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Collaborative solutions: Building community in New Orleans and across America

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The crises of Hurricane Katrina for New Orleans, and much of the Gulf caused many of us to think about how we might be of help. On one level it was a personal question, how can I help with my time and resources? From the viewpoint of a practicing community psychologist I asked, what have we learned in community psychology over the last 40 years that can be of help to whole communities in such crisis situations? Having created a field called community psychology, then surely we must have something to contribute to such a massive community rebuilding challenge. So that is the focus of today's conversation - what does psychology and specifically community psychology have to offer to the process of rebuilding of whole communities?

I have to say right up front that I have not worked here in New Orleans and bring no expertise from local work on the ground in New Orleans. But New Orleans has challenged all of us to ask these questions.

In my community psychology practice I work with communities all across the country that are facing crises, by no means crises on the same level or intensity as New Orleans, but significant crises nonetheless.

Communities where major manufacturing plants have closed, leaving long-term unemployment and underemployment.

Communities seeing a large influx of new residents, sometimes immigrants, which creates challenges for the newcomers and the old-timers as well

Communities experiencing outbreaks of high levels of violence among youth and young adults.

These are all community crises occurring here in the US; many of them are places where I have been invited to work over the last decades .When faced with these situations one needs more than theories and research, one needs effective tools and strategies that can actually help these communities heal and grow.

Ever since I began addressing issues of building and rebuilding whole communities, I have been challenged to find useful resources, strategies and the capacity to deliver them. What I know about communities and how to build and rebuild communities is mainly what communities have taught me over the last four decades.

When situations or clients posed issues to me, I scrambled to find answers from any field: community psychology, public health, organizational development, community and grass-roots organizing, nonprofit management, civic engagement, advocacy, municipal planning and any other field that could offer resources of use in addressing the needs of my communities. I found help from places like the National Civic League, the Healthy Communities Movement and community organizing list serves.

I am always looking to translate knowledge from these fields into useful tools and strategies that communities can actually implement. Giving community psychology away is really my job, along with doing all I can to ensure that what the community receives can really be of use to them

Working with whole communities creates special challenges. You really cannot just pick one issue or one sub-population to work with. You can start that way, but ultimately everything is connected. John Muir says “When we tug at a single thing in nature, we find it attached to the rest of the world”. This is true in community work as well. The best simple conceptualization I have found to capture this interconnectedness is the Ottawa Charter of the World Health Organization (WHO, 1986) which describes the prerequisites of health to be: peace, shelter, education, food, income, a stable ecosystem, sustainable resources, social justice and equity. This is a comprehensive description of the goals of a healthy community.

In community development work the process is as important as the products. There is no question that the cities and towns on the Gulf are being rebuilt. But, how are they being rebuilt? And, perhaps more importantly, who is determining the process and the outcomes? Can we imagine a method of designing and rebuilding that differs from the traditional patch-'em-up and top-down approach? Can we envision a deep and community-wide process, driven by residents from all parts of the community, including those who are poor and black? If we can, we can see an amazing opportunity to build, from the ground up, model cities and towns that represent the multicultural nation that America has become. I occasionally read of efforts such as the ones occurring in New Orleans by the Broadmoor Improvement Association (ref Globe 7/30/06) that sound like they have these characteristics but more often we hear the cries of those who feel

disenfranchised by the process. I am convinced that when we build democratically, we can live democratically.

Senator Ted Kennedy said it well “What I heard over and over on my visit [to the affected areas] is that local people want a voice in their own future. They don't want big outside companies with political connections to call the shots. Bringing everyone around a common table is the only realistic way to enable the nation to come together and support the people of the Gulf Coast with worthwhile jobs in the modern economy, and to provide opportunity and hope that are so urgently needed.”

### **The bigger picture**

As in all situations, it is best to understand a problem before we leap to a search for solutions. In the case of Hurricane Katrina, this involves understanding the larger forces that have contributed to this disaster and addressing these in addition to the immediate needs.

These larger issues include:

- **Global environmental policies that lead to environmental degradation and global warming.**
- **Global and national economic policies that separate rich and poor.**
- **The long and continuing history of racism in America**
- **Refocusing on the allocation of our resources to urgent domestic, non-military needs.**

- **Our chronic inability to work in a cooperative and collaborative manner at (and across) local, regional, national, and international levels.**

We need to move forward, together with collaborative solutions.

### **What are collaborative solutions and why are they the answer?**

Simply put collaborative solutions are attempts to do together that which we cannot do apart. There are six crucial components to create collaborative solutions

1. **Engage a broad spectrum of the community, especially those most directly affected, celebrating racial and cultural diversity.**
2. **Encourage true collaboration as the form of exchange.**
3. **Practice democracy, and promote active citizen engagement and empowerment.**
4. **Employ an ecological approach that emphasizes the individual in her/his setting, and builds on community strengths and assets.**
5. **Take action by addressing issues of social change and power based on a common vision.**
6. **Align the goals with the process.**

### **Principle 1:**

**Engage a broad spectrum of the community, especially those most directly affected by the issues, celebrating racial and cultural diversity.**

In order to seek collaborative solutions, we need to bring together all the key parties. How can we think that we will find workable solutions without engaging the key players, especially those most directly affected by the issues? Yet, we often try to resolve

gang violence without gang members at the table, combat youth drug abuse without talking to the youth, or address the needs of new immigrant communities without bringing immigrants into the room.

Once we have all the parties in the same room, then we need to create an atmosphere of respect where the racial and cultural diversity of the community is celebrated as being central to the community's wholeness. Until we are able to understand that our diversity is our richness, we will continue to struggle to find collaborative solutions that truly meet the needs of all in our communities and organizations.

Why involve the community? What are the benefits of involving grassroots organizations and leaders?

