Beyond Promises: A Planned Approach For Rural Volunteer Community Development

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Beyond Promises is a model program created to assist rural volunteer community development groups. This program emphasizes the need for organizing, planning, and training in a grassroots approach to rural development. Much of the literature concerning both rural development and the concept and practice of citizen participation is theoretical and analytical. The Beyond Promises model purports to be neither; instead, this model is a practical, "how-to" model based on a synthesis of the processes found to be most successful by community organizers in creating effective community-based organizations and by management consultants in creating effective participatory management processes. Granted, this is a strange marriage; but a synthesis of the policies and procedures of the community organizer and the management consultant can yield some synergistic effects.

Both community organizers and management consultants operate as change-agents; both are concerned not so much with solving problems as with teaching the participants how to solve their own problems; and both seek to create an organization capable of sustaining itself after the change-agent leaves. The Beyond Promises model offers an organized, planned approach for rural citizen participation that will result in progressive, controlled growth and change.

As federal and state agencies eliminate many government programs and services, rural areas will experience an ever-increasing need for a planned, professional, unified, volunteer approach to community development. This paper provides scholars, government agency representatives (local, state, and national), institutional leaders, civic and religious group members, and concerned citizens with a workable model that can effectively solve community problems and meet community needs. Both the Beyond Promises organizational model and training model can be adapted to any area's needs and resources, and an evaluation of the pilot program in Alabama offers insight into the effectiveness of these models.

BACKGROUND

In 1983, the Alabama Office of Voluntary Citizen Participation (AOVCP) began a Rural Volunteerism Project. In August, 1984, the AOVCP contracted with Organizational Development, Inc. to develop a model program for rural volunteer community development. Interviews with those who had successfully implemented community development programs, albeit not rural volunteer community development programs, yielded much practical advice, an introduction to community organizing and community development literature, and some shared copies of conference proceedings that were either directly or indirectly related to rural development. From these interviews also came the title of the manual and the organizational and training models.

In an interview with Walter Oldham, Executive Director of the Tuskegee Area Health Education Center, Inc. (T.A.H.E.C.), discussion centered on a personal story that Mr. Oldham felt illustrated the efforts of many sincere, but ineffective groups:

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When I came to Tuskegee fourteen years ago, I was very eager to help in the community's development. Soon after I arrived, I heard of a man who needed some help. Somehow, a group had scrounged up some cement blocks and other materials to build a day-care center so that the mothers could go to work to help to support their families. Now, they had reached an impasse. The building was essentially completed, but it had no roof. Before they could open the center, they had to find a way to get a roof on the building.

So I, dressed in my best suit and white shirt, got in my car and set out to find this day-care center. After many miles and many turns, on an increasingly narrow unpaved road, I came to the site. Sure enough, there was the day-care center with no roof. I was greeted by a huge black man; he must have been 6' 10" tall. He was spotless. He was so clean that he just shone, and his overalls looked as if they had just been brushed.

As I got out of my car and looked up—way up—at him, he said, "Many groups have promised to help us. We've been investigated, and we've been written up. Many people have been interested in helping us. People have created charts and figures, and then they have told us that we would hear from them later. We have never heard from them again."

He continued, "All we want is a roof. We don't need to be studied anymore. If you can't help us, just tell us. We don't need any more promises!"

The moral of this story is that people living in rural communities have often been promised a great deal. Seldom has the reality reached the heights of the promises. These people do not need any more promises. They need results. The Beyond Promises organizational and training models offer a guide for those who are truly interested in more than promises. These models do not provide any quick and easy solutions, but they do provide knowledge, skills, and an organized, planned approach that will work if the people of a community are willing to work together to achieve their goals. Successful programs are not generally the result of a haphazard, sporadic effort on the part of a few. They are, however, quite often the result of a planned, serious, long-term commitment to rural community development by voluntary citizen participation.

