

WORKING CAPITAL

SUMMER 2011



The Newsletter of the Chicago Program
of Local Initiatives Support Corporation



Neighborhood volunteers like North Lawndale coach and State Farm Agent Darren Tillis (right photo, center) are the backbone of Hoops in the Hood efforts to foster youth engagement and community safety.

HOOPS IN THE HOOD: A PROFILE OF NORTH LAWNDALE VOLUNTEER COACH DARREN TILLIS

Community volunteers are an integral part of all successful neighborhood efforts – including Hoops in the Hood, a partnership of LISC/Chicago and organizations in 11 neighborhoods to offer summer sports programs focused on building youth engagement, leadership and community safety strategies.

In North Lawndale, one of those volunteers is State Farm insurance agent Darren Tillis, who opened his insurance office in North Lawndale in 2001 but brings a commitment to the community that goes back much further. He was born and raised in the neighborhood, and he's joined with dozens of residents to carry on one of the community's great traditions of supporting local civic and cultural life. For Tillis, Hoops in the Hood has become a central part of that volunteerism.

"Since I was 11, basketball has played a major role in my social and academic development," says Tillis. "I grew up on a block where my childhood role model was Mickey Johnson, a professional NBA basketball player who lived down the street. He encouraged us to get involved in athletics while also stressing the importance of academics, and my parents always stressed that my academic performance

dictated my participation. Today, 30 years later, I still maintain relationships with people I met playing team basketball as a kid – and I still hold on to those life lessons and do my best to pass them along.”

When Tillis found out that LISC/Chicago and State Farm Insurance had partnered to bring the Hoops in the Hood program to North Lawndale, he jumped at the chance to work with the staff at Lawndale Christian Development Corporation (LISC’s lead agency in the community). Today, he coaches one of the teams playing in LCDC’s Hoops program.

“I attribute my life today to the lessons, skills and mentoring I got participating in youth basketball,” says Tillis. “As a coach, it’s my hope that we can provide our youth with the same kind of experience. Hoops is an opportunity for kids to develop socially by interacting with business professionals and positive role models through a shared value – sportsmanship.”

Darren’s experience with youth athletic programs and his work with Hoops help him see first-hand how community involvement can have a lasting effect on participants and how they view their community.

“Young people begin to understand community-building and their role in helping the community move forward,” he says. “The youth feel safe and become advocates for keeping their communities safe. In 20 years, today’s participants can look back on Hoops in the Hood and the positive effect it had on their personal and professional development – and as our future community, business and political leaders, pass those positive insights and experiences onto the next generation. Leaders across the world attribute their problem-solving skills, conflict resolution skills, community building skills and leadership qualities to their involvement in sports. These are the same qualities that children learn by participating in programs like Hoops in the Hood.”

But Tillis’s neighborhood involvement extends beyond sports. The Illinois State University alumnus serves on the boards of North Lawndale Neighborhood Housing Services and the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative facilitated by the Better Boys Foundation. He also offers college readiness talks to young people at North Lawndale’s Chicago Youth Center.

Tillis will be among the speakers at LISC/Chicago’s Hoops in the Hood August 20 cross-city tournament sponsored by State Farm, where he’ll be cheering for the team he coaches as well as promoting the broader initiative, including the many interlocking programs and community groups that inform the larger initiative.

“This program and the dozens of community projects that make it possible give the whole community – not just in North Lawndale but in all Hoops communities – a chance to come together,” he says. “Hoops puts families and whole blocks on the streets in a positive, shared experience of teen endeavor. It gives everyone a tremendously constructive experience of what it means to be a community. And it helps kids and adults see that ‘community’ is bigger than one block or one neighborhood – it’s as big as the whole city, and by extension, the whole world. That’s a lesson to carry forward well beyond the end of the summer Hoops season – that’s a lesson for life.”