- Local community groups can communicate with people that outsiders can't reach.
- Community members know about, and can connect with, both formal and informal leaders.
- The often-overlooked informal leaders have constituencies, knowledge, and clout.
- Community members know what has and hasn't worked in the past. They are the community historians.
- Community members can promote ownership of and participation in the project.
- Because of their breadth and depth of local knowledge, community members are the best architects of the solutions.
- Community members can help create positive social norms.
- Local community organizations build local leadership. (adapted from G. Kaye)

One self assessment tool that we use helps communities clarify the assumptions behind their approach. The tool distinguishes between agency-based and community-based initiatives. Too often, we talk about developing a program in which the community will be an empowered partner, but the strategies we use are agency-based rather than community-based. Community empowerment and ownership can only be achieved through the community-based approach. The tool allows our clients to look at the difference between agency-based and community-based approaches and see where they stand on the continuum. (Adapted from Chavis & Florin 1990).

| <i>Issues</i>                        | <b>Agency-Based</b>                      | <b>Community-Based</b>                                |
|--------------------------------------|--|---|
| <i>Approach</i>                      | <b>Weakness/deficit</b>                  | <b>Strength/asset</b>                                 |
| <i>Definition of<br/>The problem</i> | <b>By agencies and/or<br/>Government</b> | <b>By local community<br/>Members</b>                 |
| <i>Role of<br/>professional(s)</i>   | <b>Central to decision-<br/>Making</b>   | <b>Resource for<br/>community<br/>problem-solving</b> |
| <i>Primary decision-</i>             | <b>Agencies and/or</b>                   | <b>Community members</b>                              |

|  |                   |             |
|--|-------------------|-------------|
| <i>Makers</i>                                    | <b>Government</b> |             |
| <i>Potential for<br/>community<br/>ownership</i> | <b>Low</b>        | <b>High</b> |
|  |                   |             |

Our tools are designed to jar people out of their traditional thinking.

If they determine that their programming and work is “agency-based” yet, they would like to have the community as an empowered partner, a big question arises: How do they move their work to the "community-based" column?

There are four strategies to increase community members’ engagement which we have seen communities use that involve small or large amounts of resources. Each has a high percentage of success. They involve the use of: mini-grants, leadership development, community outreach workers, and community organizers.

John McKnight (1995) likes to say that those in the academy rely on numbers and statistics for their truth but communities rely on stories so I will add some stories.

#### Community Story – North Quabbin Community Coalition

During the 1980s, the formerly thriving mill towns of north-central Massachusetts suffered serious economic setbacks. In 1984, one of two large manufacturers in the North Quabbin region closed, and many people were thrown out of work. At this bleak moment,



I was asked to help create a community coalition. No one had any sense that we were at the start of a twenty-year adventure. We thought this was a short-term intervention. But we were about to discover something about each other and about this amazing process of building collaborative solutions.

My first visit to the area was visually stunning. The region is called the North Quabbin because it is north of the 22 mile long Quabbin reservoir which provides water to Boston and was created by flooding four local towns. On the drive into the area I would catch glimpses of the Quabbin stretching out as a magnificent wilderness. Even as I approached the towns, the landscape remained beautiful – small ponds, hills, farm land. And then I entered the towns: Main Streets untouched for seemingly fifty years, many closed up stores, large mills – the second largest of which was now shut down - a huge building sitting quietly and empty on the main drag. The town centers were roughs in the diamond. It was like stepping back a few decades.

I was asked to create the North Quabbin Community Coalition to address the emerging needs of the community in this time of crisis. The original members of the Coalition were representatives of the local hospital, mental health service, legislators, clergy, residents and the Chamber of Commerce. The coalition covered a nine-town area encompassing about 30,000 people. The early years of the coalition focused on coordinating services and filling service needs. To this end, the coalition created a local information and referral service, a rural shelter for homeless families, new domestic violence prevention and treatment services and child sexual assault prevention curricula in the schools.

After a few years, at one of the annual retreats of the steering committee, the coalition realized that to create the community they dreamed of required not only a

competent helping system but also a mobilized and empowered citizenry. Therefore, they renamed themselves the “North Quabbin Community Coalition”, (previously the Athol Orange Health and Human Service Coalition) and worked to more vigorously engage grassroots residents and other missing sectors (business, clergy, etc.). At this point, we were searching for a framework to describe this type of whole community activity where the goal was to improve the quality of life for all those living in the North Quabbin. The coalition’s leaders learned of the healthy communities concept and started identifying themselves with the movement.

Opportunity to implement their newfound commitment to engaging the grassroots came about through the development of Valuing Our Children, a grassroots child abuse prevention program. The program was in part a leadership development program aimed at training vulnerable parents to become part of the staff, board and deliverers of preventive parenting services to other families in the community. Valuing Our Children has become a statewide model of excellence in child abuse prevention.

Grassroots residents and healthy community processes also became the backbone of the next major accomplishment for the coalition: the creation of Community Transit Services. The lack of access to public transportation had been identified as a major issue from the onset of the coalition in 1984. Task forces tackled the issue year after year without much success. Transportation seemed an even more difficult issue to change. Then, the participants in the North Quabbin Adult Education Center, the local literacy program, became partners with the Coalition and created the North Quabbin Transportation Co-Op. The group gave the needed extra push by advocating with the Coalition, and state and national legislators, which resulted in the first-ever transportation

system throughout the area, connecting the nine towns to the major cities both to the east and west. There were 22,000 rides in the first year of the service.

Advocacy for the area, and for greater statewide changes that would improve their communities, has always been a significant part of the Coalition's work. The Coalition has built strong relationships with local legislators, and regularly advocates for new services to the area, against cuts in local services, and as part of statewide efforts such as moving towards universal healthcare coverage.

The North Quabbin Community Coalition continues today as a vital force in the community. The Coalition sees itself as the "kitchen table" (Bialecki, 2003) around which the various sectors of the community gather to identify and solve problems. Although the Coalition budget remains around \$150,000/year, programs the Coalition has created generate \$3.1 million and 77 jobs annually.

Collaborative solutions became both a goal and a framework for the operations of this Coalition. Over the last 22 years, a collaborative solutions approach has transformed the way the North Quabbin community does business and their commitment to this approach is deeply rooted in the community.

**Principle 2. Encourage true collaboration as the form of exchange.**

So what happens when we gather all these different folks in a room? What processes do they follow?

*Collaboration* is a term that is appearing everywhere. Unfortunately, the more the word is used the vaguer its meaning becomes. Being really clear about the meaning of *collaboration* will make a key difference when you want to encourage true exchanges of this type. So let's start with an understanding of what collaboration is and is not.