THE BEYOND PROMISES ORGANIZATIONAL MODEL

Certain prerequisites or conditions will favor the successful implementation of a rural volunteer community development organization. First, the community must face problems or unsatisfied needs that they perceive can be best solved or only solved by concerned citizens working together.

Second, a successful organization will recruit members from throughout the rural area. The determination of the confines of the rural area should be a decision of the group, but the most successful groups will define themselves according to their political power structure. In other words, if the county or the parish is the locus of political power, they will include the entire county or parish. If the congressional district or a loose confederation of counties or parishes with common concerns is the locus of political power, they will include the entire congressional district or all those aligned in the loose confederation. Some weak counties or parishes will benefit from an alliance with more powerful counties or parishes. The most successful rural volunteer community development organizations, however, will form geographical boundaries based on the understanding that a position of unified strength is better than a position based on geographical chauvinism.

Third, a belief in the group's ability to deliver more than promises is vital. The success of a rural volunteer community development organization is directly proportionate to the belief the group has in its ability to be successful. If the attitude of the group is pessimistic, the accomplishments of the group will be slight. If the attitude is that all things are possible, all things will be possible. Optimism can be built.

The Beyond Promises model contains four phases. The first phase, the conception of the nature and potential of a rural volunteer community development group, may be either evolutionary or revolutionary. The idea may grow from an existing group's or existing leaders' awareness of the need and potential for such an organization; or the concept may be forced upon the rural area by an out-

side force: an act of nature (such as a flood, hurricane, tornado, forest fire) or an act of man (such as the closing of the rural area's major source of employment); or discontent with the status quo may reach an explosion point; or stimulus may come from an agency or institution outside the rural area.

The second phase, the birth of the organization, may be the culmination of years or months of thought or concern, or it may be a sudden, basically unplanned emergence. An evolutionary conception will result in a slow birth; a revolutionary conception will cause a rapid birth.

The third phase, the development and growth of the organization, can require merely a matter of months, or it may take years. Indeed, successful organizations will realize that they are at all times either growing or dying, and they may seek to grow continuously to avoid the obvious fourth phase: the death of the organization. Some organizations may plan their own death if they are no longer meeting either real or perceived community needs; they may die a slow, lingering death; or they may plan for both their death and renascence as the legendary phoenix.

The Beyond Promises model dictates time frames, and these time frames relate to a somewhat revolutionary growth: growth caused by a catalyst or change-agent. This model will be most successful if the realization of the need for a volunteer citizen participation group has emerged as a grassroots concern in the rural area. The catalyst that causes the birth and growth of the organization may come, however, from outside the rural area. The catalyst may be an agency, institution, consultant, or combination of these. The catalyst helps the rural area plan, train, implement, and develop organizational growth. An outside catalyst, or change-agent, can provide organizational, training, and consultative skills that will create a competent grassroots leadership and involvement; however, a group may develop without an outside catalyst.

PHASE ONE: CONCEPTION OF THE ORGANIZATION

The conception of the organization may take a matter of weeks or months and requires the following three steps:

1. Identify the stakeholder groups in the community.
2. Involve key people from the stakeholder groups.
3. Conduct a leadership training session.

The first two steps are critical to the birth of the organization. In rural communities, there will be many stakeholders. These will come from the traditional stakeholder groups: the political leadership in the community; the beneficiaries or constituents most affected by the area's problems; other people who live among the beneficiaries or who deal with them; the business community most directly related to the area's problems; the news media (particularly the local newspaper); and the cultural, civic, political, and religious groups.

In rural areas, these groups will not all be located in the most powerful towns or communities, yet they must all be involved. They must be informed from the outset; they must have input into the discussions that involve the stakeholder groups; and they must be invited to attend the leadership training session. In addition, they must be personally contacted by someone whom they respect and trust; and they must be urged to become a part of the rural community development organization. Rural folk will not go where they are not invited, and personal invitations are most highly prized. It is critical that none be overlooked. To avoid the possibility of overlooking any stakeholder group, the local paper should advertise and encourage interested citizens to participate.

