are often defined by the trials and tribulations we encounter in our lifetime. The great American cities, our geographic Goliaths, are no different. Chicago overcame the great fire of 1871, rebuilding itself as one of the largest and most vibrant cities in the world. New Orleans is still working to rebuild after Katrina in 2005, striving to reclaim its identity as a cultural icon. New York has overcome obstacle after obstacle to remain the world's capital and a beacon of greatness and hope. As many of these Goliaths today continue to struggle against such obstacles, there are David-like cities nearby that have made great strides in the face of adversity. The city of Columbia Heights, Minnesota, is one of those Davids. Columbia Heights has become a model for success, a blueprint of productivity, in a time where progress seemed impossible.

Columbia Heights has long been a city of diversity and acceptance. Incorporated as a city of Minnesota in 1921, Columbia Heights began as an ideal location for immigrants, as mostly Polish immigrants settled here in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. From that historical moment on, immigrants have flourished in this first ring Minneapolis suburb, finding the freedom to do so where other towns struggled against the ever-changing demographics of a modern world.



Columbia Heights worked hard to foster peace, acceptance, and order, welcoming change and thriving in its wake. At only three-and-a-half square miles, Columbia Heights is a geographically small city that borders Northeast Minneapolis.

Albeit David in size, Columbia Heights is home to approximately 20,000 citizens; citizens of varied race, religion, and socioeconomic status. This diversity is most obvious in its very own school district, Minnesota Independent School District 13, with a student body that exceeds 3,000. Like many small cities, Columbia Heights was faced with many obstacles over the last several decades, none more trying than recession and a rapidly changing population.

### **DEMOGRAPHICS**

In 2000, Columbia Heights was a city of 18,520 residents. Of those residents, 87.4% were White, 3.6% were African American, and 3.2% were Hispanic or Latino. The remaining population was made up of 1.6% Native American, 3.5% Asian, and 1.31% from other races. In just ten years, Columbia Heights had grown modestly in population to 19,709 people, but radically shifted demographically as the population had changed to 64.9% White, 13.3% African American, and 11.9% Hispanic, with another 1.3% Native American, 4.8% Asian, and 3.8% from other

racers. This drastic demographic change came with new challenges, and the City sought effective leadership to address the needs of its changing community, and meet these challenges head-on with a positive outlook on what was quickly becoming one of the most diverse and socioeconomically challenged cities in Minnesota.

Today, approximately 17.1% of Columbia Heights residents live below the poverty level – almost 6% more than the state average and almost 3% more than the national average, meaning Columbia Heights has one of the highest poverty rates in the tri-county metro area. Columbia Heights itself lies in the southernmost tip of Anoka County, sharing its borders with both Hennepin and Ramsey Counties. With an inordinate amount of subsidized housing for a city its size, a problem compounded by the subprime mortgage crisis in the late 2000's and the recession that immediately followed, home values began to decrease significantly. As a result many homes went into foreclosure and became vacant, and many owners either walked away from their properties or rented them out because they could no longer afford to live there on their own. Today, more than a third of all residential property in Columbia Heights is rental. A highly transient group was thus borne into the population as a result of these difficult times; difficult times that continue today.

## **HISTORY**

All of these dynamics combined for a community of both great and specific need. As local government aid, or LGA, funding decreased; the Columbia Heights Police Department began to feel the effects of change. A department of twenty-five officers with a tightening budget caused the department to discontinue several programs that had been created specifically to address the needs of this diverse community. Most proactive programs were placed on indefinite hiatus, and the only three officers with dedicated Community Oriented Policing positions were discontinued. Neighborhood Watch and Rental Property Programs were discontinued and patrol tactics once again became reactive. The proactive community programs were no longer a priority.

The school district and the police department did not have an effective relationship during these changing and trying times and the school district had their own storms to weather. As funding fell in response to the recession, an increasingly diverse population began to fill the classroom. Students who spoke English as a second language made up 10% of state classrooms. However, with a growing Hispanic and East African population, among others, the Columbia Heights School District's average for English Learners was trending into higher double digits. Lacking the resources to respond to this change, immediately test scores began to drop as the student body grew larger and their needs grew more diverse. By 2012, there were 38 different languages spoken in the classrooms and approximately 30% of all students were now considered English Learners.

With the discontinued community programs, the City's police department's positive relationship with its community struggled. Crime rates reflected this as

they rose drastically. With multiple homicides occurring in the eight-year span from 2000 to 2007, the robbery rate more than doubled, and the property crime rate increased almost fifty percent. The outlook for the city of Columbia Heights and its many residents was bleak. The progressive symbiosis between community and police had been fractured and trust in public servants was waning.