Collaboration is not just sitting in a room with a variety of people; it is about creating whole new ways for us to interact with each other. When individuals and systems interact effectively, we can maximize our resources and find solutions to seemingly intractable community problems. Collaborative processes have the potential for creating revolutionary changes in our communities and in our world.

A close colleague, Arthur Himmelman (2001), has carefully defined the kinds of exchanges that take place in community groups. He has described the differences between *networking*, *coordination*, *cooperation*, and *collaboration*. His definitions build on each other—the functions of the first are incorporated in the second, and so on. As we move along the continuum from networking to collaboration, we increase the amounts of risk, commitment, and resources that participants must contribute to the exchange. At the same time, the capacity to produce significant community change also increases.

In New Orleans and other cities in crisis, we will not see meaningful, sustainable and systemic change without collaboration.

### **Networking**

Himmelman defines *networking* as *exchanging information for mutual benefit*. This common type of exchange occurs when a meeting opens with members' descriptions of what's new at their organizations; or, when a neighborhood gathering begins with a check-in. In a networking exchange, we hear news about opportunities for ourselves or for our clients: staffing changes, new programs, clinic hours, and so on. We can see that networking is a key building block for good collaboration, but by itself networking is not collaboration.

### **Coordination**

Himmelman defines *coordination* as *exchanging information and altering activities for mutual benefit*. Coordination increases efficient use of resources and the ability to meet community needs. A lack of coordination creates significant problems. Resources are wasted and the community misses out.

Activities that encourage increased coordination can be of great benefit. In one small, rural community, we brought together the clergy in order to address issues of hunger. We began to talk about how to provide as many warm meals as possible in the community. We started with a *networking* exchange: we had the representatives indicate when each church group served warm meals. This revealed that only two churches provided warm meals each week, and they both did this on Sundays. When the churches agreed that one would offer a meal on Sunday and the other would serve its meal on Wednesday, we moved from *networking* to *coordination*. The participants had modified activities in order to provide as many warm meals as possible during each week for hungry community members. These changes were mutually beneficial and served a common purpose.

### **Cooperation**

Himmelman defines *cooperation* as *exchanging information, modifying activities, and sharing resources for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose*. Cooperation builds on the exchanges of networking and coordination and adds the new concept of *sharing resources*. Risk and involvement increase as each participant antes up resources in a cooperative relationship.

In defining cooperation, Himmelman has included the magic word: *resources*. That means dollars, staff hours, equipment, space, and other materials that actually get

work done. As soon as resources are on the table, an exchange frequently gets more edgy. Many see resources as what makes the world go around. Once we start to share them, we need greater levels of trust.

Nonetheless, cooperation can be simple. A number of human service agencies may decide to share a booth at the Cambodian Community Festival over the weekend. In order to cover the cost of the booth, they need to pool resources.

Cooperation can take on a more complex form when several agencies combine funds to create a shared-staff position. We sometimes see this with outreach workers. When a number of agencies would like to increase their effectiveness in a specific community, but none of them has enough money alone to fund an outreach worker, they can turn to cooperation. For example, one agency can contribute literacy-project outreach money, another can chip in diabetes-program outreach money, and a third can come up with HIV-prevention outreach money. Together, they can fund a full time worker who provides outreach to the identified community on all three issues. The three agencies find a common purpose—making community resources accessible to the specified community—and, they share resources to make it happen. The risks are clearly higher in the shared-staffing example than in the weekend-booth project. Will each agency get its money's worth? Who supervises? Who gets credit?

Cooperation is a very useful form of exchange. When organizations feel competitive toward and distrusting of each other, they don't share. As a result, each group may end up with inadequate resources. Crucial tasks never get done. On the other hand, if resources are pooled through cooperative efforts, as in the example of the outreach worker, common purposes can be achieved.

## Collaboration

Finally, we come to *collaboration*, which builds on networking, coordination, and cooperation. To reach *collaboration*, Himmelman adds *enhancing the capacity of another for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose by sharing risks, resources, responsibilities, and rewards*.

The key phrase relating to collaboration is *enhancing the capacity of another*. For a helping system in which many components are often competitive or even hostile, this is a revolutionary concept. It takes time and it takes dedication to achieve. Once we have collaboration in place, we can accomplish significant changes in our systems and we can dramatically increase the effectiveness of our work—individually and together. The following examples demonstrate the possibilities.

The first example occurred on Cape Cod in Massachusetts, where the Lower Outer Cape Community Coalition worked to promote the livable wage for workers. The *livable wage* is an alternate concept to the *minimum wage*. The living wage is calculated according to what a family must earn to live in a given community in the most basic way. It includes the expenses of child care, housing, transportation, and other essentials, based on local costs. The Coalition determined that employees at hotels, motels, and restaurants in the area needed to earn about \$15 an hour in order to live in the community where they worked.

The Coalition brought this data to the local Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber members' first response was derisive laughter. However, as the discussion deepened, the Chamber members began to understand that the livable wage calculations included only the essential expenses of holding a job. They then began to understand the problem more

personally. It turned out that many Chamber members could not keep their stores, restaurants, and other businesses fully open because they could not find workers, especially during the busy summer season. Workers were often not available because they were unable to locate affordable child care and housing.

There was indeed, mutual interest: the businesses needed more workers, and the workers would be happy to clock more hours, if they could afford to pay their bills at the end of the day. Out of this collaborative effort emerged the Business Human Service Collaborative for Affordable Housing and Child Care; this collaborative became a powerful force working to enhance the capacities of both businesses and workers on Cape Cod.

The second example comes from eastern Tennessee and was a project of the Cocke County Collaborative, a community-based social-change and community-building organization. They take a holistic, grassroots approach to social change in their area.

A few years ago this collaborative brought together white youths who were learning videography with black elders, with a long history in the community. The common purpose was the recording of oral histories of the community. This videography experience set the stage for amazing interracial, intergenerational collaborations that enhanced the capacities of all participants. The white youth and the African American elders truly collaborated.

Himmelman's definitions help us to see that collaboration is a sophisticated, multi-layered, and radical concept. To enhance the capacity of the other requires a transformation. In many systems, opposing community institutions, organizational departments, or state agencies are aligned to be competitive with each other. When city



hall works to enhance the capacity of the city’s neighborhoods and the neighborhoods can enhance the capacity of city hall, then, we have a transformation to collaborative solutions.

