NURTURING GRASSROOTS INITIATIVES FOR HEALTH AND HOUSING*

DAVID M. CHAVIS, PH.D.

Center for Community Education
School of Social Work
Rutgers University
New Brunswick, New Jersey

PAUL FLORIN, PH.D.

Department of Psychology
University of Rhode Island
Providence, Rhode Island

S TRATEGISTS AND PRACTITIONERS concerned with health promotion are placing ever greater emphasis on the crucial effects of political, social, environmental, and lifestyle changes. The World Health Organization, for instance, defines health promotion as "the process of people to increase control over, and to improve their health," and recognizes that most of the improvements in population health status in industrialized and nonindustrialized nations alike is due to political, economic and social change. This definition and concept of health promotion leads to strategies and approaches traditionally found in community development practice.[1,2] Health promotion and the need for adequate housing can be effectively addressed through grass-roots community development.

There are a number of definitions of community development.[3,4] For the purposes of this paper, community development uses a sense of community to catalyze social, economic, environmental, and individual change. A sense of community can be developed or enhanced by providing opportunities for membership, for individual and collective influence over the environment, for common needs to be met, and for shared emotional connections and support.[5-9] Central to this approach is the development of a community's collective capacity to manage and control change. Communities need not always be geographic: they may be ethnic, racial, or professional.

The development of community and grassroots control as part of the community development process is important for health promotion because it

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recognizes that social change of oppressive conditions is primary prevention. The level of one's sense of community and sense of control, along with sufficient economic resources, is associated more directly with the incidence of social, psychological, and physiological disorders than any other factor known to the medical or social sciences.[6,10] Health promotion strategies delivered through community development have the greatest potency, broadest spectrum of effects, and best change of institutionalization within local communities.

Health promotion and neighborhood-based housing development are among the public services in which there is rapidly developing realization that the coproduction of services by citizens and community institutions is essential for positive and sustained change.[11,12] Local community participation in planning, implementation, and evaluation has become a key component of health promotion policy in the international arena.

Programs with similar goals have already been tried in both the United States and Canada. It would be well to approach the current situation with wisdom gained from these earlier efforts. The most common criticisms of the War on Poverty in the United States include the following: little, if any, comprehensive planning; limited support system for community programs; establishment of a new system, by-passing local authorities and other "powers" in the community; insufficient local coordination across sectors and among government agencies; and insufficient funding (in part due to dependance on federal rather than local sources as well as an absence of any examination of what was available locally).[14,15]

This paper advocates a systemic approach to community development, termed an enabling system, that can enable health promoting mechanisms and policies that affect the physical (i.e., housing and neighborhood) and social environments. It recognizes and seeks to draw advantage from existing private and public community institutions while allowing for and encouraging new organizations, coalitions, and networks. It endorses enabling systems as a cost-effective way to utilize and increase invaluable grassroots resources. An analogy can be drawn from commonsense practices in agriculture: a farmer who tries to cultivate each plant on an individual basis will soon exhaust his capabilities; he is well-advised to apply "enabling systems" such as tilling, seeding, irrigation, and hoeing across the entire field. This model, applied to community-based health promotion, has the additional advantage of encouraging popular decision-making and initiative. Freed from guidelines arbitrarily decided from above, but nurtured by the availability of resources, information, and access to other groups, local institutions are better equipped to develop strategies responding to local conditions.

Voluntary Community Organizations and Community Development

Voluntary community organizations include block or neighborhood associations, tenant associations, church volunteer groups, youth groups, and merchant associations. They may be independent or connected through federations or coalitions.

Whatever their type, voluntary community organizations share several characteristics that define their distinctive place in our society. They are geographically based, representing residents of a particular area, volunteer driven where the primary resources are the time, skills, and energy of members, locally initiated, by residents responding to local conditions, human scale where decisions are made face-to-face and operations are informal, problem solving where accomplishing specific tasks accomplished is important, and multipurpose and flexible to address a variety of issues simultaneously and to adjust strategies when necessary.

A variety of case studies and a small but growing body of empirical research has documented a variety of positive impacts of voluntary community organizations.[18] These organizations have many impacts on their physical and social neighborhoods. They may engage in clean-up and beautification projects, mount home maintenance and repair programs that improve the existing housing stock, renovate abandoned buildings to add to the housing stock. They may also change the social relations within an area, reducing isolation and increasing a sense of community among residents.