If the organization is to be basically an outgrowth of an existing organization, much attention must be paid to inviting those currently outside the existing group. An uninformed, uninvited stakeholder group can become an early adversary, and there will be enough problems at the beginning without creating any unnecessary ones. Group membership should, of course, be open to anyone who seeks to improve the quality of life within the rural area and who respects the innate dignity of the individual; and

all stakeholders must share this sense of purpose and adhere to this value.

All stakeholders should be not only concerned, responsible, and responsive to the need for a volunteer community development organization but also educated. "Educated" has a particular meaning in reference to the group. "Educated" does not refer to academic degrees, but rather refers to an understanding of the fundamentals of community development, of the organizing process, and of needed leadership and problem-solving skills. The leadership training session will provide this needed training and education.

The leadership training session should be open to all interested citizens, be conducted as a six-hour program during the week and continued in the afternoon during the week and continued (after a supper-break) that same night. This training should be planned for the winter months when there is not much else to do and involve a free meal and refreshments for the breaks. Either a trained professional who can quickly gain rapport with the group or a capable community leader should conduct the training session. One initial training session, as compared to several, is definitely preferable, for it provides a somewhat captive group, ensures a continuum of learning, and forces the group to experience intensive interaction for a prolonged period of time.

PHASE TWO: THE BIRTH OF THE ORGANIZATION

The second phase should immediately follow the completion of the leadership training program and includes the following steps:

1. Determine the desired type of organization.
2. Determine the organization's mission.
3. Choose an organizational name.
4. Establish a regular meeting time and place.
5. Identify problems facing the community.
6. Determine issues.
7. Select three short-term group projects.
8. Begin interaction with other institutions and agencies.

During the second phase, the organization begins to practice the leadership skills learned in the training program, works to complete three short-term projects, and develops confidence in its ability to work together to meet community needs and planned goals and objectives. During this time, natural leaders will emerge; and interactions with other agencies and institutions will become an acknowledged necessity.

The initial meeting following the training session should have as its agenda the accomplishment of the first six steps. These meetings should last no longer than one hour. The one-hour limit forces the group to work rapidly to reach a consensus and causes no burden on those who must leave their work to attend group meetings. In addition, an hour of rapid-fire brainstorming is the maximum amount most groups can tolerate and still perform well. The meeting place should be in a central location and close to the power-brokers in the rural area. The meetings should be scheduled every two weeks.

The organization's mission should be a relatively simple task to complete, for the training session will have prepared all the participants to write a one-sentence statement of organizational purpose. The organizational name should also take a limited time, for it too could have been proposed for consideration before the initial group meeting.

The identification of problems and selection of issues facing the community may take more time than the initial meeting will allow. The group should have defined the important difference between problems and issues during the leadership training session. Projects that represent merely problems but are not issues should be avoided. People will worry about problems, but they will work for issues. Issues are problems that everyone feels strongly enough about to work together to change.

All initial projects should also be fail-safe: they must be doable, practical, current, and they must affect the entire rural community. Choosing initial projects that are rather simplistic, but that require the cooperation of existing rural agencies or organizations, will ensure both the suc-

cess of the projects and develop a propensity on the part of all involved to work together for the common good of the community.

PHASE THREE: THE DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH OF THE ORGANIZATION

The third phase should begin no later than nine months after the group's initial training session and includes the following steps:

1. Elect officers.
2. Determine permanent group size and function.
3. Develop an organizational plan.
4. Begin yearly goal-setting and evaluation sessions.
5. Extend efforts to coordinate activities with other institutions and agencies.
6. Develop a training, education, and development plan for group members.

The delay in electing officers until the third phase allows for a rotating leadership, and this encourages the emergence of natural, committed leaders. Before electing officers, the group should decide which officer positions their group will require and write job descriptions for these offices.