**Tool**

The Continuum of Collaboration Worksheet

The following self assessment tool helps communities assess how their efforts are making use of *networking*, *coordination*, *cooperation*, and *collaboration*. The tool allows them to mark how frequently they now employ each of these exchange processes, and to indicate how frequently they would like to use each process in the future.

## The Continuum of Collaboration Worksheet

- **Instructions:** Given the definitions of networking, coordinating, cooperating and collaborating, identify the following:
- With an “x” identify which functions are most frequently used in your collaborative efforts
- Discuss how you might like to change this “mix”
- With an “o” identify where you would like to be (which functions you would like to use more frequently, etc.)
- Discuss and note what your collaborative needs to do to make this happen

|                          | Use Frequently | Use Sometimes | Hardly Ever Use |
|--------------------------|----------------|---------------|-----------------|
| • <b>Networking</b>      | _____          | _____         | _____           |
| • Exchanging Information |                |               |                 |
| • <b>Coordination</b>    | _____          | _____         | _____           |

- Exchange Information
- Alter Activities
- **Cooperation** \_\_\_\_\_
- Exchange Information
- Alter Activities
- Share Resources
- **Collaboration** \_\_\_\_\_
- Exchange Information
- Alter Activities
- Share Resources
- Enhance Capacity

Community Story - Mayors Task Force on Deinstitutionalization

One summer evening in 1981 I was asked by the community mental health center director where I worked, to represent us in a meeting about the placement of two emergency service beds at the mental health center in downtown Northampton. At that point, the city of Northampton was experiencing the deinstitutionalization of a major state mental hospital and a large VA hospital. Deinstitutionalization was a subject that was rubbing many people raw including the police, fire department, and the Mayor's office. The meeting was chaotic and generated quite a bit of conflict. The police and fire departments raised serious concerns about safety issues tied to having mental health patients in beds in the downtown area, as did the City Councilor from Ward Two where the beds would be placed. (Wolff, 1986)

The Mayor sat and listened. The Department of Mental Health responded to the questions by accusing the City of a NIMBY (Not in My Back Yard) attitude and a stigma against the mentally ill. Then, the Mayor got angry. The environment in the room was conflictual, hostile and unproductive. I did my best to identify the issues, the disagreements, and future directions. Agreement to site the two beds in the community occurred. The Mayor announced that he would not tolerate this level of discord, and he was creating a Mayor's Task Force on Deinstitutionalization. Then, pointing at me he said "And you, young man, will chair it!"

So, I spent the next nine years facilitating, refereeing, and learning about how parties in a community that could be in total disagreement with each other could find productive ways of seeking new solutions through collaboration. The Mayor's Task Force on Deinstitutionalization was where I really began to learn what it takes to bring together organizations and a community to seek collaborative solutions.

The Task Force met monthly for nine years. In a single room would be gathered the Mayor and his staff, numerous city, health and human service, and legal system players. In the first months of our meetings, a patient at the State hospital on a day pass went into the heart of downtown and started a fire that killed two elderly women. After that the stakes got higher in the meetings. We talked about specific incidences that occurred in the city and developed protocols for addressing issues like arson. We stretched beyond mental health and began looking at single room occupancy, affordable housing and gentrification.

Over time the sergeant from the police force and the director of the emergency mental health service program began to sit down on a weekly basis to discuss their

caseloads which overlapped by 40%. This was truly a wonderful community response to deinstitutionalization. It was also an amazing lesson in how dysfunctional and uncoordinated our helping system is and how necessary forums like this were. Finally, it was an astonishing learning about bringing the community and helping system together to find answers to complex issues. The community and the helping system learned to hear each other, learn from each other, and then, find collaborative solutions that truly enhanced each others' capacity to act together. Building effective collaborative relationships could modify a complex system like the mental health system.

The best summary of this work was a quote from the Mayor's last inaugural address: "The task force has helped to make this community more secure by providing a monthly forum where DMH officials, city police, mental health advocates, jail administrators, representatives from the courts, district Attorney's office, Mayor's office, VA hospital and community hospital can hammer out differences and develop protocols to handle the community's concerns associated with deinstitutionalization, normalization and specifically those who may be in danger to themselves and others (Daily Hampshire Gazette 1984, p.3),

**Principle 3. Practice democracy and promote active citizen engagement and empowerment.**

In successfully seeking collaborative solutions, we need to examine our own processes to see how we are encouraging and supporting civic engagement in a way that truly allows the airing of diverse issues, and the pursuit of new solutions. This goes beyond just bringing those with the least power to the table; it means designing ways for all views to be heard and respected by those with more power, not any easy task. It also

requires that we support those most disenfranchised in gaining the skills and finding the opportunities to practice active citizenship successfully. We have learned through our work with youth that you cannot just bring youth to the table and achieve success. You must create a setting and educate the adults in the room to act in such a manner that allows the voices of youth to be heard.

When a coalition sets up their chairs in a circle and fills the room with a broad spectrum of the community, we have the possibility for democracy and participation. When the leader asks everyone in the room to list the top issues facing their community and the Mayor's answer and the grassroots residents' answers are written down on newsprint with the same pen and given equal weight, then we have one of the most concrete examples of real democracy that we find in America today. Creating settings where all voices can be heard, respected, and counted is our first step.

Community building requires community participation. These two concepts work hand-in-hand—we cannot do one without the other. The community must be at the heart of decision-making on issues that affect its members. We cannot come up with effective solutions for a community without the residents' contributions in identifying the problems, exploring possible solutions, implementing changes, and ultimately evaluating the community development efforts.

Yet, within our democratic society, change rarely occurs this way. Too often the community is not at the heart of the decision making; in fact, they are barely consulted.

