

Volunteers in Neighborhoods

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INTRODUCTION

An estimated twenty-thousand neighborhoods in North America have some kind of neighborhood association or organization. The work they do is 99% volunteer-powered and results in a far higher quality of life--physically and humanly--for millions of Americans. Yet, organized volunteerism has paid relatively little attention to neighborhoods.

DEFINING NEIGHBORHOOD

Two classic definitions of "neighborhood" are:

1) Mainly Geographic, an artificially bounded area or one defined for purposes such as postal delivery, zoning, political precincts, or service delivery.

2) Mixed Geographic-Social as "an area in which a feeling of belongingness and common interest exists." The feeling of belongingness may occur for reasons which are ethnic, racial, religious, economic, geographic, or any combination of these. Thus, a recent column by Ellen Goodman made a good case for "the office" as a significant contemporary neighborhood. A good neighborhood

worker essentially tries to move from the first to the second definition; that is, to build a sense of belongingness in what once was just a chunk of adjacent geography.

SIGNIFICANCE OF NEIGHBORHOOD TO THE COMMUNITY

Neighborhoods are some of the best places to confront social problems. Caught early, these problems tend to be more inexpensive to solve. They are also more manageable on a neighborhood scale. For both these reasons, empowerment of people is more possible here. Involvement is more accessible to people and more likely to produce immediate, tangible payoffs in more personalized modes of operation. It is also possible that neighborhood emphasis on issues of clear, common self-interest encourages reconciliation between otherwise antagonistic individuals and groups (of course, it could also work just the opposite way). But the crime problems caught early by, say, Neighborhood Watch, mean notably safer neighborhoods; they also mean fewer tax-burdensome new prisons.

"Think globally, act locally" is a slogan that could have been written for neighborhoods.

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SIGNIFICANCE OF NEIGHBORHOODS FOR ORGANIZED VOLUNTEERISM

Organized volunteerism has built bridges to the human service delivery system, churches, corporations, the military, and the arts. But there has been precious little outreach to neighborhoods. This is surprising when one considers the significance of volunteering in neighborhoods.

Thus, if 20,000 organized neighborhoods average only 25 volunteers each, that's half a million people. Moreover, many of these volunteers are never or rarely seen elsewhere. They don't go crosstown to volunteer at any agency out of "pure altruism." But they aren't for that reason apathetic, as some seem to think. They do participate more frequently in neighborhoods, because involvement channels are more accessible and tangible payoffs are closer at hand. These payoffs involve a wide range of vital basic problems, such as housing, nutrition, public safety, social problems, for which volunteers are virtually the only solution, or at least a main one, not just a supplement to some other more primary factors.

Finally, the optimal style of volunteering in neighborhoods is one that deserves far more attention on the part of organized volunteerism. The "neighborhood style" focuses on facilitating rather than directing people, in all- or mainly-volunteer groups. There is a definite, though informal methodology here and you won't find it in formal volunteer program textbooks. We need to learn more about this style.

THREE ORIENTATIONS IN NEIGHBORHOOD VOLUNTEER PARTICIPATION

The three main ways in which people can participate in neighborhoods are:

- A. The Issue Orientation (Advocacy)
- B. The Service-Providing Orientation (Doing for Other People)

C. The Exchange Orientation (Doing for Each Other)

The listings below apply fully to lower-income neighborhoods, and partially to more affluent neighborhoods.

A. The Issue Orientation (Advocacy)

This is the attempt to win policy points with people in power, usually involving a fair share of resources allocated to the neighborhood. Advocacy is most frequently directed to city hall or other local government, but it may also deal with the business community (e.g., banks, employers).

Typical issue areas for neighborhoods include:

HOUSING

Zoning codes, tenants unions, funds for rehab work, etc.

SANITATION

Garbage collection, sewer, vermin, etc.

HEALTH, HUNGER

PUBLIC SAFETY

Police coverage and behavior, street lighting, safer street crossings (including street lights and stop signs), fire protection, etc.

TRANSPORTATION

Public transportation coverage and schedules, road repair, dusty dirt roads, bike paths, etc.

(FINANCIALLY) DISCRIMINATORY POLICIES

Banks not making home improvement loans at reasonable interest rates, neighborhood "convenience stores" overcharging, etc.

RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Parks, basketball courts, swimming pools, etc.

SCHOOLS

Keeping the neighborhood school open and available for neighborhood as well as school system use.

EMPLOYMENT

TRAINING COURSES--COMMUNITY (NEIGHBORHOOD) LEADERSHIP

B. The Service-Providing Orientation (Doing for Other People)

Roles here tend to resemble those of agency-related volunteer programs. One person helps another; the distinction is quite clear and consistent between providers and receivers of help.

HOUSING

Weatherizing, fix-up, painting, handyman work

CRIME PREVENTION

Neighborhood watch, citizen patrol, etc.

NEWSLETTER PREPARATION AND DISTRIBUTION

CLEAN-UP, FIX-UP PARKS

DAY CARE, Co-op

DONATE, DISTRIBUTE FOOD

HELP RUN FOOD BUYING CLUB OR FOOD CO-OP

ORGANIZE SOCIAL GATHERINGS, GAMES, AND OTHER FUN EVENTS

FUND-RAISING

NEIGHBORHOOD OFFICE HELP

CAMPANIONSHIP, FRIENDLY VISITING

HELP INCAPACITATED NEIGHBORS

Cut grass, shovel snow, etc.

GET-OUT-THE-VOTE DRIVES or PETITIONS

On issues important to the neighborhood

HELP FORM AND MAINTAIN NETWORKS

See next section

ORGANIZING RECREATION

Also coaching

C. The Exchange Orientation (Doing for Each Other)

Here are networks, self-help groups, support systems, mutual assistance groupings where people (volunteer to) help each other. One minute you're giving help, the next minute you're receiving it, and everybody's happier (usually).

The list includes:

SOCIAL EVENTS

Coffee klatches

Friendly athletics, like softball

Block parties

Neighborhood parties

Bingo games

On-going drop-in visiting in the neighborhood office

SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Common interest groups

Self-help groups

Networks

Skills or surplus exchanges

Co-ops (food, clothes, child care, etc.)

A RALLYING POINT

A neighborhood association needs a location/headquarters that is visible, accessible, and if possible has key facilities like a kitchen, meeting rooms, recreational equipment, and a telephone, of course. In decreasing order of sophistication and expense, the headquarters may be a neighbor-

hood center, a neighborhood office (often a storefront), a community room, or a place(s) in neighborhood people's homes. Where neighborhoods lack their own center or office, they are most likely to rent or borrow one from a neighborhood church or school.

BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN ORGANIZED PROGRAMS IN HUMAN SERVICE AGENCIES AND NEIGHBORHOODS

As an agency person it may be best to soft pedal, at first, actual or potential philosophical/political differences. Seek instead practical situations in which it is clearly to your mutual advantage to work together.

Identify and use bridge people, trusted both by neighborhood people and by you. Do not necessarily expect to be trusted or even understood yourself, at first.

Listen and learn a lot before making any suggestions. Never try to lay on your program. Discover what neighborhood people want to do and what they need. Then offer resources and programs which are moving in that direction or can be deflected that way. The fewer strings attached, the better, but be absolutely upfront about any strings there are.

Communicate via media which are listened to and trusted in the neighborhood; usually that means a neighborhood newspaper or newsletter.

This article is being published concurrently as publication number 16 in the Yellowfire Press Mini-Series (March 1985). The Yellowfire version includes a section on other relevant readings. For a complete list of available materials, contact: Yellowfire Press, 1705 14th Street, Suite 199, Boulder, CO 80302.