This occurred at the same time the school district was feeling the weight of their own budgetary woes, immediately affecting the students they served. Test scores were down, truancy was up, and suspensions were at some of the highest levels in history. Student achievement was lacking and the district's high school and middle school students' learning levels needed immediate improvement. In 2006 the high school failed to make adequate yearly progress and they had not met the state proficiency goals in math or reading in 2004, 2006, or 2008. The District's inability to acclimate to the changing demographics of the student body created roadblocks to both learning and student assimilation. A student body that was seventy percent White in 2002 was less than fifty percent White in 2006. And by 2012 seventy percent of the student body was made up of students of color.

### **MOVING FORWARD**

But change was afoot in 2007, the Columbia Heights School District appointed a new Superintendent. Kathy Kelly, who had worked in the school district since 1997 had been through the difficult times with the students and the teachers



and understood what had to be done. Revitalization and reinvestment into the students and teachers was needed and community stakeholders needed to help, stakeholders such as the Columbia Heights Police Department, for one. Superintendent Kelly understood the effectiveness of synergy and the positive changes that could be impacted by creating a new blueprint for the school district and the community it serves.

Then, in 2008, under the command of the newly-hired Police Chief Scott Nadeau, the policing style of the Columbia Heights Police Department began profound and immediate change as a new philosophy was created implementing and incorporated community partnerships and citizen involvement, addressing the issues of crime and disorder in the city. One of the most notable of partnerships was that of the police department and the school district. Criminal activity dropped immediately, and continued to drop over the next seven years. Criminality that continues to drop today, as Columbia Heights celebrates its lowest crime rate in over forty years.

The relationship between the community and their police once again began to grow, and the investment of community members and stakeholders was restored. Schools started to improve and students' needs were again being met. Attendance was improving and enrollment again began to increase. Ultimately, it was the police department and the school district working together using communication, innovation, and synergy to make positive advances towards solving the issues affecting public safety and education, as well as greater social issues affecting Columbia Heights.

The City Government approached these challenges deftly and aptly as well, realizing that the precursor to success was accountability. The City of Peace was born, and Columbia Heights accepted its new role in America as a city of inclusion, rather than trying to fight the inevitable change of modernity. A city needed to be accountable to its citizens, and in turn the community needed to be accountable to its self, realizing that the only road to success must be traversed as a community and not as an individual entity or as individual cultural groups.

Even the threat of terrorism didn't stop Columbia Heights from approaching obstacles with compassion and creativity. One of the poorest neighborhoods in the city, a neighborhood made up of primarily Muslim East-Africans, struggled to fight radicalism within its own homes. As the newest cultural community to come to Columbia Heights, these families were bombarded with Americanisms and the pressure to assimilate while finding ways to maintain their identity and culture as their first generation of new Americans began to attend the schools, find employment, and create families of their own within this new world. The city of Columbia Heights, including its police department, approached this new immigrant community with one simple question, "What can we do to help?" The way was then paved for a future community education and recreation building to be constructed in the epicenter of this neighborhood, along with a brand new playground.

Focused on the youth, Columbia Heights understood that without youth engagement, the success of Columbia Heights would eventually falter. The City and School District worked quickly to build another recreation center on school grounds, and from this effort the Hylander Center was borne. Parks and Recreation, the Police Department, and the school district all worked tirelessly to create programming for the youth, engaging them in "Cops 'n' Kids", which is an after school basketball program free to all students, creating open gyms for both high school and middle school children, and looking into expanding into after school soccer programs, all for the benefit of the youth. A new library is underway, scheduled to open in June, 2016, providing the kids with yet another safe haven dedicated to education and development. Not only is this nurturing communication amongst the youth and its community, but that also of local government and law enforcement which has long held a strained relationship with minority communities, it is providing the children the space and security needed to grow into productive adults able to give back to the very community that fostered their maturity.

## **BECOMING ONE**

Community picnics, “Coffee with a Cop” and other community oriented police methods, partnerships with the local food shelf (Southern Anoka Community Assistance), open lines of communication with our faith based leaders, creative training opportunities focused on cultural exposure and competency were all used as tools to inclusion and acceptance. Implicit biases were destroyed and avenues to diverse and effective relationships were formed. No longer was the police department at odds with the public, no longer were the messages of the school district at odds with that of the local government, and no longer were the members of the community in the dark about the direction of their neighborhoods.

Transparency became the standard, and accountability became the message. Columbia Heights flourished so when police were involved in a critical incident, or the school district was confronted with an unforeseen obstacle, there were no riots, no displays of civic discourse. Rather there was action and communication. A team effort towards correction and improvement so Columbia Heights could continue its efforts towards progress, never falling back into the darkness where other communities both local and national seemed destined to remain for the time being.