I was once asked by the mayor of a small city to work with his buddy, who was charged with converting the old police station into a youth center. It took three months to convince the mayor's buddy to invite youth to our meetings. When we finally got some

young people in the room, he asked them what they wanted out of the proposed center. When they said “dances on Friday night,” the mayor's buddy replied, “We won't do that. What else do you want?” At that instant, the community-building process for the youth center died. It was clear that their voices would not be heard. Why would they even bother to participate in the process any further? So-called discussions, during which we ignore the voices of those most affected, take place much too often

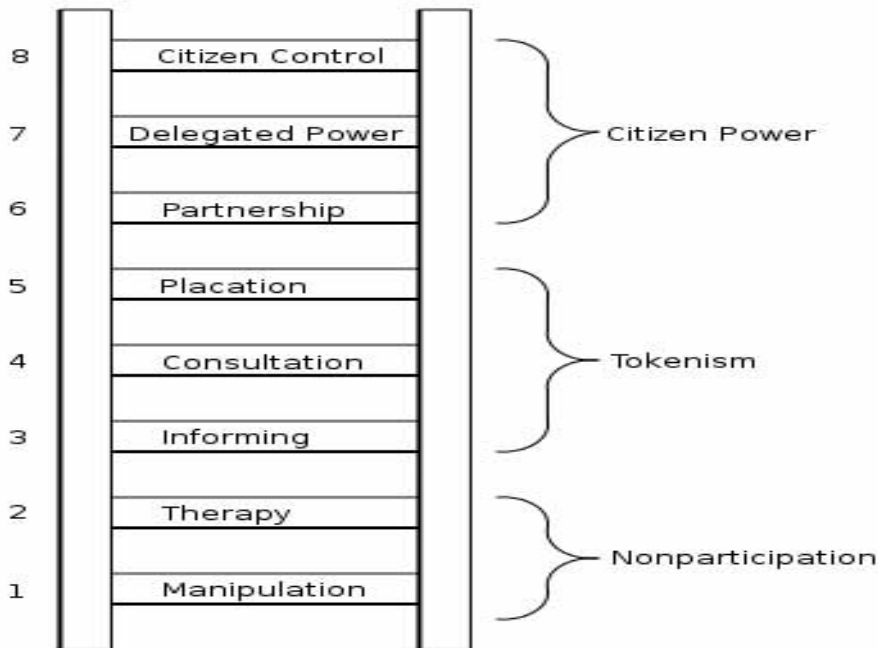
In order to build a system of democratic public deliberation, we need to reverse the trend away from involvement. As groundwork, we need to look carefully at how our systems either encourage or discourage participation and democratic decision-making. While we do this, we need to work with the people in the community and with the constituents of the systems to encourage their participation, to gain (or re-gain) their trust so that their voices will be heard, and to provide them with the skills and support that they will need when they participate.

### *Self assessment Tool: How much participation do we want? -The Ladder of Participation*

Before we start along this road to change, we have to ask ourselves: “Do we really want participation? Do we really want democracy?” There’s no simple answer that applies to every situation, but evaluating potential levels of democratic involvement will help us figure out what we’re getting into, how we want to proceed, and will help us become aware of the effects that will accompany shifting the way we make decisions in our communities.

More than thirty years ago, I came across Sherry Arnstein’s “Ladder of Participation,” which allows us to see the many levels of participation between totally

authoritarian and fully democratic decision-making. (Arnstein,1969). Arnstein defines eight categories of citizen participation, clustered in three groups. The bottom group, *nonparticipation*, includes manipulation and therapy. The next group, called *tokenism*, includes informing, consultation, and placation. The top group, called *citizen power*, consists of partnership, delegated power, and citizen control. The higher you go on the ladder—in the direction of citizen control—the greater the likelihood that both citizen engagement and democratic processes will occur.



***How do we encourage democratic participation?***

So, how do we go about practicing democracy, promoting active citizenship, and empowering people in communities? One way is through building collaborative leadership and leaders.

**Collaborative Leadership**

To truly engage a large group in community decision-making requires us to practice an often unfamiliar form of leadership called collaborative leadership. A successful collaborative leader has the ability to share power, is flexible, can see the big picture, is trustworthy, and has patience, abundant energy and hope.

The following range of skills is needed to be a collaborative leader:

Be inclusive, promote diversity

- Practice shared decision making
- Resolve conflicts constructively
- Communicate clearly, openly, and honestly
- Facilitate group interaction
- Nurture leadership in others and encourage top-level commitment

(Collaborative leadership material adapted from Developing Community Capacity, WK Kellogg Foundation 1994)

Community Story – Cleghorn Neighborhood Center

Practicing democracy has been at the heart of work that I have recently been doing with the Cleghorn Neighborhood Center (CNC) in Fitchburg, Massachusetts. Cleghorn is a low-income Hispanic community in an economically struggling former mill town. The neighborhood has had a generally negative reputation in the community.

The Cleghorn Neighborhood Center decided to take a community-building and community-development approach to its work, with the support of the Community Foundation of North Central Massachusetts. The people at CNC began with an idealistic commitment to visit door-to-door with every household in the 3500-person neighborhood. During these visits, CNC staff made individual contact and did not just



ask what was wrong with the community. Building on the work of Kretzmann and McKnight (1993), they also asked what was good about the neighborhood, what the residents would be willing to do to help improve the community, and how the residents thought they could become invested in creating change.

The door-to-door surveys indicated that 85 percent of Cleghorn residents are unemployed, 82 percent are looking for employment, the majority speaks only Spanish, and many of these Spanish-speaking residents are not literate in their native tongue. This has created interesting challenges for the community mobilization process

The CNC also organized a candidates' night, at which the five candidates for the local city council seat talked about their positions. Borrowing from the wonderful work of Frances Moore Lappé and Paul Martin Dubois (1994), the candidates were asked to go to five tables where the residents were sitting and listen as residents described their neighborhood. Then, instead of getting up and giving a canned political speech, each candidate was to summarize what he or she had heard. This was a huge success for all participating. The format highlighted residents' concerns and made a lasting impression on all the candidates, especially on the one who was successful in the election. He became a regular visitor to the center, attending all resident meetings and maintaining a mail box on site! The residents began to understand that what they said mattered, and that political candidates might actually listen to them.

Building on the door-to-door individual contacts and earlier meetings, another well-attended community meeting was held. Community members identified needs and issues, and they formed problem-solving volunteer work groups. The residents also identified and reported on the community's strengths, which were acknowledged by

strong applause and smiling faces. This community was not accustomed to talking about itself in positive terms. If people are offered respect, they will participate in the system, and their participation will benefit all of us.

