

W rkshop

Working with Low-Income Communities

Traditionally, low-income communities have been viewed as recipients of service rather than providers of service. Yet it has become increasingly clear that there are many residents in low-income communities who volunteer and play a critical role in restoring the health and well-being of their community. Volunteering in low-income communities is often termed as "helping out" and "giving back." It has been and continues to be a source of survival.

There is much volunteering by residents that regularly happens through an informal process, by people helping each other and by neighbors coming together in times of need. Community members reach out to give what help they can, in response to circumstances of family, friends and neighbors. Community residents purchase food for a neighbor in need; organize blocks for safe streets; and offer safe places in their own homes for residents in distress. These are just a few examples of how residents come together for the safety and strength of their community.

There is a critical need to learn how people in low-income communities connect, and what services can help them become empowered to find creative solutions to community needs. According to community organizers, the most effective way to help out in low-income communities is to shift thinking about volunteering from a model of charity to a model of citizen engagement and empowerment that involves community residents taking ownership of their problems and creating solutions. Other successful elements include making volunteering an acceptable exchange of time given; identifying and developing peoples' skills and talents; recognizing volunteer efforts occurring; and most important, building trust.

The following articles offer ideas for working more effectively with low-income communities. The guest editors offer strategies for community foundations, nonprofits, businesses and communities of faith on how to work best with these neighbors in need. ♦

Workshop, a standing feature of Volunteer Leadership, offers how-to tips and valuable insights on selected topics. If you'd like to be a guest editor or want to suggest topics for future coverage, write to Volunteer Leadership Workshop, The Points of Light Foundation, 1400 I St. NW, Suite 800, Washington, D.C. 20005; fax 202-729-8100; e-mail: janehar@aol.com

Resources

● *A Guide to Mapping Local Business Assets and Mobilizing Local Business*, Acta Publications, 4848 North Clark Street, Chicago, IL 60640; 800-397-2282; \$9

● *Bitter Roots and Sweet Fruits: Tupelo Conversations and Memories* by Susan Willey, a research paper about the Tupelo story, 800-600-4060

● *Building Communités from the Inside Out*, Acta Publications, \$20

● *Building Strong Neighborhoods*, Study Circle Resource Center, P.O. Box 203, Pomfret, CT 06258; 860-928-2616; \$5

● *Tupelo, The Evolution of a Community*, Kettering Foundation Press, 1999, \$19.95; ISBN 0-923993-06-01

● *Faith Communities as Social Service Providers*, Aspen Institute, 1 Dupont Circle NW, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20036; 202-736-5800; for list of publications, 410-820-5338

● "Grassroots Leaders," a pamphlet published by W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 616-968-1161

Successful Strategies

By Nettie Coad

My experience with the Partnership Project, which provides workshops and leadership training to better understand the root causes of poverty, has taught me several successful strategies.

Our organization was formed by the city of Greensboro, N.C., as a response to the low-wealth community's cry to do something about escalating crime and violence. The organization's mission was based on the ideas of six influential citizens. But since they were not residents of the community, it was hard for them to understand how to address the problems.

When the organization was established in 1993, Project Greensboro was funded by the city. Many of the strategies I had applied successfully in my neighborhood of Ole Asheboro Street could not always be used, since sometimes we had to challenge the city, which was trying to address problems. This resulted in my being viewed as "one of them" and I began to lose my credibility among my neighborhood leaders.

The Mission

In April of 1997, I attended a workshop of the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond in New Orleans. This training helps organizations, agencies and institutions become more effective in their work by developing their own analysis of history, culture and power relationships. In 1997, we changed our name to the Partnership Project to better reflect our mission. We are now funded by a three-year grant from the Babcock Foundation, based in Winston-Salem, N.C.

After two years of organizing throughout the community, more

than 600 people here attended People's Institute workshops and have a better understanding of the root causes of poverty, crime and violence. Our city's mayor, the departments of Community Development and Human Relations and several police and transportation personnel have attended workshops. This improved understanding has resulted in better relationships and more effective planning and decision-making with neighborhood involvement.

Lessons Learned

Ten lessons we've learned at the Partnership Project:

- Our interdependence presently depends on a dominant and an oppressed culture. We have to recognize the history that produced this system. The distribution of power must be analyzed. For instance, my neighborhood is negotiating to take over management of a city-owned school that's been turned into a housing complex. Now it's managed by a group that has no ties to the community. The community now has a sense of its own power, and that is the essence of our work: having people recognize their power and take action to realize that power.

- Understanding the gifts of people of different cultures rather than seeing them only as deficiencies is much more difficult than it would appear. It requires an examination of our own cultural biases.