### **Project 1: City/School Collaboration**

In the beginning change was slow. But there were immediate results that began to show in and around the Police Department as well as the City’s schools. Chief Nadeau knew that community involvement was necessary for long-term change, and accountability at the officer level was paramount to this progress. The idea of one designated Community Police Officer was no longer valid, and all officers were tasked with the responsibility of community policing, while also continuing to effect crime on a purposeful level. The department began to seek out grants to help provide funding for the enforcement and community outreach programming needed.

By 2014, the Columbia Heights Police Department required all officers to complete a minimum of ten hours each year in community oriented programming. Programs including Senior Academy aimed at elder abuse education, Adult Basic Education classes where new immigrants could have a dialogue with the police asking questions and learning about local law enforcement; as well as a multitude of programs designed specifically at positive youth outreach. By 2016 the department average had eclipsed 30 hours of extracurricular attendance per officer. This resulted in department participation of almost 1,500 hours of strictly community-oriented programs, and this number continues to grow exponentially every year.

Most effectively, the police department began to partner with the school district and launched a youth outreach program via a county grant. The Cops-N-Kids program was created and officers began hosting weekly open gym events at both the middle school and the high school. This allowed officers to both provide a

safe haven for youth to gather and engage in recreational activities, as well as create a dialogue and relationship with the diverse youth of Columbia Heights.

As change continued, so too did the student body. Approximately 38% of students are now African American, with 24% being White, and 30% being Hispanic. 80% of all students in the district received free-or-reduced lunch, which is significantly higher than the state average and places amongst the highest in all of the state of Minnesota. The high poverty rates were directly affecting our community and the school district and police department were coming together to address their needs. The police department and school district increased the school resource program and a third full-time SRO was placed in the Alternative Learning Center for at-risk youth.

In 2015, the Columbia Heights police department had fully integrated community oriented policing into the DNA of its department. Community Oriented Policing became one of five strategies clearly outlined in the Strategic Plan, constantly seeking ways to improve upon the department's positive impact. In 2009, with the assistance of a federal grant, the Columbia Heights police department was able to implement a full-time sworn position of Community Oriented Policing coordinator. This position became so vital to the organization that after the grant expired, the Columbia Heights City Council folded the position into the budget allowing for its continued operation based on its own merits. This position works closely with the community to ensure safe housing, successful neighborhood and business watch programs and by working with the school district to establish and maintain positive youth outreach. As of 2016, the Columbia Heights Police Department has over 150 neighborhood block leaders and over 75 business partners. Both record highs for the organization.

In 2013, the Columbia Heights Police Department was given the Columbia Heights School District's "Superintendent's Above and Beyond Award". This was to celebrate over 5,000 positive youth contacts the police department had with the students. This was accomplished by the police department's hosting weekly open gyms through the "Cops-N-Kids" program, as well as becoming an active member of the Big Brothers Big Sisters program. 20 employees of the police department became active "bigs" meeting with their "littles" every week inside of Columbia Heights' schools. The bug of community involvement has spread throughout the City, as the number of active BBBS participants in the city now exceeds 30 and continues to grow. The police department created the "Teen Academy", hosting a free annual after-school program, allowing students to meet over the course of several weeks and learn in a classroom setting, as well as hands-on activities, what the job of police officer entails and further create positive bonds between police and the youth.

The Columbia Heights Police Department has also partnered with all elementary schools in the city to promote anti-bullying by reading to kindergarten, first and second grade classes each semester, reaching 655 students in 2014 alone.

A number that continues to increase each year since as more officers reach out to our youth within the confines of their very own classrooms. Along with the department's annual D.A.R.E. program, youth contacts have increased tenfold over the last 8 years. The results have been nothing short of amazing. In 2007 and 2008, youth arrests reached record highs with an average of 247 youth arrests each year. Once these youth programs were implemented and positive youth contacts began to increase, youth arrests immediately started to decline, reaching an all-time low in 2014 with 106 youth arrests. The Police Department was awarded the first ever City of Peace award in Columbia Heights in 2015, recognized for their efforts in promoting peace through communication, partnerships, and dedication within the changing community they serve so diligently.

In the summer of 2014, the first annual "Eat and Greet" was held and, along with the school district, the police department partnered with other city and county agencies to provide free food and education about what's available to our citizens in order to help them create and maintain a home in Columbia Heights. This event provided the opportunity for an open dialogue between the community and their police



department and community stakeholders. This event had almost 100 attendees from the community and was such a big success; it provided the momentum for 2015's "Eat and Greet" which was so strong that attendance increased to over 250 attendees. New Muslim leaders sat and shared food with some of Columbia Heights' oldest residents, descendants of the Polish immigrants that first settled this community. This was a meeting that highlighted what Columbia Heights was and what it was becoming, and the outcome was cultural awareness, understanding, and acceptance.