#### **Principle 4 Employing an Ecological Approach that Builds on Community**

##### **Strengths**

The core premise of an ecological approach to community building is very simple. It states that we need to understand the behavior, the issue, or the problem that we are looking at in any given community in the context of both individuals **and** their environments/settings. These settings may be physical, economic, social, environmental, or organizational. As simple as this premise is, it is unfortunately disregarded most of the time. American society focuses on the individual and the success or failure of that individual, and too often over emphasizes the individual and underemphasizes the individual's environments. As William Ryan (Ryan, 1972) showed us many years ago, we seem most comfortable "blaming the victim." Certainly, most difficult of all is to address the problem by looking at the multiple interactions of the individual in their settings. Yet, this is exactly what is needed.

Let's look at an example.

I have recently been involved in a project that focuses on reducing drinking among college students. Traditionally, many of these interventions focused on the campus and on the students. A careful look at the campus setting will show that often

colleges and universities do a relatively good job of considering the campus ecology by controlling alcohol access on campus.

In most places, this approach then moves student drinking off-campus. Off-campus is where the students buy alcohol; where they find other students with apartments, who host large parties; and where kegs are purchased and consumed. So, this specific project looks at the campus community partnerships, because in this case the important ecological settings are off-campus. Questions raised include: Do liquor and package stores check IDs carefully before selling alcohol? Are the bars similarly cautious? What do landlords and neighbors do when there are noisy alcohol-fueled parties? How do the police and the courts handle offenders? Are there any real consequences for the students?

This example of college drinking illustrates that even an ecological approach can be limited if the settings that one looks at are only on-campus settings and one ignores the off-campus settings. An ecological approach always requires looking at the next concentric circle out from the individual to an ever expanding set of ecologies.

**Ecologies have both assets and deficits:**

A second major factor that often limits our capacity to productively use an ecological approach is our exclusive focus on community deficits rather than community assets. I've have had four communities in Massachusetts proudly tell me that they have the highest teen pregnancy rate in the state. What a bizarre thing to brag about! And yet it is that claim that bring them funding for programs, because our whole helping system is based on deficits not assets.

John McKnight (Kretzmann & McKnight 1993) has made a great contribution to an expanded ecological approach by articulating the shortcomings of helping systems that continually focus on deficits, instead of assets. McKnight encourages us to look at our communities as sources of strength and assets. We need to learn to catalog these assets, help the community become aware of them, and make use of them. As we take an ecological approach to collaborative problem solving, we need to always be asking about a community's strengths as well as its struggles.

### **Tool - A New Approach to Community Assessments**

The classic needs assessment done in a community asks people, "What are your problems?" "How can we, the formal helping system, solve them for you?" This is a formula for disaster. The first question makes the assumption that this community only has problems and lacks assets/strengths. The second question makes the assumption that the only people who can solve the identified problems are the professionals who are asking the questions. An asset-based ecological approach dramatically changes the way we conduct every community assessment. We would ask four different questions instead of the usual two:

- 1) What are the strengths of the community?
- 2) What are the issues that the community is struggling with?
- 3) How can you (the resident) be part of the solution? How can you help in the community building process?
- 4) What do you want from us, the formal helping system?

If we went from the usual two questions to the new four questions, we would begin to approach every community and community problem from an ecological point of view and an asset-based point of view. The effects from this could be revolutionary.

### **Community Stories: The Institute for Community Peace and Ecological Stages**

Let me illustrate how an ecological approach can enhance community collaborative solutions. For many years, I have been a consultant for the Institute for Community Peace (formerly the National Funding Collaborative of Violence Prevention.) ICP is a national organization committed to community development and empowerment approaches to addressing issues of community violence. Their mission is to promote the development of a safe, healthy, and peaceful nation by mobilizing community resources and leadership. ICP supports strategies that emphasize resident engagement, community empowerment and expanded national attention to the wide range of factors that contribute to and can prevent violence. ICP was created by a number of funders who were gravely concerned by the growing violence in communities across America; they began by working with ten communities across the country to prevent violence.

Experiences in these communities demonstrate how the ecologies that are focused on by community coalitions can change over time and how they developed increased sophistication. In New Orleans, their coalition rejected the emphasis on violence prevention, calling themselves the Crescent City Peace Alliance which prioritized the peaceful outcomes that they were seeking. In Spartanburg, South Carolina, the Stop the Violence collaborative focused on the violence in some of their most underprivileged communities by working to improve housing conditions. In Santa Barbara, the Pro Youth Coalition worked directly on gang violence, and engaged the gang bangers as part

of the solution to create positive settings for other youth. In Rockford, Illinois, the Violence Prevention Collaborative found ways to engage black churches as allies in violence prevention with black youth. The Rockford collaborative understood that black churches were critically important ecological settings for disseminating violence prevention messages to the black community. In Newport, Tennessee, the CONTACT Council always operated from a holistic/community development perspective and never solely focused on individuals, but always on the broadest settings. These operations included: saving the Dead Pigeon River, fighting racial discrimination, creating ways for the black-and-white communities to work together, and supporting economic development. In Newport, they understood that all these ecological settings were part of creating a peaceful, nonviolent community.

As a result of experiences from these ten communities, the Institute for Community Peace created a set of developmental stages (Bowen, et al 2004) regarding ways that communities engage the issue of community violence over time. These stages clearly reflect the ecological approach and expand our thinking by adding the dimension of time.

The ICP model includes the following stages:

- 1) **Creating safety.** The focus is on stopping crime and beginning to heal the community.
- 2) **Understanding violence.** The focus is on gaining clarity about violence issues and mobilizing the community.
- 3) **Building community.** Here, the focus is on building human, neighborhood, and system capacity, and creating a safe infrastructure.

4) **Promoting peace.** The focus is on re-framing violence by attending to factors that alienate and isolate community members. This includes shifting community norms, promoting a culture of nonviolence, addressing the ‘isms’ (such as racism) and root causes of violence, and changing community image problems.

5) **Building democracy and social justice.** Lastly, the focus is on holding residents, large institutions, and society accountable for sustaining peace. This is accomplished by developing effective and participatory citizenry, and advocating for and implementing an agenda for social change that promotes a just and civil society. These stages start with the neighborhood and expand to encompass ever larger ecologies, ending with the nation.