Volunteer community organizations often strengthen, facilitate, or substitute for social services needed by local residents. They organize and deliver their own services, often entirely volunteer, including day-care and babysitting, employment services for teens, food-buying clubs for working-class families, food pantries for the hungry, and temporary shelter for the homeless. Some organizations have entered formal and informal "coproduction" relationships with municipal governments in which the city and a volunteer organization assume joint responsibility for a service.[16,17] Coproduction arrangements have been established in areas as diverse as health care, housing rehabilitation and job counseling and can sometimes prove cheaper than public delivery.[18]

Volunteer community activities and projects can stabilize urban neighborhoods by increasing satisfaction, reducing fear of crime, and promoting confidence and investment in the community. Participants can develop competencies and confidence that empowers them, decreases feelings of helpless-

ness, and increases their sense of citizen duty.[19-21] These organizations can also collectively be "empowered," obtaining increased mastery over the affairs of their neighborhood by altering the distribution of power and decision-making authority within the community.[22-25]

Their number has been growing during the past two decades. Examples of successful grassroots groups can be found in all regions of our country among all income, racial, and ethnic groups. Although detailed distributions are unavailable, concentrations of such groups occur in a number of older, low, and moderate income neighborhoods in our larger cities.[26] It is safe to assume that every large city has many such organizations.

Their growth has been given impetus by several large scale trends within our society. One of these has been called a "rooted distrust of bigness."[27] The alienating qualities of big business and big government have led to mounting cries to empower people and to strengthen mediating structures such as the family, church, volunteer associations, and neighborhood groups.[28] Simultaneously, search for community involves many Americans and has been growing.[29] Pollster Daniel Yankelovich reports that in 1973 approximately 32% of Americans felt an intense need to compensate for the impersonal and threatening aspects of modern life by seeking a community. By the late 1970s, that number had increased to 47%.[30] Where grassroots community organizations exist, they receive a ready response from residents, and participation rates range from 15-11% of the residents. A 1980 Gallup Poll showed a striking 69% of the urban population willing to devote an average of nine hours per month to neighborhood activities, including "the performance of some neighborhood social services." Participation also seems to increase as the size of the group's turf decreases. Florin and his colleagues (unpublished data) found that membership in block associations averaged 62% of the residents.

Clearly, people appear ready to seize opportunities for the kind of connection and sense of control provided by volunteer community organizations. Their numbers and potential for positive effects make them a potent vehicle for the revitalization of American urban communities. Yet our understanding of these important social entities remains limited and our documentation of their effects underdeveloped as is our ability to foster, nurture, and sustain them.

CHALLENGES

A system should be in place to respond to the often unique needs of thousands of communities. Earlier efforts exclusively targeted poor or high-

risk communities, but current community development strategies reach out to all communities and apply greater effort to communities traditionally more difficult to serve, (e.g., immigrants, poor, homeless. If this approach is successful, most local communities will be engaged in the process. Even a medium-sized city could have hundreds of initiatives to support. Each community has a different amalgam of issues, often requiring different strategies to accomplish the same goal.

Community health-promotion strategies must be sustained for a long time, and multifaceted strategies are required. Often these strategies will draw together a variety of experts and citizens of differing educational and cultural backgrounds. These bring diverse interests "to the table." Their ability to work together varies. Assistance may be required to achieve their potential collaboration in planning and implementing programs. Equally challenging is the multilevel comprehensive planning essential for access to the resources necessary for healthy communities.

The challenge in planning systems to support community development is creation of an environment within which organized community initiatives can be sustained. Individual case consultation or staff intensive methods cannot meet the challenge because resources and trained personnel are limited. Individual case management approaches can also create unnecessary dependence on external consultants and larger systems.

General systems theory[31,32] has shown strong promise for developing a comprehensive strategy for systemically supporting community organizations.[33-35] Social scientists have begun to document the effectiveness of systemic methods to support community development corporations,[36] voluntary community organizations,[34] health promotion programs,[37] and self-help groups.[38-40] The following discussion of enabling systems is based on general systems theory, previously cited research, and our own experience with these systems.

A number of principles can be derived from consideration of challenges and theories relevant to the development of enabling systems. Technical assistance and support services that comprise an enabling system for community development should do the following:

Develop local control and competence. Decision-making and planning should be localized to increase ownership of community problems and solutions. Local governments and voluntary associations need to be involved. Skills and capacity to follow through on the planning process are additional primary goals of the enabling system.

Be flexible in the content. Enabling systems should support the changing

and differing priorities and problems of the communities and organizations they serve. This does not require expertise on every possible issue; the enabling organizations are aware of their own strengths and broker clients to where needed resources are available.

