IMPROVING THE STREET WHERE YOU LIVE

Programs that Begin with Neighbors

SOCIAL SERVICE PROGRAMS have traditionally taken a deficit-model approach to community development, focusing on what is missing in a community rather than trying to strengthen and develop existing assets. Many well-intentioned people have looked at the numerous problems in low-income neighborhoods and suggested a range of services to "fix" the situation. The prevailing wisdom has been that residents of low-income neighborhoods have a great number of needs to be met, but very little to offer in return. While job programs, youth development efforts, and affordable housing campaigns are critical to personal and community well-being, they too often only scratch the surface of the "services to need" ratio. After decades of outside assistance, poverty remains a real challenge for many American communities.

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In 1990 there were nearly 3,000 neighborhoods with poverty rates of 40% or higher, almost double the figure from 1970 (Jargowsky, 1997). Over the past 40 years, the federal government and others have spent billions of dollars trying to reverse this trend. From the War on Poverty initiative of the 1960s to the more recent Empowerment Zone/Enterprise Communities programs, government and nongovernmental agencies alike have tried to reinvigorate communities and stimulate regrowth in high-poverty neighborhoods. Despite the ongoing debate about the effectiveness of these and other programs, it is clear that outside intervention alone, governmental or otherwise, cannot succeed in rebuilding distressed communities (Green and Haines, 2002). Community development specialists and researchers have found that an approach based solely on residents' needs cannot rebuild communities and enhance capacity in a sustainable way. What is needed is an asset-model approach, one that focuses on a neighborhood's existing strengths. The defining question for community development is no longer "How can we help these communities?" but "How can these communities help themselves?"

In the last two decades, the community development field has been steadily shifting its thinking away from the deficit-model approach. Experts now talk instead about an idea called "community building," which begins with the assumption that efforts to rebuild communities must also include efforts to increase the capacity of citizens to solve their own problems. Comprehensive community initiatives that aim to improve physical and economic conditions must simultaneously improve the ability of local residents to affect personal and community change on their own.

In the early 1990s, two researchers at Northwestern University, John McKnight and John Kretzmann, launched a local research effort to map the capacities and assets that already existed in a low-income, high crime neighborhood. Their research uncovered a startling finding: this outwardly impoverished community had a wealth of assets on which to draw (1993). As they looked at individuals, community and faith-based organizations, and local institutions like libraries, schools, and businesses, they saw considerable personal and physical assets in the community: people who had untapped talents for childcare and auto repair; organizations that were neighborhood connectors; and traditional institutions whose roles and services had been too narrowly defined. This initial work led to an intensive look at how poor communities are labeled and, more importantly, how they are best served. They found that asset-based community development required a different approach and new kinds of measurements.

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Ultimately, McKnight and Kretzmann determined that the deficit approach to community development—what's not present rather than what is—leaves residents thinking that they and their neighbors are "incapable of taking charge of their lives and their community's future" (1993, p. 4). The alternative approach that they suggest—the asset model—"leads toward the development of policies and activities based on the capacities, skills, and assets of lower income people and their neighborhoods" (p. 5). The asset approach becomes the only viable alternative for poor neighborhoods for two reasons: 1) there is evidence that significant community development can only occur and be sustained when the local community is invested in the results; and 2) the availability of outside resources will always come up short. Even in federally targeted areas like the Enterprise Zones, there is never enough support to adequately rebuild communities with outside resources. There must be something else.

The "something else" for low-income communities is to come together around their strengths and build on them. In cities and rural areas, whole communities often suffer from disinvestment and lack of hope. Once thriving communities are now shuttered and barred. The reality of crime and poverty is all around. But within these neighborhoods there are citizens and organizations that *can* connect people, that *can* create better links to existing services, and most importantly, that *can* build trust again.

The two communities profiled here are attempting to rebuild their neighborhoods one block at a time. By building on what they have, maximizing external assistance through local resident participation, and counting on the gift of neighborliness that still exists, these communities are succeeding in connecting people the old-fashioned way.

Carmel Hill Project

Challenge: How can a blighted inner-city neighborhood reinvigorate itself?

Background: In the early 1990s, the block of West 118th Street between Fifth Avenue and Lenox in central Harlem had a lot of problems. The street was lined with condemned or abandoned structures and city-owned apartment buildings that were in horrendous, life-threatening condition. Families were living with holes in walls and ceilings, fire and water damage, kitchens and bathrooms that did not work, and pest infestation. Vacant lots were eyesores, and safety was a major concern. Behind the obvious evidence of

disinvestment, families were struggling even to access the benefits and resources for which they qualified. Residents of this block had many obstacles to overcome.

Solution: In 1992, a group of neighborhood residents, together with a private philanthropist and the Children's Aid Society, established the Carmel Hill Project, a community-building and social service project based on 118th Street. The premise of the project was that a devastated urban block could transform itself if residents were given the opportunity and the support they needed to create a different kind of neighborhood environment. The Carmel Hill Project is a comprehensive and multifaceted effort at block renewal. Its mission is defined around four closely related objectives:

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- Strengthening families through services, better housing and community conditions, and developing capacity;
- Improving the lives of children through educational opportunities, family counseling, and outreach and training to parents;
- Creating a better physical and social environment on the block; and
- Community organizing.

The project has had an interesting trajectory that highlights how success breeds success. When the Carmel Hill Project first began, it dealt mostly with housing issues. Since then, three buildings on the block have been rehabilitated and residents have formed tenant associations. A partnership

between the Children's Aid Society and Mt. Sinai Hospital has led to improved access to health care in the form of a community health clinic. A block association now provides a vehicle for maintaining contacts with the local police precinct, resulting in vastly improved police responsiveness. Most recently, the project has focused on improving education for children on the block in the form of scholarships for 78 children to attend a local parochial school. Prior to the scholarship program, children on the block attended 26 different schools. Embedded in all these components is a strong commitment to case management for individuals and families on the block.

