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Placing Volunteers at the Center of Community Development

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Abstract

It is the goal of this article to take back the ownership of community development efforts and place them where they belong; squarely on the shoulders of active local volunteers. It is essential that program and policy makers understand the central role that volunteers play in the community development process. Volunteers are at the core of effective community development and are routinely the catalysts behind successful efforts. Through their efforts, volunteers shape channels of communication, and more importantly, facilitate interaction that cuts across class and other divides, serving to connect local citizens. This effort results in the emergence of community. It is therefore essential that volunteers be better utilized, trained, rewarded, and more closely linked to broad-based community development efforts.

Key Words:

volunteers, community development, community agency

Introduction

It is essential that program and policy makers at all levels understand the central role that volunteers play in the community development process. However this process is often viewed as a grand effort facilitated solely in the realm of government and business sectors utilizing their vast funding and related resources. Volunteers, when considered, are only credited a minimal impact, often in select sectoral settings (religious organizations, educational settings) that do not spill over into the wider community. As a result, the vital and primary roles of volunteers are often ignored, forgotten, or too easily dismissed.

This article seeks to stress and highlight

the invaluable role that volunteers play in the development of community. We have become conditioned to thinking that the capacity for volunteer-led community development has been lost and must now come from skilled learned experts outside the community. Community development has wrongly come to be seen as the privy of academics, government, and economic development strategists. It is the goal of this article, and this special edition of the *International Journal of Volunteer Administration*, to take back the ownership

of community development efforts and place them where they belong; squarely on the shoulders of active community volunteers.

Contrary to existing misconceptions is the fact that volunteers and nonprofits are more often the catalysts and primary actors that drive successful community development (Claude, Bridger, & Luloff, 2000; Brennan, 2005). It is interesting that we continue to be surprised by the impacts of, and rediscovery of, volunteers as agents of community development. Historically, it has always been our active citizens, civic groups, and local organizations that have fostered the development of community. Active volunteers are at the core of effective community development. Such development is based on the deliberate involvement of local citizens coming together to meet the general needs of the community (Luloff & Bridger 2003; Brennan, 2006; Brennan & Luloff, 2006). Through their efforts, volunteers contribute to channels of communication, and more importantly, facilitate interaction that cuts across class and other divides, serving to connect local citizens. This active effort results in the emergence of community (Wilkinson, 1991).

An understanding and recognition of volunteers and their contributions to the emergence of community are particularly relevant in light of current social and economic conditions. Communities, and particularly those in rural areas, are being encouraged, and in some cases mandated to “do more with less.” As local, state, and federal funding to support a variety of local services become increasingly sparse, the need for an informed, proactive, and well-trained volunteer force is paramount. Similarly, as responsibility for social services continues to be transferred to the local level, volunteers are being asked to take on a variety of new tasks, master new skills, and contribute to community life at an extent that far surpasses

similar demands of the past (Sharp & Parisi, 2003). It is therefore essential that volunteers be better utilized, trained, rewarded, and more closely linked to broad based community development efforts.

Review of Related Literature: The Relationship Between Community, Development, and Active Volunteers

Traditional approaches to community development have relied heavily on the intervention and guidance of individuals with relevant expertise, usually recruited from outside the community. In response to failures and shortcomings of these outside efforts, emphasis on participatory approaches to development has emerged (Luloff & Bridger 2003; Brennan et al., 2005; Brennan, 2006). Such approaches are characterized by active local communities and residents contributing to all facets of program planning and implementation (Luloff & Bridger 2003; Brennan & Luloff, 2006; Brennan, 2006). Such approaches are at the core of many conceptions of community.

Community: A Process of Interaction

Definitions of community often include a variety of characteristics such as geography, human life dimensions, and locality oriented social actions (Wilkinson, 1991; Luloff & Swanson, 1995; Luloff & Bridger, 2003; Brennan, 2006). Yet the presence of these elements does not automatically signal the presence of community. For example, it is true that place or locality is important components of community. However, community is much more than a geographic location. It is a social and psychological entity that represents a place, its people, and the relationships that exist there (Wilkinson, 1991; Bridger & Luloff, 1999; Theodori, 2005). In this setting, volunteerism, active citizens, and social participation are seen as the cornerstones in the emergence of community and its development.