After the election of officers, the group faces a crucial decision: should it seek to expand its membership and become a large organization with various committee functions or should it operate as a problem-solving group that spins off projects and lets the size of the group be determined by the magnitude of the projects its chooses? The latter choice provides the opportunity to create either auxilliary or free-standing organizations sponsored by the group, and this allows the community's citizens to choose the projects they would like to support without being committed to be members of the problem-solving group.

These spin-off projects can be led by a member of the problem-solving group, by the entire group, by an existing agency or institution, or they can become totally autonomous groups with their own leaders. By choosing to become a problem-solving group, the organization will be able to extend its influence and use its skills to help other newly-emerging or-

ganizations without becoming involved in too many varied causes and issues. The problem-solving group approach also enables the organization to involve many different people who have specialized interests, needs, or capabilities. The problem-solving group operates as a corporate quality circle, and the large organization operates as a typical community-based organization.

The organizational plan will include the mission statement, goals and objectives for both short-term and long-term projects, the organizational structure with job descriptions for officers and committee chairpeople, and recordkeeping procedures. As the group becomes more sophisticated, it will need a budget, articles and bylaws, incorporation as a non-profit organization, facilities, equipment, and paid staff. The sophisticated approach may be several years in developing, for the loosely-organized approach seems to be very successful in rural areas. The organizational plan, however, is a necessity. It will provide for an orderly sequence of projects and greatly enhance the group's effectiveness.

A formal approach to keeping accurate records and yearly evaluation and goal-setting sessions are mandatory. The evaluation should occur before the election of new officers. This cyclical approach to planning will enable the group to function in an orderly, growth-oriented fashion.

One of the most serious problems facing rural volunteer community development groups is the lack of any communication with other rural development organizations and the absence of linkages with agencies and institutions (both public and private) that share their concerns and could offer invaluable aid in solving the community's problems. As Charlie Nash, a Southern farmer who is a member of the Farm Development Network in Arkansas, so succinctly stated: "If all the rural development organizations and agencies in my home state knew about each other and worked together, we could develop Arkansas four times over."

Forming linkages and networks with other rural community development organizations should be an integral part of the third phase. This networking should

begin within the community by involving existing community organizations, agencies, and institutions in early projects. From that, the organization should spread its contacts to encompass neighboring counties and regions. Finally, the organization should become aware of possible state and national linkages. People can learn so very much from other people. A horrible loss occurs when an organization fails to communicate with others because of pride, prejudice, fear, selfishness, or chauvinism.

A training, education, and development plan is essential for the continued, progressive, controlled growth of the organization. Training programs will prepare the organization's members to perform the tasks required; education programs will prepare them to perform a different or more advanced type of task; and development programs will prepare them to grow and enjoy controlled, progressive change as the organization grows and changes. Again, these programs should be a product of the linkages they have formed with other agencies and institutions.

THE BEYOND PROMISES LEADERSHIP TRAINING SESSION

The leadership training program provides the rural volunteer community development group with the knowledge and skills needed to implement the Beyond Promises organizational model successfully. The training program consists of four modules: an organizational concept module; a birth of the organization module; a planning module; and a problem-solving module.

The leadership training program participants learn the phases and steps in the organizational model, and they develop group-process, planning, and problem-solving skills. In addition, they learn both to conduct and to participate in effective meetings. The training program is a highly interactive program and involves experiential learning. At the time the participants are learning basic terms and concepts, they are developing a mission statement based on these terms and concepts. As they learn about organizational structure, they are also determining the type of structure best suited to their

rural area. As they learn the relationship of their misson to the planning process, they develop goals, objectives, activities, and tasks for their organization's first meeting.

In all of their small group work, they rotate the roles of timekeeper, recorder, and reporter; and this prepares them to rotate the leadership positions during the organization's second phase. They begin to experience working as a group to solve problems, and they begin to know and trust each other. They gain experience in speaking within a small group without fear of embarrassment, ridicule, or reprisal; and they gain experience in speaking before the entire group as a spokesperson for their small group.

