

Aurora housing assistance groups merge to bring savings, stability

By Marie Wilson
Daily Herald, 5/16/2018



Denny Wiggins, retiring executive director of Joseph Corporation in Aurora, receives a blessing Tuesday from Betty Skonieczny, left, with the Sisters of Mercy, which founded Joseph Corp. in 1991, and Rick Guzman, executive director of the new nonprofit organization The Neighbor Project.

"We all have something to contribute" is the driving belief behind a new agency created from two longtime housing and homeownership assistance groups in Aurora.

The Neighbor Project, as the new nonprofit is called, aims to make the community stronger by improving the financial and living situations of more of its residents, executive director Rick Guzman said.

Formed by the merger of Joseph Corporation and Emmanuel House, [The Neighbor Project](#) will help participants pay down debt, save money and buy homes -- all of which Guzman says will allow more Aurorans to invest in the city in which they live.

"A disproportionate number of our neighbors have income, but not stability," Guzman said. These families often are renters who earn a living, but often have to relocate or allocate money to rising rents.

"Most of these renting families have no net worth," Guzman said. "That's not just problematic for them. That's a problem for all of us."

The Neighbor Project will focus its programs in three areas:

- Financial literacy and debt reduction
- Assistance with saving for college, housing down payments or businesses
- Homeownership assistance to purchase a home or avoid foreclosure

Joseph Corporation and Emmanuel House help about 40 families each year with these services. Combined, Guzman said the families they can serve will climb to 60.

The merger has been two years in the making, said Denny Wiggins, who retired as executive director of Joseph Corporation after nine years. During his time, Wiggins said the agency developed 25 new houses, representing an investment of \$2.5 million, and helped 350 homeowners avoid foreclosure.

"Believe me, that's a huge success," he said.

Wiggins and Hayley Meksi, outgoing executive director of Emmanuel House, said they are excited for The Neighbor Project's work to help people escape the financial downsides of renting, which create what Meksi called "a cycle of disadvantage that we know is very real."

[Joseph Corporation](#) was founded in 1991 by the Sisters of Mercy to help families avoid homelessness, said Betty Skonieczny with the Sisters, who also is one of 16 new board members of The Neighbor Project.

[Emmanuel House](#) was founded in 2002 by Guzman and his wife, Desiree, to help people save for down payments on houses.

In 2006, the agency bought a five-unit building and allowed families to move in, paying what would have been their rent into a savings account to use to buy a home. Thirty families have participated.

"Churches and volunteers readily rallied around this mission," Meksi said.

Now leaders of The Neighbor Project hope for a rally around the new mission of helping people reach their potential contributions to the community, board member Brian Schrader said. "Hopefully we'll capture some of that energy and spirit to help others," he said.

The name The Neighbor Project also draws on the fable of the Good Samaritan, in which Jesus challenges followers to take the time to help those around them in need, Guzman said. "We're all in this together," he said. "When our neighbors prosper, we do, too."

Watch The Neighbor Project [Intro Video](#)