2015 marked the most attended National Night Out event, where there were 55 gatherings in the community of which over 1,250 attendees – all of who were taught the life-skills of CPR and AED use in training sessions cohosted by the Columbia Heights Fire and Police departments in their very own backyards. The Columbia Heights Police Department hosted monthly "Coffee with a Cop" events at several locations, giving the community a chance to sit down and speak with police officers informally, allowing the community to get to know their police, as well as allowing the police to get to know their community. This includes "Pizza with a Cop", which will bring cops into the school lunches to sit and talk with students in a positive setting. The Columbia Heights Police Department hosted the 2014 "Clean,

Fed, and Warm” open house at the police department and welcomed our community to come tour the department facilities and interact with police and fire. This venture raised over \$3,500 to purchase food and clothing for the less fortunate within the Community.

The year 2015 also marked the department’s largest participation in the annual “Shop with a Cop” program, in which fourteen families, chosen by the school district, had the opportunity to go shopping with police officers, buying Christmas and holiday gifts for their children and family members, all of which were paid for with over \$5,000 in community donations. Columbia Heights had also attained the Heart Safe Community award this same year, led by the police department. 10% of the City’s population was provided with free, hands-on CPR and AED training, and this number will continue to grow as the police and fire department continue these efforts on at least a quarterly basis from here on out. The police departments also partnered with the school district, to ensure all students are trained in CPR and AED before they graduate from high school, as well as provided training to the local business, churches, and our local mosque.

The school district has seen immense and positive changes within their buildings as well. Truancy issues have declined and test scores continue to improve. Attendance is also up and K-12 suspensions are down a remarkable 130%. Enrollment in the K-8 schools has increased while high school enrollment has stayed consistent over the last several years. In 2013, 47% of all kindergarten students were considered English Learners and in 2015 25% of all students spoke Spanish as their primary language, while another 6% spoke Somali. Columbia Heights schools continue to thrive despite the obstacles it faces. Superintendent Kelly designed and implemented all-day kindergarten for Columbia Heights and was awarded the 2012 VH1 “Save the Music Foundation” Superintendent of the Year, as well as the 2013 Minnesota Supervision and Administration Division Art Educator of the Year for her appreciation and integration of both music and the arts into the classroom.

Columbia Heights is closing the achievement gap by graduating more students and outperforming the state in most categories for the 2014-2015 school year. The results, released by the MN Department of Education, show that CHPS has the second highest graduation gains of all school districts in the greater Twin Cities area. The High School has also been selected as an honor roll recipient from the College Board that oversees Advanced Placement courses and student test scores. They were awarded that honor along with only 13 other schools in the state of Minnesota.

Valley View Elementary School in Columbia Heights was a 2015 finalist for the Minnesota National Distinguished Principal award, after being nominated by Superintendent Kathy Kelly for outstanding leadership and achievement. In 2013 and 2014, Valley View was recognized as a “Beating the Odds” school by the Minneapolis Star Tribune, being the only Minnesota public school with high levels of

poverty noted for its significant gains in both math and reading. Also in 2014, the Minnesota Business Partnership awarded Valley View with the Minnesota's Future Award for exceeding statewide averages in reading and math while serving high percentages of low-income and non-white students. The Police Department has now partnered with Valley View Elementary and the Sheridan Story, distributing weekly bags of food to children whose families need the support of their community at no cost to the families.



Recently, the Columbia Heights Police Department conducted a citywide survey, asking the community to evaluate their police department. Ultimately, 89% found that the police department has a good relationship with the

community and almost 70% found that the police department has been responsive to the changing demographics. Perhaps most importantly, 94% of the community found their police department to behave respectfully and professionally and 94% felt safe from crime. Results were analyzed and in 2008, department community oriented policing, or COP, hours were at an all-time department low with just over 2000 for the entire year while crime skyrocketed with almost 2600 crimes reported. By 2015, the inverse was true as COP hours exceeded 6000 department wide and crime fell to a forty year low with less than 1300 crimes being reported – a fifty percent decrease in less than 10 years, which exceeds both state and national averages.

In 2015, the Columbia Heights Police Department and the Columbia Heights School District were present for one of the proudest moments in each of their organization's history, as they were recognized by the United States Department of Justice, receiving the L. Anthony Sutin Award for Civic Imagination. This award recognized the proactive and creative partnership the school district and police department had forged to create success and opportunities for the youth, holding them accountable to themselves and giving them the tools to succeed as they embark on a future of their own.