Be a sustained effort. Training and technical assistance must be of significant duration and intensity to impact complex processes. "Low-dose" interventions such as one-shot generic workshops seldom produce sustained results.

Be experiential and practice/skills oriented. Concepts from adult education must be used to equip people with workable skills easily taught and readily usable.

Be problem-solving and result oriented. Approaches should lead to tangible action plans based on realistic assessments of both current and desired conditions of client organizations.

Account for developmental phases of organizations. Different processes and issues are salient for mobilization, maintenance, and mission phases of an organization.

Promote self-assessment of strengths and weaknesses. Services should efficiently address needs while not redundantly training for existing strengths. Client organizations must learn to identify and to solve problems with minimal outside support.

Be adaptable to different "dose strengths." Services are gauged to the organization's needs and resource-center capacity, e.g., three pages of printed materials on meeting management or a half-day workshop as needed.

Be readily available and "on-line." Implementation is facilitated and learning leveraged by responding promptly to emergent needs.

Promote resource sharing and networking among similar organizations.

Have active monitoring and outreach. Publicity, recognition, and incentives for achievements should be embedded in the systems.

Facilitate informational inputs and feedback. Enabling systems can develop mechanisms and techniques to assist community organizations efficiently to receive information about their environments. Different mechanisms can be made available including assistance in planning, implementation, and interpretation of needs and strengths assessments; evaluation assistance; resources for planning and evaluation; a monitoring system available to community groups; and process evaluations with feedback components.

Foster the use of local resources. Often groups served by national and regional organizations focus outside their communities for resources and

ideas, and depend too much on technical assistance. This includes dissemination of technical assistance and training skills and resources to local community staffs and leadership.

Encourage innovation and adaptation. The development of new models, strategies, and solutions must be built into the system so that programs can adapt to changes in communities and meet new challenges. Client organizations should be viewed as incubators of creative solutions. Diffusion of innovations will be enhanced by creation of environments that support change and are sustained through linkages within the network and among other networks or systems.

Provide resources for purposes of maintenance and production. Systems should provide resources equally for organizational development and maintenance (e.g., general assistance in community mobilization and coalition development, leadership development, organizational capacity building, etc.) and for activities to achieve organizational goals (e.g., dissemination of effective health promotion strategies, programs, and curriculum). One organization need not develop expertise in all maintenance and production areas; expertise and responsibility, however, should be contained within the system and all members need to be aware of available resources. Organizations tend to request production resources more often than maintenance, regardless of need. Systems should build incentives and easily usable resources for maintenance.

Be sensitive to internal conflicts in local communities and sponsoring organizations. This should be a target for preventive action in system planning and operations. Consultation skills must be developed. Distribution of awards, travel, and other benefits of technical assistance must be carefully scrutinized, and whenever possible collective and group efforts rather than individuals should be rewarded.

These qualities build capacity and grassroots participation, and enhance longevity, effectiveness, and independence. Dual levels of development—bottom-up and top-down—develop enabling organizations at all community levels to add momentum to change.

ENABLING SYSTEMS

An enabling system is a coordinated network within and among organizations that nurtures grassroots community developments. The central purpose of this system is to increase the capacity of communities to manage and to control change. Enabling systems consist of intermediary support organizations to broker resources from larger systems to community organizations.

They provide such systemic supports as conferences, workshops, recognition events, and other activities. Intermediary support organizations can include technical assistance and consultation. Technical assistance focuses on activities that address a social problem (e.g., drug-abuse prevention) or common organizational need (e.g., nonprofit management). Enabling systems also consist of organizations and services that assist the production (addressing social problems) and maintenance (organizational and community capacity) of their organizations.

Another defining characteristic of enabling systems is a multiple system of geographic levels (e.g., national, regional, and local). The local structures increase the psychological and physical accessibility of the system to the communities and more efficiently provide sustained assistance. Larger structures allow for better dissemination of innovation and knowledge. Larger systems can economically produce resources (e.g., publications, planning tools, curriculum, public education, etc.) that address common needs across the system.

STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS OF ENABLING SYSTEMS

Seed capital and incentives. Human and financial capital development must be stimulated through incentive grants, recognition of successful community efforts, and further development of local leadership.

Incubators. Innovative and entrepreneurial ventures need to grow at the grassroots level; local solutions need support; and the infrastructure must nurture efforts at the most local level.

Multiple community sites. Thousands of communities need to be involved, and one or two pilot sites will never develop an infrastructure that can serve the multitude of communities in a state or province. Multiple sites, even within the same county, will seed widespread development.