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Testing 1, 2, 3: An outside evaluation concluded that almost 10 years after the Carmel Hill Project began, West 118th Street between Lenox Avenue and Fifth is close to what the project founders envisioned. Residents feel safe. Even at night, 94% of the survey respondents felt safe walking with someone on their block, and well over half said they felt safe even when alone. In addition, apartment buildings were renovated, new townhouses were constructed, vacant lots cleaned, and streetlights installed. Residents felt great pride in their block and confidence in their neighbors. More than 55% rated life on 118th Street as great or very good. Eighty percent of residents who had lived on the block 10 or more years said that the block is better or much better than it was before. Nine out of 10 residents felt that people who live on the block know each other by face, get along with one another, and can be counted on to take action, to maintain order, and to fix problems in the community.

Maintenance Required:

- Stay within a fixed geographic area, such as a city block. Focus on a natural community that is small enough for face-to-face contact and for program staff to get to know everyone individually.
- Develop strategies that build trust. Get to know one or two key people whom everyone on the block respects. Be responsive and make sure to follow through on promises.
- Sponsor social events on a regular basis. These events help build relationships and reinvigorate efforts to improve the community.
- Think long-term. Benchmarks of success are important, but lasting change for families and communities takes a long-term commitment.

Warning:

- Don't assume you know what residents need. Listen to them and work to address both individual needs and those of the community. This also requires that the program stay flexible enough to meet changing circumstances over time.
- Work to discourage the perception that residents are "clients" in need of services. The program's success depends on residents seeing themselves as citizens.

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The Carmel Hill Project supports the idea that natural communities formed by fixed geographic boundaries can have enormous benefits for residents. Working simultaneously at both the individual and community levels yields impressive results. While individuals' specific needs are addressed, they also see physical improvements in their immediate environment, which gives them faith that the project really can help. Best of all, the Carmel Hill model of creating a meaningful urban community where residents have access to resources and work together on neighborhood improvement can apply to all communities, not just impoverished ones.

Shreveport-Bossier Community Renewal

Challenge: How can neighbors reconnect to solve the toughest of problems?

Background: In the early 1990s, Shreveport, Louisiana, a midsized city with a population of just over 200,000, faced what seemed to be overwhelming problems: high crime, joblessness, welfare dependency, homelessness, and substandard housing. Even residents of "stable" neighborhoods lacked a basic sense of security.

Solution: Recognizing the tremendous challenges the community faced, citizens, including many in the faith community, established Shreveport-Bossier Community Renewal (SBCR) in 1995. SBCR is a relationship-building process based on practical lessons, socioeconomic theory, and faith-based teaching. The group's philosophy is that the social isolation of individuals is the root of community problems, and that rebuilding neighborhood and communitywide relationships ultimately restores the foundations of a safe

and caring community. The organization's work is based on the following assumptions: 1) people need to have strong connections with one another where they live; 2) neighbors must engage in an intensive relationship-building process to restore connections in neighborhoods where requisite relationships have long since broken down; and 3) the city, as a community, must come together in a grassroots volunteer corps to marshal citywide resources and leverage them as needed.

The Shreveport-Bossier Community Renewal solution embraces a systematic restoration of human relationships in the community through a three-pronged action strategy. First, paid staff members establish "Friendship Houses" in target neighborhoods. Friendship House leaders are the nexus of the neighborhood-based approach. By building relationships with neighbors and connecting needs with resources, they act as catalysts for caring connections and problem solving throughout the neighborhood. Second, Friendship House leaders help recruit "Haven House" leaders. Haven House leaders are volunteers who commit to the SBCR approach and receive training and support in their work to foster communication among their neighbors. Leaders meet regularly with their neighbors and mobilize them to help each other. Finally, the solution involves organizing a grass-roots volunteer corps or "mission team" to unite the whole community in efforts to help people by connecting resources with needs. Currently, there are 350 leaders and over 5,000 individuals who have joined the SBCR effort.

Testing 1, 2, 3: Like all substantive efforts to rebuild devastated communities, SBCR has mapped a long-term approach; the program is currently in

stage two of an eight-stage plan. Survey results gathered on the early stages of the program indicate that the community-building process is working. Friendship House programs have succeeded in reaching families that wish to participate, and Friendship House leaders have developed excellent relationships with participants. The research also suggests that one-on-one communication with adults in the target neighborhoods is a more effective way of engaging residents in the SBCR solution than a service-delivery approach.

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Maintenance Required:

- Take advantage of existing neighbor-to-neighbor connections. More is accomplished when people can build on established relationships.
- Foster the neighborhood's sense of ownership in the program. The staff can initiate the process of community building, but long-term sustainability is dependent upon transferring responsibility for the program to residents of the neighborhood. It will also help to reduce turnover in participating families.

Warning:

- Insist on buy-in at all levels of the community, not just in distressed neighborhoods.
- Make training personnel a priority. Staff must understand all the components of the program and how they relate to the larger goal.

The common sense approach of SBCR demonstrates how a community facing tremendous challenges can develop a structured way to marshal citizens' talents and energies to improve their communities. This solution doesn't demand unusual or exotic resources—instead it puts neighbors, religious organizations, and civic institutions to work reweaving the bonds that create a caring community, person by person. For more information, see www.shrevecommunityrenewal.org.