The primary contact for this Project is Scott Nadeau, Columbia Heights Police Chief. He can be reached at 825 41<sup>st</sup> Ave NE, Columbia Heights MN 55421; by phone at 763-706-3105; and via e-mail at [snadeau@columbiaheightsmn.gov](mailto:snadeau@columbiaheightsmn.gov).

### **Project 2: The City of Peace Park Initiative**

Founded on the premise created by its very own citizens, city officials, and civil servants after the attacks on 9/11, Columbia Heights is motivated by its mission that states, "Peace is something that has to be encouraged continuously in

order to ensure a community of open arms to diversity for all who wish to buy into this vision of living together in peace, no matter their race, culture, or creed; most importantly during times of great testing and hardship.” Columbia Heights Mayor Gary Peterson, along with concerned citizens and volunteers of this proud and virtuous city, set forth on the mission of restoring peace to their community, while the rest of the world displayed fear and insecurity.

The City of Peace Initiative began and three projects stand today emphasizing the efforts and progress of this community. The “Clock Tower of Peace” was erected in 2006, the “Police and Fire Tribute of Peace” was built in 2010, and the “Heritage Tower of Peace” became a reality in 2013. All of these monuments stand today for both citizens and strangers alike to witness what a community can do, even in times of need, when they work as one. And while all of these projects brought together an engaged community of stakeholders, businesses, citizens, and even high school students in conversations and activities that centered on art, diversity, and working towards peaceful partnerships in all facets of life, the greatest challenge was yet to come

In April of 2015, six Somali men in Minnesota were charged with Conspiracy to Provide Material Support to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). One of these men lived in the Circle Terrace neighborhood of Columbia Heights. The neighborhood has long been one of diversity and struggle that has more recently seen an influx of East African immigrants settling here. With great change comes great challenge. On May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2015 the Columbia Heights City Council approved an amendment to a Parks and Recreation Bill allowing for the advancement of a community building set in the City of Peace Park on Circle Terrace Blvd, which lies directly in the center of this diverse neighborhood. What do these events have in common? Everything. The best way to fight the radicalization of our youth is to provide opportunity, and allow all of our citizens the best chance of success.

The Circle Terrace Neighborhood is one of poverty and need. 60% of all residents are on government assistance and opportunity is not prevalent. For the better part of the last decade, Circle Terrace has been a haven for crime and disorder. The small neighborhood contributed disproportionately to police calls and officer action taken in Columbia Heights. This community, made up of almost 100% rental properties, has long been a diverse and transient population, making it difficult to truly create the sustainability of an effective community. However, even in the face of these odds, this community is one of pride and great work ethic. Almost 75% of the neighborhood is currently employed and/or an American student. Even after the resident of this neighborhood was arrested for supporting the terrorists of ISIL and ISIS, this neighborhood continues to forge positive relationships with their community and its City agencies, including local law enforcement.

Before the terrorist arrest was made, the City of Columbia Heights had purchased two lots directly adjacent to the small playground in the Circle Terrace

Neighborhood of what's now known as the City of Peace Park. These lots once contained dilapidated rental properties, but with the assistance of Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) and other federal and local funding sources, these properties were purchased several years ago with the intent of neighborhood enhancement. During this time, the City created a proposal allowing for the park equipment in this park to be replaced, along with the installation of an outdoor athletics court for 2016. With this, an idea was proposed for a multipurpose recreational building to be erected within this new park. Before taking this proposal to the City Council, the Columbia Heights Police Department conducted a door-to-door survey of the entire neighborhood and its surrounding communities. This effort was aimed at gauging the interest in such a building. However, the police department's goal was not to advise a community on what it was they "needed", but rather learn about this community's identity, and to help them realize their own goals and needs. This survey included questions about language skills and race, income and employment, and education and children. But most importantly it asked the community if they even wanted a building and, if so, what they would want it for.

The results of this survey showed a community desperately seeking opportunity; desperately seeking a relationship with its city and its city's organizations, including the police department despite the recent tragedy that had occurred. This is a community that lives to work, but works to live, struggling to make ends meet with 70% of households making less than \$40,000 in total income. 60% were dependent upon government assistance simply to get



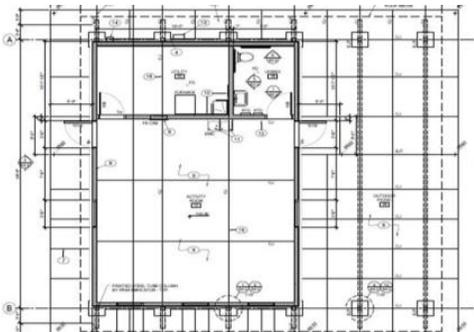
by. We asked if this community would use a community building for public outreach and recreational services and what we heard was a resounding, "YES!" Over 80% of respondents wanted to use the building for police outreach and recreation. 80% of respondents also requested that this building be used for educational purposes, such as youth-based tutoring and mentoring as well as adult education, community outreach, and a bevy of other opportunities.