**Principle 5. Take action by addressing issues of social change and power based on a common vision.**

Collaborative solutions are undertaken in order to create community change. That is the core premise. In order to move beyond exchange of information and ideas, efforts at collaborative solution must ultimately move towards community actions aimed at creating community change. Community change, organizational change and systems change happen when the group decides to act. Collaborative solutions do not come about automatically by just getting the right people around the table and talking respectfully. Indeed all that may be produced by such meetings is hot air. The community story that follows illustrates a collaborative that did create change:

Community Story- Lower Outer Cape Community Coalition

In the 1990’s, Provincetown had one of the highest rates of HIV infection in Massachusetts. In order to get adequate care, however, persons with AIDS had to travel to Beth Israel Hospital in Boston, a three-hour drive from Provincetown. For those without a car or those

who were unable to drive, their only mode of transportation was the bus. Daily, the public bus left Provincetown in the morning and arrived in Hyannis where they had to change for the private Boston connector. Unfortunately, that Boston bus regularly pulled out on schedule fifteen minutes before the bus arrived from Provincetown. Once in Boston, the patient had to make their way across the city to Beth Israel. This was ridiculous.

At this time, the Lower Outer Cape Community Coalition, an organization committed to collaborative solutions, was working to enhance transportation in their area. When this transportation issue arose at a coalition transportation task force meeting, the Coalition called for action. The private and public bus providers made an agreement to talk and see if they could find a common solution to this problem of uncoordinated schedules. And, they did. Within a few weeks, bus schedules had been modified; now, the Provincetown bus arrived in time for riders to catch the connector to Boston. A few weeks later, the director of the company that managed the bus to Boston took a ride to see what AIDS patients faced when they arrived in Boston. He was so impressed with the arduousness of the trek across Boston by foot and bus that he decided to have his own buses stop at the hospital directly. This simple, no cost collaborative solution eluded those involved until a conscious process of coalition building convened a meeting of the community, addressed the issue and pushed for community change.

. The applicability of a collaborative solutions approach is virtually endless; it is used by many including groups working on safe communities, smart growth communities, sustainable communities, restorative justice communities, community organizing and development, healthy communities, and others.

Creating a common vision



Across all these efforts, a key assumption is that those working together have a common vision. A common vision is something that is created together as a group. Too often we see situations where a small group of people have written a grant and created a common vision that they then invite others to join. Since ownership is such a critical piece of successful collaborative solution efforts, it is enormously important that all those involved be part of a process to create the vision. And in fact, it is helpful to revisit that vision on an annual basis to make sure it's still where you want to go and to allow all those who have joined you in the past year to be a part of that ownership process. Our work with communities often involves simple exercises in which the group projects ahead two to five years and dreams of what they would like to see happen in that period of time.

#### Community action to create community change

Once a collaborative solutions effort has a commitment to community change and a common vision then it is time to move to community action. In this context, the community actions are those activities undertaken through a collaborative aimed at the specific community changes that the group has identified. Now, this may sound quite simplistic; but we have seen many coalitions, and partnerships, which are quite busy, but, if you look closely, they are not taking any community actions to create community change. Rather, they are developing reports, creating planning products, and subcommittees that can study issues endlessly spin their wheels and never step out into the community to actually create change. Marian Wright Edelman of the Children's Defense Fund talking about teen pregnancy coalitions has said that in the beginning of a coalition you get the talkers and later you get the actors and she is interested in the

actors - I think all of us would agree that we too are looking for those actors to be part of our collaborative solutions.

A helpful tool for groups at this point is to create a strategic plan to clarify where they are headed. This is what Greg Meissen and the Self Help Network (2005) has labeled a Road Map, and which most people often call logic models.

## **Passport to the Future**

### **I. Who are you (as a program)?**

### **II. What needs are you addressing? How do you know they are needs?**

### **III. Where do you want to get to? (goals and anticipated outcomes)**

**What is the ultimate goal or 'end in mind'?**

**What are the immediate and intermediate changes that are expected?**

**What resources do you need?**

## **IV**

**A. How are you getting there? What are you doing now?**

**(activities)**

**What is your plan?**

**What are the activities of your program/organization? of your coalition?**

**Describe what your program looks like?**

**B. How will these activities lead to the expected outcomes?**

**Why will doing your planned activities get you to your goals?**

**v. How will you know if you are on the right road/path and getting to the right destination? (evaluation)**

**How will you know when you get there? What will it look like?**

**What will happen if you make it there?**

**Adapted from material developed by the Self Help Network, Wichita State University**

I think all professionals would stop using the term “logic model” if they watched the grimaces on the faces of community folks when they now hear this term. Too many communities have been tortured too often with poorly implemented logic models. Logic models are an example of trying to bring help to communities in strategic planning and then devising mechanisms and language that cause communities pain. Our ongoing challenge is to address all these issues by searching for or creating community-friendly tools.

### **Changes in programs policies and practices**

What kind of community changes are we talking about? Fawcett and his colleagues (1995, Community Tool Box <http://ctb.ku.edu>) have developed a framework and a comprehensive documentation system of collaborative solutions efforts that essentially narrows down the focus of intermediate outcomes to changes in programs, policies and practices. Although when this was first presented to me over 15 years ago, I balked at what seemed like such a narrow set of definitions. I have now seen that changes in programs, policies and practices are indeed the first level of the most obvious changes that occur in a community on the way to creating their ultimate community vision.

Take the example of working to reduce smoking in a given community. We look to implement the policy changes in terms of smoke-free workplaces restaurants and public buildings; we create smoking cessation programs and prevention curriculum in schools; and we change the community practices of smoking so that it becomes unacceptable activity in all spaces, including the home. Although the ultimate measure may be the numbers of young people who smoke and the rate of lung cancer in a

community; the intermediate measurable outcomes of the coalition's efforts are the changes in programs, policies and practices. This model allows community efforts to document their progress

#### Key factors for coalitions in successfully creating community change

It is helpful to see what the research literature has offered regarding the key factors that allow a collaborative to successfully move towards creating community change. Roussus and Fawcett (2000) reviewed a wide range of research studies on coalitions and found the following key variables as the ones that affect a coalition's capacity to create change

- Having a clear vision and mission
- Action planning for community and systems change
- Developing and supporting leadership
- Documentation and ongoing feedback on programs
- Technical assistance and support
- Securing financial resources for the work
- Making outcomes matter