Technology development and transfer. Home-grown solutions need to be distilled and systems need to be established that can be replicated. Pipelines to potential solutions and external resources need to be established. training and technical assistance in the process (e.g., community development) and different content areas (e.g., substance abuse prevention, transitional employment programs, business incubation) must be available, easily accessible, and compatible with the needs of a variety of users. To be culturally appropriate, the process must allow adoption and adaptation.

Multiple levels of planning and support services. To insure community ownership and coordination, collaborative planning must occur at all government levels and, in many cases, even smaller neighborhood units. These

levels must also be integrated, and intermediary support organizations need to exist at the various levels. At the most local levels, support networks among community organizations can be developed and sustained.

Partnerships and other collaborative structures. If broad-based solutions are to engage a variety of local resources, partnerships must involve governments, businesses, colleges and universities, health and human service providers, leaders of the powerful and relatively powerless, schools, and churches. All community sectors must join together in solving community problems.

Resources networks. A resource network "maximizes mutual support and the exchange or resources."[41] It is "a type of network sustained not only because it increases resources available to people or expands their knowledge, or provides new experience, but also because it dilutes the sense of loneliness."[41] Resource networks link intermediary support organizations and community organizations. They are horizontal organizations;[42] exchange of resources and decision making is collaborative. The relationship between community organization and support organizations is reciprocal. Mechanisms are developed to exchange knowledge and experience among support organizations and their clients. Network exchanges also occur regularly between support and community organizations.

Intermediary support organizations. These organizations can develop and deliver support services. Such organizations exist in almost all jurisdictions. Services can be delivered through one organization or through a consortium or resource network; on occasion an entire system may need to be developed. Intermediary support organizations can be part of a government or university, foundation, technical assistance service, clearinghouse, or another organization that provides the elements and functions of the enabling system. Intermediary support organizations help enabling systems to reach local institutions.

FUNCTIONS OF AN ENABLING SYSTEM FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Specific functions are provided by the enabling system, in most cases through intermediary support organizations. Some functions seem essential to enablement of community development.

Brokering of resources and information. Collection and distribution of resources (e.g., money, volunteers, technical assistance) and information contribute to negative entropy, loss of energy. This is the most basic function of enabling systems that intermediary support organizations can provide. Direct provision of information and resources and referral to other resources

are essential. It is not necessary for enabling systems or intermediary support organizations to contain all the knowledge or expertise to address every possible situation or need. It is essential, however, that the system know where those resources exist and can provide adequate referral, including monitoring, evaluation, and follow-through.

Financial resources can be distributed through intermediary support organizations. Grants, loans, and other financial allocations can be obtained from governments, foundations, and corporations and distributed through intermediary support organizations on competitive and noncompetitive bases. Intermediary support organizations allow financial allocations easy access to community organizations due to their established networks and low overhead. Network members are involved in distribution of resources.

The Citizens Committee for New York City provides an excellent example of this process. It solicits funds from a variety of public and private sources, and distributes them as small ($50 to $3,000) incentive and seed grants. These grants, combined with a program that recognizes model programs and technical assistance, foster innovation and encourage community groups to move into new areas of problem solving or organizational development.

Organizational and community capacity building. A major vehicle is leadership skills training (e.g., advocacy, planning, meeting management, delegation, negotiation), including training staff and volunteers.

Team-training methods have also been successfully used, and develops a core group to operate collectively within an organization or community. This strategy has a number of advantages over training individuals. Team training makes workshops more relevant to the participants' situations because teams can spend time on activities relevant to their own situations. Team training can be considered an intervention of higher ''dosage strength'' than traditional individual training designs.

Organizational development techniques—such as team building, participatory strategic planning, and group problem-solving—are another group of services that support the enabling system. These services are more labor intensive and require a greater variety of skills and experience on the part of the provider. They also have a greater effect on the organization and its community than training methods alone.

A critical challenge for the group of services that support these enabling functions is to provide sustained support. There must be active follow up to workshop and organizational development activities.

Research and development. Enabling systems should be guided by information on the environment as well as anything that improves knowledge of

issues addressed and the methods to address them. The goal is an intelligent system—one capable of learning, growing, and adapting. Research and evaluation services should be integrated into enabling systems as part of intermediary support organizations rather than a function outside the system. Program audits, requiring independent evaluators, can be appropriate at times. Research and evaluation initiated by intermediary support organizations in collaboration with their network members are less likely to encounter resistance from participants, and their results are more likely to be useful when "owned" by members of the system.