The neighborhood of Circle Terrace was searching for the one thing they lacked: opportunity. And Columbia Heights wanted to help them actualize it. The City not only asked them how they could be of service, but they actually listened to their voices. The community and local government came together to provide this neighborhood with the answers they had been searching for.

This park building would act as a focal point for the community, providing the citizen's access to a community building that would host a multitude of

community and recreational events. The community, which is approximately 60% Somali, has requested the building be created to provide the opportunity and resources for programs such as Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts of America, Adult Basic Education, Heart Safe First Aid Training, Parks and Recreation, Parenting Classes, Religious Outreach and Events, and several other possibilities. The Community has also emphatically requested that his building be a center for police services and outreach, in efforts to build a positive relationship between police and the community they serve.

The City of Columbia Heights has responded to these requests by promising to provide various departmental staff services, to include both Police and Parks and Recreation within this building each and every week at no extra cost to the community. The City has already invested in the park redevelopment by funding the park and playground rebuild, and has pledge to fund the maintenance of this building without fees to the community. Several Community stakeholders have already pledged their allegiance and support for this project, including both the Columbia Heights School District and the Anoka County Community Action Program, which works directly towards neighborhood growth and well-being.



With overwhelming positive results and support for this building, a proposal was brought to the Columbia Heights Parks and Recreation Commission for approval, allowing for the incorporation of this building for community outreach and recreational services in the Circle Terrace Neighborhood. This proposal was approved unanimously and was next brought to the City Council, where it again garnered unequivocal support from the Columbia Heights Council leadership. A committee has since been formed to establish grants and funding for this project that has been estimated to cost an additional \$250,000 to park improvements. This committee has met with government leaders such as Congressman Keith Ellison and US Attorney Andy Luger, both of whom lent their unfettered support for this project, assisting in the funding research for a project of this magnitude even in a city as small as Columbia Heights.

Meetings were held and applications were completed, and as of February 2016 the city is awaiting approval from the Anoka County governing board that would allow a large portion of this project to be funded by further CDBG grants, with the remaining funding to be raised by local stakeholders and other local grants and opportunities. Less than a year after the FBI stormed down the streets of this community, the reality of this neighborhood building aimed at opportunity and community welfare is all the more closer to becoming a reality.

Once this building does become a reality, there will be a city office inside allowing residents to interact with city employees, such as Police Officers and Parks & Rec

representatives, on a regular basis, as well as allowing open avenues for communication in the comforts of their own neighborhood. The City of Columbia Heights will staff this building on a part-time basis within the confines of the City's budget. The Police Department currently employs two foreign-born officers, one from Somalia and the other from Ethiopia, as well as Community Service Officers of Iraqi, Somali, and Hmong descent. These officers share cultural, religious, and language skills that would allow this diverse community the opportunity to speak with officers who share their origins and experiences. However, all city employees will share in the responsibility of this building and its resources, as it is important for all city workers and community members to understand and learn from each other.

During the last year, we have paved the way to make this model of opportunity a reality. The City of Columbia Heights and the Columbia Heights Police Department have worked in tandem to open the doors to our community's future. We have worked tirelessly to evoke change within this ever-growing community of first and second generation immigrants, as well as a multitude of other races and religions, truly creating a neighborhood steeped in the American tradition of cultural acceptance and growth. On July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015, the police department hosted a community picnic on the piece of land where this building will go. We invited the entire neighborhood, along with several community organizations to attend creating an informal affair designed to show the community exactly what opportunities are available to them. Over 250 people showed up, wanting to know more, excited to be reached to and invited in as members of a larger community, proving once again: if you build it, they will come.

The police department has since returned to the neighborhood on multiple occasions to maintain an open dialogue, gain insights, and improve communication about the project. The residents have even signed a petition of support for this project, expressing their devotion to change and opportunity through community outreach. This project, which is a vein of the Columbia Heights City of Peace initiative, looks to promote progress and enhance the quality of life by creative means aimed at offering everyone a space to find peace and opportunity within their very own neighborhood. Our neighborhood. More than just words on a page, the City of Peace initiative continues to work for those who live, work, and visit the city by providing hope and opportunity to all.

The primary contact for this Project is Gary Peterson, Mayor of the city of Columbia Heights. He can be reached at 590 40<sup>th</sup> Ave NE, Columbia Heights MN 55421; by phone at 763-706-3507; and via e-mail at [gpeterson@columbiaheightsmn.gov](mailto:gpeterson@columbiaheightsmn.gov).