- Relationships are critical to problem solving, but if there is a power imbalance, relationships will not change it. Often, there is accountability among government agencies only to the people who provide the money, but not to people

who are supposed to receive it.

- We must have a shared analysis prior to taking action of any kind. This means understanding the root causes of poverty rather than dealing with its symptoms. If we don't understand what "unbuilt" a community, we cannot rebuild it with assurance that the "unbuilding" will not occur again.

- Racism and its relationship to class is the primary cause of the inequities in many communities.

- It is disrespectful and dehumanizing to call neighborhoods full of families, culture and history "fragile," "blighted," "target" and other names that objectify.

- Less visible leaders in communities are too often overlooked. Institutions and agencies try to identify someone they think is a leader; we allow people to identify their own leaders.

- Communities must not only be organized but also work from a common analysis to create sustainable change and secure resources.

- White, middle-class participants have the responsibility of working in their own communities to create shifts in thinking and action, not in black communities.

- We must examine why we want to do this work, how well do we know the people, how well do we know the cause?

At Partnership Project, we ask people to examine the work and its effectiveness on the people served. Knowing how a situation came to be is the greatest starting point. ♦

Nettie Coad, director of community organizers for the Partnership Project, has been a community organizer in Greensboro, N.C., for 25 years.

Mobilizing Volunteers

By Merith Weisman

The mission of the Volunteer Center of Rhode Island (VCRI) is to mobilize people and resources to deliver creative solutions to community problems. Our collaboration with the Providence Housing Authority (PHA) is one way we address our vision of involving low-income families in volunteerism.

This project, begun in 1998, encourages volunteerism among the residents of several Providence public housing facilities. VCRI supports this program by supervising, training and serving as a resource to the PHA program coordinator.

The PHA program works to promote volunteerism and strengthen the community in several ways. First, it provides free, safe, educational and fun after-school and summer programs to youth who live in the public housing. Second, adults are offered several ways they can get involved. Most choose to volunteer in the youth program itself or, if they prefer, they may do clerical work to support the youth program. Third, parents can participate in the program by taking job training classes. All participants not only earn credits that allow their children to attend the youth program, but also earn welfare-to-work credits.

Enthusiastic Response

Initial interest in this program was greater than anticipated. "At first, many of the residents didn't know what 'volunteering' meant," says Francia Wilson, program coordinator. "Almost none had ever volunteered before; none were currently volunteering. Once they learned what would be requested of them, more

people than we expected signed up and filled out the application. And it seemed that each time someone got involved, they told their friends."

Some volunteers were more difficult to engage. In response, we began sponsoring monthly recognition events and sending thank-you notes and reminders to program participants. Youth program summer field trips are also an important incentive for adult participation. At one of the sites, too many volunteers signed up. In order to keep this momentum going, the number of volunteer hours required for participation in the program will be decreased from eight to four hours monthly. With transportation provided by PHA, we will also begin offering choices of several quarterly eight-hour off-site family community service projects. We look forward to National Family Volunteer Day as a way to involve PHA program participants with volunteerism on a national level and further strengthen the program. Additionally, soon the program will support a Youth Service Council, modeled on the existing VCRI model.

Facing Challenges

Some parents have begun to resent the program and feel that they are being "forced," "sentenced," or "coerced" to volunteer. Residents of public housing do not fit into the groups that are often required to volunteer, such as youth, students and those convicted of a crime. Residents recognize this, and the program must adapt to this challenge. Additionally, many of the residents simply do not trust those in authority, feeling they have spent years facing government barriers. Often these are the same

individuals who neither participate regularly in the program nor have their children in the youth program.

Because 61% of the 1,242 low income families that the PHA serves are Hispanic, we have ensured that our program coordinator is bilingual and bicultural. This has alleviated many potential communication problems and has been highly effective in combating insecurities that some residents feel toward authority and mainstream culture.

Ninety-one percent of the families served are headed by single mothers. We were originally concerned about parents feeling they had to leave children unattended to fulfill the requirements of the PHA volunteer program. We addressed this problem by encouraging parents to volunteer in the youth program with their own children. This means that the children will not be alone, and helps parents to spend quality time with their children.

The Volunteer Center of Rhode Island looks forward to continuing the Providence Housing Authority volunteer program. We want to make the program sustainable for the future. We know that it is helping individual residents, and as Kristina Arroyo remarks, "The volunteer program is the best thing that ever happened here. I am learning new job skills, building my resume and having fun." ♦



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is executive
director of the
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Partnering for Strength

By Shannon M.B. Dixon and Janis Foster

Grassroots volunteers in Memphis historically have achieved great successes—from implementing neighborhood improvement projects to blocking an interstate highway that threatened a park and historic neighborhood.