A more accurate definition of community views locality as a place where people live and meet their common daily needs together (Wilkinson, 1991; Theodori, 2005). Rather than a geographic boundary, community can be seen as a comprehensive network of individual relationships that meet common needs, express common interests, and act to meet the general needs of the locality. However, it is important to note that not all relationships serve to create the sense of connection that characterizes community. It is only through a process of deliberate and focused actions that diverse groups present in localities express their common interests and discover methods for meeting their general needs. This process of interaction culminates in the emergence of community.

Wilkinson (1991) and others view community from an interactional perspective, where the emergence of community was a dynamic process of bringing people together. Through people volunteering and interacting with each other, an entity can emerge that is far greater than the sum of its parts. This perspective does not imply that local institutions, social structure or more formal entities are unimportant. Alternately this viewpoint does not presuppose a utopian view of community that is devoid of conflict and self-interest. Similarly, the local economy, sociodemographics, power structures, organizations, and formal institutions are without a doubt vital to the make up of the community (Luloff & Bridger, 2003; Brennan et al., 2005). However, they only serve as the backdrop for our lives and the relationships we have on a daily basis with other residents. They do not speak to the motivation of people to voluntarily come together to improve their local society. |

Interaction is a pervasive and constant feature of local life. It provides meaning, context, and structure to our daily lives. Without such interaction, collective action, common identity, and community simply

cannot exist. Equally important interactions increase awareness of local issues/problems, help identify opportunities for volunteering, and lead to the development of focused actions aimed at enhancing local well being. From an interactional perspective, community development is the process of facilitating this interaction and building relationships that increase the adaptive capacity of local people to address the issues relevant to their lives (Wilkinson, 1991; Luloff & Swanson, 1995; Luloff & Bridger, 2003). Such capacity is reflected in the ability of local people to organize, manage, utilize, and enhance those resources available to them in addressing local issues and problems. This ability and capacity for collective action has come to be known as community agency (Wilkinson, 1991; Luloff & Swanson, 1995; Luloff & Bridger, 2003).

This process of building social relationships, communication networks, and volunteer capacities, constitutes community development. Summers (1986) further defined this process and notes the distinction between the development of and the development in community is important.

The Development of Community

The term community development is often used interchangeably to represent both social and economic change. The viewpoint that is adopted therefore dictates different roles for volunteers and their capacities. Many times development is directly associated with the recruitment or establishment of industry and other economic structures. This usage can be seen as the development in community (Summers, 1986). In this context, a community is seen as a given and development is said to enhance this already existing entity (Wilkinson, 1991). From this development in perspective, clearly defined outcomes are envisioned and their achievement or failure signals end of development. In this setting, little if any role is seen for the volunteer, with

development being dictated by local elites or extra local forces.

Alternately, the development of community seeks to enhance the social realm and relationships between people (Summers, 1986). These are seen as the basis for a wide range of local development efforts. Under this framework, it is the process of interaction, establishment of channels of communication, and collective mobilization of volunteers that signal the development of community. Central to this perspective is the establishment of relationships and networks between community members of diverse backgrounds (Wilkinson, 1991; Luloff & Swanson, 1995; Luloff & Bridger, 2003; Brennan, 2006). Based on these, opportunities for action, volunteerism, and locally based plans for social and economic development can be prepared. In this process, volunteers and other active citizens are at the center of, and are the driving force behind community development. From this viewpoint, the success or failure of individual community development projects is irrelevant. More importantly, through process of coordination among volunteering residents, a capacity is created that allows for long-term and sustainable efforts to enhance local quality of life.

