I was placed at Neighborhood House in St. Paul, MN as a community assessment intern on the West Seventh Corridor Expansion Project. Neighborhood House is a nonprofit that works with various communities across St. Paul by providing a multitude of programs for individuals and families. Those programs include: youth leadership, adult education, college access, food support, family centers, community health, parent and early childhood education and career education/employment services. The project’s goal was to conduct a needs assessment in order to gather information on the West Seventh community followed by improved and updated services/programs offered there.

Neighborhood House for a long time, has been a place to help immigrants and refugees since it had been founded by women of the Mount Zion Temple in 1897. It began helping Eastern European and Jewish immigrants accommodate to St. Paul. As it grew into the organization it is today, the ethnic compositions of its participants has grown to become much more diverse. Neighborhood House now helps more than 15,000 people at six different locations around St. Paul.

The West Seventh Corridor Expansion Project deals with one diverse community within the Highland neighborhood surrounding West Seventh street. Anyone can be helped, although those primarily served are Central/South American, East African and Eastern European. Currently, Neighborhood House rents out of two basement apartments to provide a Family Center and a Food Market. They are smaller than the other locations, but work to help the people just as much. Other services provided within that neighborhood are skills for school (early childhood education), adult education, college access, refugee resettlement and financial literacy
coaching/training. Neighborhood House partners with a local school for the early childhood education and borrows space within another apartment building for the adult classes.

This project is in phase one of an ongoing process to resolve issues of space and scale of programs. One major problem is the fact that the services are spread out at different locations, which causes problems related to outreach. I worked with two supervisors, Sarah Berger and Shad Klukas to organize and execute the research. We also met monthly with two other board members, Sarah Lindeman and Jean King who gave feedback on research methods. Jean King was our honorary board member as she is a renowned program evaluator and method analyst currently working at the University of Minnesota - Twin Cities. This small team paid much attention to my learning in order to make sure I was soaking up as much as possible.

I also worked with those who are employed and volunteer at the family center and food market at our location in West Seventh. Frewoine Nerea is the case worker for the family center there, and I worked with her often because she has closer ties with the community. As I got to know her, other community members opened up to me as well. We gathered two women from the community as advisors who would continue to volunteer their time and provide feedback on our methods and help tie in our efforts to the concerns of those living there. Therefore, I collaborated with my team at headquarters, as well as women within the community.

The first important piece of information I learned was what a needs assessment is: what is versus what should be. By learning this piece of information, I was able to put in perspective what pieces of the puzzle I really should be looking for when we did the research. Another ‘aha’ moment was when I fully understood how important it is to work with the community. Although I have learned how critical that is within my courses as we’ve discussed community organizing,
putting it to practice is a different experience. I engaged with those who worked at West Seventh because I found it extremely important to make those connections, especially for a project like this. Consequently, these became a prime example of how relationships matter for this line of work. In order to change lives, one has to ask those whose lives you're changing what they think of it all.

I found that place matters as well. I primarily worked at a desk in headquarters which is the Wellstone Center in the West Side neighborhood. There, I saw more people, and more individualized programming. When I went to West Seventh, I observed a more tight knit and smaller community. That difference prompted me to think about how the services needed to be modelled slightly different than the way they are at Wellstone, because the communities are vastly different. Both relationships and place matter very much. I had to understand that my decisions are affecting the lives of real people who have very legitimately challenging circumstances.

Coming away from this project, I have a new perspective of the social services field and what it is like to work at a non profit. I think working behind the scenes and not always with the participants directly can put people into their own bubble. But I find it valuable to step into other people’s realities in order to grasp a well rounded understanding. Working in a non profit and doing a lot of research, forced me to develop more organization skills such as making small checklists each week as well as having a timeline/to-do list for the long term that can be modified as I crossed tasks off.

To begin the project, I was asked to do a lot of background research. This included, demographic information, other projects conducted in the area and other social service providers.
I found that there were not many other closely located organizations that provide help like Neighborhood House does. Some of them we partnered with in order to make our programs come to fruition, but we were the core assistance for those in that community. Despite this, the amount of help is very small, so much that when we needed to gather volunteers for the canvassing/surveying efforts, we had to reach out to various faith communities. This was a very helpful collaboration because it furthered our connections with those communities and provided us with volunteers.

This experience has broadened my perspective on the work I could potentially be doing in the future. I felt that Neighborhood House has done amazing work, and will continue doing so as they move this project to phase two. If future Badger Reach fellows end up working at this organization there are some tips they should know. They should always be able to ask for help as everyone is very welcoming and open to helping out. It is important, especially for a project like this one, to take notes on everything because every piece of information has the potential to be useful later on. Also, to remember to use online resources whenever necessary as they can prove to be very useful. Finally, get to know the community that is being worked with as it not only is morally necessary but it is very advantageous as well.

I enjoyed my time at Neighborhood House and I learned a lot. I very much look forward to seeing how the project moves along in the future. Community work has always been something that has intrigued me and I am grateful to have obtained this experience under my belt. I have made lasting connections and I plan to use my acquired skills in future work.