### **Project 3: The New Library and the Collaborative Spirit**

The vestiges of the collaborative spirit are strong in Columbia Heights, and perhaps nothing centralizes these efforts more than the Columbia Heights Public Library. Anoka County is home to 23 cities, townships, and communities, yet Columbia Heights is the only city within the county that still governs its very own library. While libraries have become decentralized over the last several decades, Columbia Heights has taken pride in their own. In 1999, city officials assessed the library and it was in dire need of upgrades. However, at this time there were budgetary concerns that continued to loom into the next decade as the economy struggled and city governments everywhere made cuts, even in the face of public demand. 15 years later, residents were given the chance to vote on their own library's future.

While increased taxes and public funding usually generate negativity and opposition, the community of Columbia Heights overwhelmingly voted to support a \$9.3 million dollar investment into a new library, approximately \$7 million of which would be funded by the tax payers themselves. The referendum came to being due to a successful petition by residents after the City Council voted 4-1 to bond for the new facility. In 2014, 63% percent of the participating citizens voted in favor of a new Columbia Heights Public Library to be built, accepting the responsibility of higher taxes to make this long awaited dream a reality. In June 2016, the new Library will be completed along the main artery of Columbia Heights, built next to the historic Heights Theater on Central Avenue. These cultural institutions are beloved amongst the residents of Columbia Heights, and now they will neighbor one another, welcoming residents and strangers alike to Columbia Heights.



But why would the poor community of Columbia Heights give such a resounding yes to the extra financial burden of \$54 in additional taxes per household in 2016 and \$38 annually in the following 19 years? Opportunity. Pride, connectedness, and opportunity. The Columbia Heights Library is not just a place where you can check out a book, it is a place that partners with the entire city and county to provide services to the public, services that are both free and supportive. The new library will have 24 computers, which is three times as many as the current facility, and high-speed internet that is all free of cost to its users. With over 685,000 minutes used and 25,000 computer logins on the current 8-computer setup, imagine the endless usership and possibility that the 24 computers of the new facility will provide. There will be designated sections for adults, teens, and children to ensure that the learning environment is both appropriate and conducive to learning, meeting the needs of everyone.

In 2015 alone, the library served almost 103,000 people in a City with a population just over 20,000. The library has a strong and active partnership with the Columbia Heights school district, enjoying positive working relationships with Immaculate Conception School, Metro North Adult Basic Education, Head Start, Valley View Elementary kindergarten, and Early Childhood and Family Education. 87 “story times” were offered in 2015, reaching a total of 1,728 parents and children, providing the parents with the tools necessary to foster early literacy skills. With a robust summer program, the Columbia Heights Library provides a multitude of opportunities aimed at reaching all sects of society, including everyone from infants to seniors. The library’s very own strategic plan puts all of its emphasis on “pursuing partnerships, educating the community about the library’s purpose, and providing outstanding service while anticipating the changing needs of the community.”

This strategic plan emphasis is ever more critical given the fact that Columbia Heights has a minority population that is greater than both the state and national levels – a change that has occurred almost exclusively in the past decade. And the library has been up to the task. Relying on over 1,200 hours of dedicated volunteerism, the Columbia Heights Public Library has provided the citizens of this community with boundless opportunity. And by partnering with the Anoka County Library, the residents of Columbia Heights have benefited from the integrated library system, which makes a city of only three-and-a-half square miles almost infinite in it’s reach. And with over 18,500 Columbia Heights Library cardholders, and over 240,000 county cardholders, this new facility will provide a learning destination for many, both near and far, young and old.

With over 400 programs hosted by the library, over 6,500 patrons attend courses annually. While this may not seem like much, that’s almost one-third of the City’s entire population. Programs aimed at the senior library patrons focusing on the arts, computer literacy, and volunteerism. Senior Surf being one such program hosting seniors to free weekly technology trainings, giving our senior citizens the skills and education to relate to the modern internet world, allowing them to reach family members and friends from afar. The Columbia Heights Public Library also provides brain fitness courses to strengthen cognitive skills and enhance memory while fighting the ills of Alzheimer’s and dementia. The library provides senior outreach as well, partaking in at-home delivery of books and other library materials to those who are unable to travel freely.