But while neighborhood groups were rich with ideas and energy, they lacked financial resources needed to carry out many of their goals. In Memphis, the civic leadership traditionally had invested public and charitable dollars in well-established charities.

That situation began to change in 1991 when the Community Foundation of Greater Memphis implemented a groundbreaking program. The foundation established the Neighborhoods Small Grants Program through a partnership with the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, which challenged community foundations to fund neighborhood organizations. The philosophy of the program was to increase the resources of neighborhood groups, as well as their capacity as local problem solvers. It was the first pool of revenue in the city of Memphis available exclusively to neighborhood organizations.

The program also was a turning point for the Community Foundation of Greater Memphis and its relationship with neighborhood groups. The foundation was just beginning its third decade of operation when it established Neighborhoods Small Grants Program. With the initial funding from Mott, the foundation hired its first full-time program officer and began a series of neighborhood initiatives. Since that time, the program has involved over 80 volunteer-run neighborhood organizations that never before had direct influence

on how money would be spent to improve their neighborhoods.

The city of Memphis and the United Way of the Mid-South are key local partners in funding, program design and implementation.

Good Matches

During the past eight years, the Neighborhoods Small Grants program has provided more than \$300,000 in grants ranging from about \$500 to \$5,000. The community foundation and neighborhood groups also used the knowledge gained from the program to bring other funds to Memphis neighborhoods, including a \$1 million Pew Charitable Trust grant to one neighborhood and a \$1 million Ford Foundation grant to another. These initiatives would not have been possible without the relationships built among neighborhood groups and the foundation.

Earlier this year, the Neighborhoods Small Grants program gained another vital local partner, Volunteer Center of Memphis, which is coaching neighborhood associations in volunteer recruitment and volunteer management skills. Throughout the Neighborhoods Small Grants Program, the foundation program staff had seen that experienced volunteers led neighborhood organizations. However, their lack of expertise in volunteer recruitment and management often compromised the impact of their well-intentioned efforts.

Partnership How-tos

The Volunteer Center's work has focused on helping neighborhoods implement their own projects rather than trying to influence the neigh-

borhood associations in selecting projects. The capacity of neighborhood associations can be increased through this focus on "how-to's" of accomplishing a project. By using better volunteer management and recruitment skills during each step of the project, the neighborhood develops happier, more involved, more effective volunteers—volunteers equipped to preserve their neighborhood and who derive immense satisfaction from doing just that.

Partnerships have been crucial to the success of the Neighborhoods Small Grants Program and the increased access of neighborhoods to the foundation and other community institutions.

These partnerships help the foundation to accomplish its mission of "using our community's assets to build stronger neighborhoods, organizations and lives."

Professional partnerships with the city of Memphis, United Way of the Mid-South and the Volunteer Center of Memphis have created the infrastructure and the funding for the program and provided the skills needed to help the neighborhoods meet their goals. After just eight years in the program, Memphis neighborhoods have increased their financial resources and gained valuable expertise through these new partnerships. ♦



Shannon M.B. Dixon is program officer at the Community Foundation of Greater Memphis. Janis Foster is a consultant in Memphis.

Tapping Communities of Faith

By Louise Elkins and Lynda Downes

The United Way Volunteer Center of Southeastern Pennsylvania expanded its involvement with communities of faith. Statistics showed an increase of requests for information or training on how to develop and expand "faith-based volunteer programs." The staff focused on the Philadelphia church community based on the success of our Program Manual for Mentoring Ministries, developed as part of our Philadelphia Church Mentoring Network.

(Note: For purposes of this article, the term "church" refers to whatever the religious institution may be and "pastor" refers to the top leadership of that institution.)

We developed a training program to address community volunteers from faith institutions. In testing our material, we discovered different "vocabulary" in the faith community as compared to our traditional nonprofit organizations. Further research showed the church is not only the place where people worship; it is also a regular gathering place for many other reasons. Faith-based volunteer programs in urban communities considered as economically disadvantaged and having few resources are both challenging and easy to work with. While congregation members tend to know each other and are ready to rally round when asked, they find it harder to tell others they cannot be a member of a committee.

Making Connections

Getting involved in a church when you are not a member demands trust and a proven track record. A faith-based community volunteer program is not very different from

traditional nonprofit volunteer programs. The same volunteer management procedures must be in place to achieve success.

As with most successful endeavors, to develop a volunteer effort within the church it is vital at the start to get the pastor's support along with the governing body. If you are a community group attempting to recruit church members to help in the community, you must make the acquaintance of the pastor, members of the governing body and the congregation. If you are not a member of the faith community or culture you are working with, it is very important that you understand the language and chain of command.

It is very important that as many members of the congregation as possible know what is happening. If members feel left out, a lot of bridges may need to be mended. In churches, where there are few or very often no paid staff, many creative ways to communicate must be explored.