This training program provides six hours of fast-paced instruction and group interaction, and it is critical to successful organizational model implementation.

The Organizational Concept Module

The training program begins with a very short lecture/discussion on voluntarism, society, and community. Then participants develop their individual definitions of community. After each participant presents his or her definition (and experiences only support from the instructor), the instructor points out similarities in all the participants' definitions. The group then divides into small discussion groups of six members. Each small group chooses a timekeeper, a recorder, and a facilitator. They are given only one minute to make these choices.

Then they are given a series of questions that will force them to think logically and to reach a group decision concerning their definition of community: what creates a vibrant, growing community; why community members should concern themselves with community development; what types of programs volunteers can develop to ensure a healthy community; who should participate in a volunteer community development organization; and who should receive the services of the volunteer community development organization. They are forced by the instructor to spend only four minutes reaching a consensus on each question.

The first exercise causes them to reach individual decisions related to a volun-

teer community development organization, and the second exercise introduces them to the process of sharing individual ideas to reach a group decision.

The next part of the module gives them definitions in handout form of basic terms and concepts: stakeholders; beneficiaries; organizational roles (enablers, brokers, advocates, activists); types of community development programs (community development, business development, infrastructure development), types of organizations (ad hoc and permanent); and membership requirements and duties. These terms and concepts provide knowledge needed before the group can interact and plan as an educated group for the birth of the organization.

The Birth of the Organizational Module

The second module begins with a small group exercise that connects with the previous group exercise by a restatement of the group's definition of its rural community. Then, the group exercise (again with imposed time limits) forces the small groups to determine the following for their community and organization: The stakeholders, the beneficiaries, organizational roles, types of community development programs, type of organization, and membership requirements and duties. As they are making these determinations, they are also learning to listen to each other and to meld many ideas into one controlling idea.

The Planning Module

The third module emphasizes the importance of planning to create measurable, achievable goals and objectives and introduces the group to the planning process. A handout defines planning terms and steps, and a group exercise follows that allows the group to plan for its first meeting. Again, this is a timed exercise and focuses on the development of a mission statement and specific plans for the first organizational meeting that will follow the training session. This module presents in handout form generic steps to take in planning a meeting and describes the roles of key people in effective meetings. The planning module develops the group's skill in planning and creates an understanding of the elements of effective meetings.

The Problem-Solving Module

The fourth module begins with an explanation of problem-solving steps. The entire group then works together to list problems affecting the rural community. Next, they eliminate those problems that are not issues. Finally, they choose, by multi-voting, an issue to examine using the problem-solving steps. This module develops skills in both determining issues and in problem-solving, and it ends the training program with an exercise that involves the entire group working to solve a problem related to their area.

Each module takes approximately one to one-and-a-half hours to complete. Smaller groups can work more rapidly, but a large group can also follow this training program outline and complete all four modules in six hours. This training program is very successful in developing the most needed skills and in introducing the most needed knowledge for the successful completion of phase two in the organizational model. The program requires much effort, however, from both the participants and the instructor. It is an exhausting, effective, and exhilarating program.

THE PILOT PROGRAM IN ALABAMA

The pilot program grew from the Alabama Office of Voluntary Citizen Participation's (AOVCP) Rural Volunteerism Project. This project identified those rural counties with little or no organized volunteer activity and high unemployment. The AOVCP then contracted with Organizational Development, Inc. (ODI) to develop a model program, and ODI volunteered its services to develop and conduct the leadership training program. After interviewing community leaders in several counties, Bullock County was selected by the AOVCP for the pilot program.