The Library enjoys an active and strong relationship with the Columbia Heights School District as well, providing daily homework help, both online and in-person from 1:00pm until 11:00pm daily. This service is free for students of all ages and is actively used by all, especially those students in the local high school. With 220 child and teen based programs alone, there are nearly endless opportunities for youth of all ages. There’s also a Teen Advisory Board and Summer Volunteer program that seeks those youths that have the charitable heart and willingness to serve. This allows teens to serve as “youth ambassadors” at children’s programs,

assisting with the reading programs registration and current programs setup and clean up. The Teen Advisory Board also provided input on the design of the new library and brainstormed future program ideas such as the popular “Anti-Valentine’s Day Party”, and developed, created, and maintained a teen bulletin board that displays current trends and topics pertinent to our future leaders.

Future readers and new parents are treated to programs such as “Baby Read, Baby Grow” and “Toddler Story Time”. These important programs are aimed at educating new parents about child development and helps build on the early literacy foundations of talking, playing, and singing, providing the basis for future scholastic success to our youngest citizens, infants and toddlers. The always popular LEGO Club is designed specifically for toddler and elementary-aged students that gives them the tools to count, sort, and socialize, as well as build on engineering and problem solving skills. There are countless other programs designed specifically for the progress and development of our youth. These programs range in all categories including science, technology, engineering, art, and math (STEAM). No child is left behind and each one is provided with the specific paint brush needed to create masterful individuals that can one day build on the success of our community or provide the necessary tools to enhance communities everywhere.

In the endless pursuit of knowledge, the Columbia Heights Public Library provides opportunities to our hardworking adults and families as well. Life skills such as “Bike U” which teaches adults the art of bicycle maintenance, and “Avoiding Scams and Frauds” are just two of 194 programs aimed specifically at adults. Add in numerous book clubs and literacy programs, all adults are welcomed to push their own intellectual boundaries. Our new immigrants are encouraged and welcome to come to the library for education and training in reading comprehension and language skills, as well as homework help and parenting classes. The Columbia Heights Public Library works endlessly to ensure all corners of society feel welcome by incorporating their needs and wants into each of their free educational programs. And if perhaps your program doesn’t exist, the library invites you to become a volunteer and perhaps start a program of your own.



The library’s reach is not limited to their new building and the walls that hold it up however. The library staff attends over 35 outreach events annually and is always looking for new ways to reach the citizens of Columbia Heights and beyond. From celebrating Polish-American Heritage Month, to the Jamboree

Parade and Carnival and the City of Columbia Heights Community Picnic, the local library continues to cement its legacy in the hearts and minds of the citizens of

Columbia Heights. The library partners with the police department as well, attending the annual “Eat & Greet” which is aimed at reaching our minority communities that are often overlooked by local governments that neglect to acknowledge the changing communities that they serve. In 2014, with the support of the Columbia Heights Police Department, the library became a “Crime Prevention Zone” by adding bike locks that can be borrowed with a library card to those in need. And while much of our community continues to struggle simply to make ends meet, the library forgave over \$560 in juvenile fines accumulated by readers ages seventeen and under with their “Youth Read-down” program. While the library provides a service to the community, it is also keenly aware of the financial burden simple fines and fees can have on families and proactively excuses fines to those in need, so to not dissuade our communities from utilizing the important and necessary features our library provides.

In fact, it is this keen sense of responsibility and social awareness that not only the library, but all entities of Columbia Heights employs. Perhaps it is because Columbia Heights relies on communication and understanding, for a successful community is not governed by one body but rather many bodies in perfect union. As if connected at the hip, when one group takes a step so does the next. The school district reaches out to the police and fire department for first aid, and the library reaches out to the school district to provide homework assistance to its students. The police department reaches out to community development to help build a park, and so on. In fact, the police department’s 2016 strategic plan, which is created annually and provides the blueprint for the department’s success, was created with input from the City Council, fire department, school district, faith based leaders, and even local families.

For a community organization to be truly successful, it must be an extension of the community it serves, regardless of field, for it is a community that defines its own success and not the government that serves it. Over the last 10 years, even in the face of constant struggle and change, the city of Columbia Heights has defined its own success, and it is through positive partnerships and synergy that the Library, local government and police department, and the Columbia Heights School district were able to serve the needs of our citizens with empathy and heart. Even with a stone David was able to take down a Goliath when all thought his defeat was certain, but he didn’t let the obstacle define him, rather he defied the obstacle. Columbia Heights may not be the wealthiest City or the most gentrified, but that’s not what defines it.

Columbia Heights is defined by its partnerships between the community and the programs that serve it. An All-American City must be of the “American Spirit” that pushes us to conquer and overcome change and diversity, something Columbia Heights continues to do on a daily basis. This award, while humbling and gracious would be gratification of a job well done, something the citizens of Columbia Heights can be proud of. But even if we are not awarded this great honor, it won’t change our outlook. We will continue to improve and push the boundaries of progress in

spite of all odds, for an award doesn't define us, it can only affirm what is already believed. And nothing is more American than that.

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