

Strategic areas for increasing community development capacity in social service organizations.

Most social service programs are primarily designed around the idea of *personal preparation*...helping to increase the capacity of the person receiving services so he/she can more fully engage in community life. Community Development is the necessary complement to the personal preparation support we provide for individuals. Community development focuses on *community preparation*: increasing the capacity of the community include to all citizens in the rhythms and routines of community life. It is a critical component of social service strategic planning and action because it

- 1)acknowledges that every citizen has the capacity to contribute to community life,
- 2)recognizes that for a person to be a part of community requires another community member to be welcoming,
- 3)helps to provide non-institutional support mechanisms for citizens,
- 4)results in increased opportunity for all citizens to engage in community life,
- 5) increases awareness of social justice issues amongst community members,
- 6)opens the way for citizens to acknowledge and exchange gifts,
- 7) reduces reliance on social service systems, and
- 8) promotes the idea that communities will benefit from including citizens who are currently isolated and feel unwelcome.

Community Development can be articulated through six distinct areas of focus in both planning and direct action:

Area One: Local Attitudes and Welcoming

The focus of this effort is preparing the community for inclusiveness. This takes two strategies. First, to help community groups reframe social service issues from “this person is not a part of community because he/she is has a problem (i.e.: poverty, disability, homelessness, etc.)” to “This person is not a part of community because the community is not prepared to be welcoming and inclusive.” This is accomplished by establishing purposeful dialogue which defines this distinction with the leaders of local community groups, businesses, churches, and schools. The second strategy is to offer trained facilitators to help interested groups conduct a “welcoming inventory” which helps a group determine how welcoming it currently is and develop strategies to be more welcoming to other community members. This strategy is also aligned with the current focus on Cultural Competency in many social service organizations. Some staff may have an interest and talent for working with local churches, schools, service groups, etc. in developing a “welcoming” environment. These efforts are most successful when they focus on the larger idea of ALL citizens needing places in a community where they can feel welcome and contribute. An additional boost in this area occurs when social service organizations team up with another non-deficit defined group (church, civic organization, school) to provide the welcoming facilitation and follow-up.

Area Two: Alignment with Other Marginalized Groups

The focus of this effort is to expand the political and resource base for getting things done for disenfranchised groups. The most effective way of doing this is to bring people together around a mutual issue. It is important to spend focused time identifying issues

and building collaborative bases around community development issues which are not just limited to the individuals we are serving. It is also important that the accomplishments of these collaboratives are broad based and beneficial to non-marginalized citizens who share similar issues. Examples: Housing collaboratives, refugee communities and community welcoming issues, collaboratives that address literacy issues, and storytelling between disenfranchised groups and non-disenfranchised groups, community improvement projects in neighborhoods, etc.

Area Three: General Community Building Activities

Look for opportunities to develop and participate in general community building activities as a way of promoting inclusiveness. Particularly useful are the establishment of community rituals that allow diverse citizenry to participate and share stories. The opportunity in this is for individuals we are serving to be seen as developers, organizers, and participants in valued community events which invite broad community participation. Examples include organizing storytelling events which broaden the acceptance between diverse community members, establishing parks, sitting benches around town, establishment of on-going or annual community rituals and celebrations, and crisis related organizing and support.

Area Four: Personal Preparation

This area focuses on preparing the individuals we are serving to join or rejoin their immediate community (family and friends) and larger community (church, school, work). Related to “community development”, it is helpful to support individuals we are serving in identifying which communities they wish to join or re-join. Attention is then paid to identifying the specific gifts the person can bring to that group, and strategizing ways for the person to give those gifts and be seen for giving those gifts. The community development component of this is built around insuring that 1) the planning process with the person addresses the community engagement desires of the person, 2) the planning process names the gifts the person can bring to community, 3) clearly outlines the support (if any) necessary and organizes that support using non-institutional (i.e.: paid social service) methods.

Area Five: Staff Skills and Job Descriptions

Specific goals for professional development are necessary for staff employed by social service agencies to build skills in doing community development work. Included in the necessary skill base, at a minimum, is a theoretical understanding of the components of community development (see attached descriptor), each staff person internalizing the idea of welcoming by identifying specific times in his/her life when they experienced being unwelcome, the ability to frame and tell short stories in individual and group situations, being able to make powerful introductions of disenfranchised citizens, leading values discussions that reframe social service needs into welcoming issues, organizing non-professional support for disenfranchised individuals in community situations, core-gift identification skills, non-manipulative problem-solving facilitation skills, and event organizing. Focus is also given to modifying the work structure and tasks of employees performing community development functions within organizations.

Area Six: Policy and Structure

Attention should be focused on determining whether or not the policies or structure of agencies and institutions (both social service and general community places) promote the integration and inclusiveness of disenfranchised individuals in the larger community or promote separateness. Examples: Does the organizations personnel policies promote hiring of people who could be viewed as being in the margins of community (i.e.: citizens with disabilities, recent immigrants, individuals who are poor)? Are they accessible by public transportation? Are meeting times convenient? Do their long-range planning processes include developing more welcoming and inclusive programming and practices? Is the governing structure inclusive? Are the primary learning centers in the community easily accessible and supportive to all citizens?

What is Community Development?

Carefully planned actions that increase the likelihood that community members will:

have increased access to valued community resources.

have increased opportunities to share stories and deepen relationships.

be face to face with each other while engaging in common activities.

define the issues, choose the solutions, and be directly involved in changing situations which effect their individual circumstances.

provide youth with opportunities to interact with and observe elders.

provide each citizen with opportunities to identify and give his/her specific gifts.

have opportunities to engage in productive conflict.

reduce reliance on social service systems for solutions and support.