Other research (Kaftarian, 1994) has added an additional variable – the capacity to address conflict

#### Community Story: the Lower Outer Cape Community Coalition

Three years after we had started the first coalition in North Quabbin, a State

Representative from Cape Cod asked us to help him create a similar coalition in his area,

where poverty and need were hidden by the seasonal wealth of this vacation playground. Today, almost 20 years later, the Lower Outer Cape Community Coalition (Hathaway, 2001) covers an eight-town area with 45,000 people, with a mission to improve the quality of life for those who live in the area. The Coalition has developed a very specific process that its task forces follow when they identify issues. The steps include identify stakeholders, define the problem, investigate options, design a response, secure resources, implement a plan, evaluate and adapt, and, finally spin it off to another agency. It is the last step that makes this Coalition's efforts different from so many others. The Lower Outer Cape Community Coalition has always seen itself as a catalyst for community change; although they have created numerous programs, they are always spun off to other community groups to own and manage.

Over a fifteen-year period, this healthy community coalition has created the Interfaith Council for the Homeless, a program for homelessness prevention; The Cape Cod Children's Place, a child care center; Healthy Connections, a health access program; the Lower Outer Cape Community Development Corporation, an economic development agency; and, the Ellen Jones Community Dental Center. These programs generate \$2.4 million and 33 jobs annually.

The Cape Coalition uses the metaphor of a tree to describe itself, with roots that run deep into the community; with coalition staff's coordination, and gathering functions as the trunk; and with the task forces that have produced all the concrete results as the branches. All the branches remain connected to the tree. For example, even after The Children's Place was created and spun off, the Children's Place director stays on the steering committee of the Coalition so that childcare issues can be integrated with

whatever the next issue for the Coalition may be. Thus, the broad range of prerequisites outlined in the Ottawa Charter mentioned earlier can all be dealt with under the same roof. This Coalition illustrates the principle of taking action to create community change.

#### Addressing issues of social change and power

In collaborative solutions we are not only looking for action, we are looking for action that addresses issues of social change and power based on a common vision. As we begin to act on the vision, we have to be willing to address issues of power. Judith Kurland, one of the founders of Healthy Communities in America, has stated that our work "...is not just about projects....programs .... or policies. Healthy Communities is about power. Unless we change the way power is distributed in this country, so that people in communities, have the power to change the conditions of their lives.... we will never have sustainable change." (Video "Healthy Communities America's Best Kept Secret" see [www.tomwolff.com/tools.html](http://www.tomwolff.com/tools.html))

#### **Principle 6. Align the goal with the process:**

Gandhi stated, "Be the change that you wish to create in the world." This quote speaks eloquently to the final component of collaborative solutions. We must create collaborative solution processes that parallel and reflect what we hope the outcomes will look like. If in our common vision we are seeking a community that is respectful of its diversity, then we must get there through collaborative processes that model diversity and respect. If we wish to create a caring and loving community, then our collaborative must be caring and loving too. This is the spiritual aspect of the work that we rarely talk about.

In much of the work I am asked to do, I am engaged with people whose goal is to improve the lives of those in need. These are wonderful people who have committed themselves to helping others. When I ask them whether they have chosen this work for the prestige, high salaries, plush offices or stock options, the answer is always “Of course not!” Indeed, as one person stated, “I do this work because of something greater than me. A sense of being interconnected.” I would call this a spiritually-based motivation.

Spirituality is often confused with religion but they are very different. Religion refers to a specific body of beliefs and practices. While spirituality refers to a broad set of principles that transcend religions. Spirituality is the part of our life that exists separate from the material world. The belief and experience of spirituality varies enormously for people. A spiritual perspective helps us understand that we are all connected as a whole. It is that part of us that transcends this world. It is a powerful force for those who have some sense of spirituality and must be considered in our work with communities.

Over the past 10 years, my work has been strongly influenced by my emerging personal spiritual practice. The questions that arise from my spiritual pursuits for my work in collaboration solutions are: How can our spirituality inform our work for social change? And, how can social change work inform our spirituality? This last principle on spirituality and collaborative solutions continues to emerge on a daily basis and the details emerge as part of the ongoing pursuit of answers to these questions

## **Conclusion**

These are my suggested six key principles for rebuilding American communities using collaborative solutions. I am sure you can say –“So what – none of that is new.” Unfortunately while that is true, what is also true is that we



do not follow these principles; we do not engage all the critical parties; we do not move towards collaboration; we do not practice democracy; or, see situations in their full ecological complexity; and, we do not take action. Finally, too much of what we do is heartless, not drawing on our own spirituality or that of those with whom we work. What I hope is new is a commitment to translate these principles into effective ways of intervening to help communities that are in need.

To have psychology and community psychology use these principles and address the needs of whole communities would make a profound difference for communities in this country. Communities are ready.

The nation may not be ready. Donata Francescata at the recent International Community Psychology Conference in Puerto Rico suggested that community psychology cannot be easily advocating for a social change agenda under conservative governments. So we have significant barriers here in the US.

But finally is community psychology ready? What will it take to have community psychologists ready to become effective change agents for whole communities?

Over the last year there has been a very energetic group of community psychologists (Hazel, et al 2006) committed to community psychology practice who have been meeting. Along with many other agendas they are committed to supporting community practice by first defining community practice, the core competencies required and the implications for training. They ventured to the first International Conference on Community Psychology in Puerto Rico and

ran think tanks with their international colleagues and the following definition emerged:

Community psychology practice aims to strengthen the capacity of communities to meet their needs and realize their dreams in order to improve well-being and to promote social justice, economic equity and self determination through changing systems, organizations and/or individuals. (Dave Julian)

Other colleagues led by Ray Scott are defining the core competencies for community practice, while Greg Meissen and Kelly Hazel are examining the implications of all this for graduate training with the Council of Program Directors.

We are in an era where it is clear that communities must be dealt with holistically. Practitioners from many fields including psychology and community psychology are challenged to develop respectful and effective ways of working with whole communities that allow them to realize their dreams. I hope that this paper has suggested some of the core principles that we can apply to that pursuit and has provided enough stories to demonstrate that it is possible to achieve.

So I leave with you the words of the Dali Lama “Choose to be optimistic. It feels better.”

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