The "effort," whether faith-based or community-based, must fit with the church's mission and the following steps must be in place: clear goals showing benefits for the congregation/community; determine leadership responsibility; budget; position descriptions.

While this information may seem like common sense, but we found that was not the case for many congregations or for all-volunteer urban community groups with which we worked. Urban churches often house local food cupboards along with other crucial programs. Members who are "just helping out" may run these programs and are trying to recruit "good Samaritans," thinking primarily about

how they are going to get the help they need. Our training provided the knowledge to change the way members are engaged. Recognition of these "helpers" is very important, even though they are doing God's work.

Facing Challenges

Church committee coordinators face a number of challenges:

- committee members saying they need help, but won't give up the reins;
- new congregation member not offering to help, but always comes to the covered dish dinner;
- committee member saying yes in front of the pastor, but doesn't follow through.

These concerns are often difficult to address, leading to frustration for everyone involved. Some successful remedies are:

- Ask long-time committee members to "mentor" or co-chair;
- Ask the new member to serve on the specific committee;
- Refrain from asking for help in front of the pastor.

This information is not, by any means, a solution to all of the concerns and challenges, but with a lot of prayer it should help. ♦



Louise Elkins is director of the United Way Volunteer Center of Southeastern Pennsylvania. Lynda Downes is special project coordinator.

Corporate Partnerships

By Polly O'Brien

Pitney Bowes is a \$4.2 billion global provider of informed mail and messaging management with a rich history of social responsibility since the company began in 1920 in the South End of Stamford, Conn. This neighborhood, which comprises low-income and minority households, light industry, manufacturing and other businesses, has long struggled with crime, poverty and deterioration.

Among the top community relations priorities of Pitney Bowes Chairman and CEO Michael J. Critelli is a revitalized South End that is a great place to live and work.

Programs

Pitney Bowes' driving principle is the belief that sustainable, positive change is best achieved through grassroots, resident-driven involvement. The neighborhood's needs are diverse, and so are the programs Pitney Bowes supports, including:

- An Enterprise Zone economic development initiative that is creating jobs, attracting new businesses, expanding existing ones and providing employment opportunities for area residents.
- A Neighborhood Revitalization Zone grassroots community mobilization vehicle that empowers residents to make decisions about the neighborhood's future and gives them the skills and resources needed to create change. Connecticut has cited the South End NRZ as one of the most successful and effective in the state, and recognized Pitney Bowes' partnership as an exemplary public-private approach to revitalization.
- Semiannual neighborhood clean-ups that Pitney Bowes has ini-

tiated, organized and supported since 1985, the first of which won a Make A Difference Day award.

- Other events that promote and encourage volunteerism, e.g., holiday parties, reading and mentoring programs, and employee service on non-profit boards.

Partnerships

Pitney Bowes has developed effective partnerships with organizations that can help meet community needs and bring about desired changes.

- We helped form a Workplace Volunteer Council and its back-to-school clothing and school supply drive for low-income students.
- We help our local Junior League to focus its efforts on the needs of South End women and children.
- We partner with an environmental organization to provide education and outreach programs for a new community garden on the site of a former illegal dumping ground.
- We helped form an affiliate of Keep America Beautiful that's working to protect and enhance Stamford's environment and educate residents about conservation.
- We're leading a regional America's Promise youth summit and Web site initiative in partnership with our Volunteer Center and a youth service agency to encourage and enable the community to improve the lives of its young people.

Resources

Pitney Bowes provides in-kind donations, including printing, mail-related services and the use of its facilities to support organizations that improve the community's quality of life. We've donated land for the

development of condominiums for first-time homeowners, and are planning a multimillion-dollar real estate donation for 80 units of needed owner-occupied, affordable housing. And we leverage local grants to direct resources towards the neighborhood. For example:

- We focus pre-K-12 educational support on schools attended by South End students, and bilingual programs that support minority/immigrant populations.
- We address educational needs of low-income preschoolers by providing for expanded Head Start and academic enrichment programs, underwriting preschool computer education and providing parents with training to help them learn how to ensure their children's success in school and be better advocates for them.
- We offer an information technology and engineering scholarship and job co-op program for South End residents, minorities and women.

Pitney Bowes' resources, leadership and technical expertise are helping revitalize the South End through these and other initiatives.

In the face of potential full-scale gentrification, the active participation of those who now call the South End home can help ensure that they will have opportunities to remain.

Pitney Bowes is an integral part of the South End and remains committed to its strong and successful partnership with its South End neighbors. ♦

Polly O'Brien is director of community affairs at Pitney Bowes Inc. and vice chair of the Points of Light Foundation's National Council on Workplace Volunteerism.