Research and development go beyond evaluation, environmental monitoring, and market research. Intermediary support organizations provide an ideal setting to develop social technologies to address community problems or to improve community initiative, viability, and maintenance.[43,44]

Experimentation. Systems foster experimentation through seed grants and research and development services. Experimentation should not be controlled by the systems, and every effort should be made to support and systematically to examine innovations, tasks best considered a metafunction of the system but pervasive to every system activity.

Development of community ownership of problem solving. This function is fulfilled in two ways. The first insures that local communities have the capacity to assess their needs and strengths and to develop strategies that gain widespread support. This includes assurance that the local community will have long-term support from both internal and external resources. It is also essential that disenfranchised and at-risk groups be included. The second decentralizes enabling systems and developments and maintains local intermediary support organizations, preferably (if not ultimately) within each community.

Dissemination and diffusion of problem-solving strategies. Distribution of descriptions of model programs through publications or newsletters expose community leaders and planners to new ideas. Problem-solving strategies presented in experiential formats are more likely to be disseminated effectively. Presentations, videos, and site visits can lead to effective adoption.[45] The intent to adopt a successful program must be supported by appropriate capacity development and adaptation to local conditions. However, if the community and key influentials within it have not developed ownership of the problem and the solution and do not see a valuable role for themselves, the likelihood of adoption is slight whatever the support services.[46,47]

Promoting collaboration. Collaborative structures such as coalitions and partnerships need to be cultivated to foster ownership and to maximize the use

of community resources. Intermediary support organizations can convene such groups and provide situations where those type of groups can be developed.

Networking. Resource exchange networks among community organizations can develop around common problems or common geographic areas. My experience is that exchange periods have been the most favorably rated part of any training program. Intermediary support organizations encourage resource-exchange networks by supporting meetings of network members and facilitating these meetings. Newsletters have been useful in resource exchanges during intervals between meetings.[42]

Successful examples of resource exchange networks exist in New Jersey: the New Jersey Family Life Education Network and the New Jersey Network on Adolescent Pregnancy support 21 county-level networks cumulatively involving 7,000 and 3,000 people respectively. These networks are managed through the Center for Community Education of Rutgers University. Each network has one full-time coordinator and a part-time secretary. County-level networks that generally meet monthly are coordinated by volunteers or part-time coordinators. The Family Life Education Network has been in existence for more than seven years and the Network on Adolescent Pregnancy is approaching its 11th year.

CORE SERVICES WITHIN AN ENABLING SYSTEM AND THEIR IMPACT

Services	Individual within the organization	The organization	Local community	Macro system
Training	X	O		
Publications	X	O		
Communication/public education	X	X	X	X
Consultation with staff and leaders	X	O		
Organizational development, team training and consultation	X	X	O	
Rewards and recognition	O	X	O	O
Advocacy and empowerment	O	O	X	X
Networking and coalition building	X	X	O	X
Needs assessment/problem solving	X	X	X	X
Collecting and distributing resources	X	X	X	X
Information and referral/linkages	X	X	X	X
Research and development/evaluation	X	X	X	X
Marketing	X	X	X	X
Generating vision	X	X	X	X

Direct effect = X
Indirect effect = O

CORE SERVICES OF THE ENABLING SYSTEM

The hybrid strategic model of an enabling organization that provides organizational and community development technical assistance is presented in the table. Services or functions of the enabling organization target, for either direct or indirect effect, the individual within the organization, the organization as a whole, the immediate target community, or larger service/political (macro) systems. A strategic approach such as this allows the greatest number of communities to be served by limited resources.

Twenty-seven states have Self Help Clearinghouses. The most extensive systems exist in California, New Jersey, and New York. Their primary function is to connect citizens with self-help groups. Almost all clearinghouses assist the development and maintenance of self-help groups, including workshops, conferences, and publications. The New Jersey Self Help Clearinghouse, for example, has helped the development of more than 500 self-help groups during the last eight years. State and local clearinghouses interact through the International Network of Mutual Aid Centers. Research and evaluation has been relatively well integrated into the national and some of the state systems.

SUMMARY

This article has discussed the need to support grassroots community development. Grassroots community development requires the development and maintenance of voluntary community organizations (e.g., block, neighborhood, and tenant associations). These organizations have proved effective in the social, physical, and economic development of a community. The challenge facing policy makers and strategists is to develop a system that supports a multitude of community initiatives. This article has discussed such an ''enabling system'' and structure, functions, and services required as part of this system.

The challenge we face is to increase the problem-solving capacity of disenfranchised communities. One of the biggest barriers we face in this mission is the competition and lack of coordination among professional service organizations.

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