The leadership training program, held on February 9, 1985, was extremely well-attended by individuals representing a number of agencies, institutions, and organizations in Bullock County. Some of those represented were the Bullock County Development Authority, the Alabama Cooperative Extension Service,

the Alabama Department of Pensions and Securities, the American Legion, the Organized Community Action Program, the Charmettes (a social and civic organization), the NAACP, RSVP directors and volunteers, the Alabama Migrant and Seasonal Farm Workers Council, the Women's Missionary Union, the Business and Professional Women's Organization, the Red Cross, the county ministerial association, the retired teachers' association, the mayor of Union Springs (the county seat), the mayor's volunteer assistant, farmers, and volunteers who were interested in the idea of a rural volunteer community development organization.

The identification and involvement of a number of diverse stakeholders was the result of efforts made by local citizens and encouraged by the AOVCP. The AOVCP also funded the training program with a $250.00 mini-grant that provided for publicity, postage, and printing.

Within two weeks of the training program, the group held its first meeting. They determined at this meeting to become a permanent organization, to call themselves the Good Samaritan Volunteers for Bullock County, and to meet regularly every other Thursday for one hour at 1:00 p.m. in the Bullock County Development Authority's conference room. They began working at once to develop a mission statement. At the second meeting, they completed the mission statement and selected their first short-term project.

This first project centered on eliminating a transportation problem faced by county citizens who could not avail themselves of needed services because of a lack of transportation. They completed a survey of available vehicles, determined how these vehicles were purchased, who operated them, how they were funded, what services they provided, what days and hours they operated, what areas of the county they served, and what charges were made (if any) for the services. Upon completion of the survey, they arranged for a volunteer to coordinate by phone requests for transportation with an appropriate transportation source.

Their second project was to inaugurate a Candy Striper Youth Auxiliary for teenagers in Bullock County. The county hospital and nursing home approached the group with this idea after hearing of their successful first project. They now have an organization of sixteen active, trained, teenage volunteers. Their third project, providing accessibility for the handicapped at county polling places, was suggested by Alabama's Secretary of State; again the group successfully completed this project.

Six months after the leadership training program, Good Sam's Volunteers had successfully completed three short-term projects, determined needed officer positions, written job descriptions for these offices, formed a nominating committee, and elected officers. Nine months after the training program, they will have begun to develop a yearly plan to involve both short-term and long-term projects. They have plans to conduct a county-wide needs assessment in the fall of their second year to use in their long-term planning for the third year.

They have learned a great deal about project planning and implementation; they have worked together for the benefit of all; and they have learned to understand and appreciate each other. Good Sam's Volunteers have begun a most important process: they are developing not only their rural community but also themselves. The Honorable Julius Nyerere perhaps best stated the underlying philosophy that governs the Beyond Promises organization and training model and that Bullock County's Good Sam's Volunteers exemplify:

Rural development is the participation of people in a natural learning experience involving themselves, their local resources, external change agents, and outside resources. People cannot be developed; they can develop themselves by participation in decisions and cooperative activities which affect their well-being.

The rural volunteer community development organization can be a source of not only self-help but also self-development, and the pilot program in Bullock County illustrates the successes a group can achieve by working together in a planned, organized approach to community development.

CONCLUSION

No problem is insurmountable if individuals work together. The worth of the individual and the worth of the community are intertwined. Too often in the past, communities have failed to work together and to recognize the true interdependence of the worth of the individual and the worth of the community. Much has been written about neighbor helping neighbor in rural areas, and it is true that volunteerism in rural areas has often been the only means of survival. This volunteerism, however, has been very selective. Historically, we in rural areas have helped our neighbor—but only if our neighbor was one of us. We limited our volunteer efforts by family, religion, race, social class, educational level, economic status, and locale (from this crossroads to the branch).

We chose whom we would volunteer to work with or help. We can no longer afford the expense of choice. We all lose when we limit our volunteer efforts to one group or segment of rural society. Our only solution to problems facing rural communities today is unity of purpose, unity of concern, and unity of effort as citizens who participate in making decisions and solving problems concerning themselves and their communities. A planned, educated approach to rural volunteer community development will enable volunteers to give to their communities and to receive the benefits of their gifts.