The Impact of Volunteers on the Development of Community

The substantial impact of volunteers in the development of community is evident in the research literature. In a variety of ways, volunteers provide structure, deliver services, and contribute the human and other resources needed by local societies (Ollis, 2001). Common throughout the community development and volunteerism literature is the impact of volunteers in providing service. Such activities are in many ways community-building efforts that cut across many of our social divides. Included have

been volunteers responding to poverty (Messias, Hilfinger, DeJong, & McLoughlin, 2005; McBride, Sherraden, & Pritzker, 2006), welfare reform (Bloom & Kilgore, 2003), services to residents with special needs (Choma & Ochocka, 2006), health care (McDowell, 2002), and hospice care (Coury, 2002). Volunteers are also playing an increasing role in enabling communities to respond to disaster and other times of crisis (Brennan, Flint, & Barnett, 2005; Flint & Brennan, 2006). Equally important has been the recognition of the role of volunteers in shaping decision-making and local governance. All of the above activities bring a diverse group of residents into concerted efforts designed to enhance local personal and community well being.

Volunteers interacting together also serve the function of transcending class and racial divides in the search for community well being (Chavez, 2005). Similarly, volunteerism provides a mechanism to cut across gender barriers and more adequately include women, youth, and minorities in local decision-making (Barnes, 2005). Such volunteerism is seen as providing a venue for interaction that builds community, while providing social, emotional, and political support for select groups as well as the wider community. Volunteerism can also be seen as contributing to individual self-efficacy and empowerment, and therefore establishing a basis for wider and long term community contributions by individuals.

Recent data on American volunteering highlights the increasing number of volunteers (65 million in 2005) and the consistent rate at which they volunteer (29% for 2003, 2004, and 2005) (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005). This data also present implications for better merging volunteerism and community development in the future. Included are relatively high levels of volunteer rates among teens (30%) and older

adults (35- to 44-year-olds at a rate of 34% and 45- to 54-year-olds at a rate of 33%) (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005). While teens may be active as a result of school requirements, their high levels also present an opportunity to firmly place them into long-term community development efforts with volunteering adults.

In 2005 the average contribution of volunteer time was 50 hours per year, with the majority of volunteers being associated with religious (35%) or educational/youth service organizations (26%) (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005). Equally important, 13% contributed their time to social or community service. The activities that people took part in represented a variety of services and community building activities, including fundraising for groups (29%), collecting/preparing/distributing food (26%), providing labor or transportation (22%), and tutoring or teaching (21%).

This recent data highlight the continuing impact that local citizens have in their communities. Such volunteerism provides opportunities for increasing awareness of needs and opportunities for contributing to the development of community. Further, by connecting these active citizens and their groups, channels of communication can be established and resources contributing to community maximized. Such connection and interaction between volunteers set the stage for the emergence of community.

Implications for the Profession and Suggestions for Increasing Community Development Through Volunteers

Volunteers acting in support of their community are vital to immediate and long term local social and economic viability. However, the deliberate and focused actions of local residents emerge only when the conditions are right. More specifically, community can exist only as long as people care about each other and the place in which

they live. This care is expressed by coordinated volunteers acting to enhance local well being.

To achieve local well being communities need to create their own solutions to the challenges that face them today. This is particularly true in the context of increasing local responsibility for a variety of services, where a direct need exists for volunteers to effectively plan, manage resources, and come together to meet local needs. Without such capacity, the chances of achieving widespread community well-being are dim. To achieve local volunteer empowerment, training, support, and program development in the following areas are vital:

- *Enhance or increase venues for interaction.* Venues for interaction play an important role in promoting awareness of issues, presenting opportunities for citizens to become involved in community development, and bring together a diverse representation of residents in formal and nonformal settings. Venues for interaction can take many forms such as community festivals, interdenominational religious celebrations, seasonal celebrations, and sport events. All bring together diverse parts of the community that might not otherwise interact. This process sets the stage for more focused and deliberate interaction.
- *Increased community capacity building.* Local capacity building must take place if volunteers are to effectively contribute to the community development process. This coordination, training, and encouragement of volunteers are essential to effective community development. To facilitate empowerment, specialized training in the form of community organizing,

methods for collaborating with other groups, conflict management, strategic planning, and advanced support for nonprofits and grassroots organizations should be encouraged. While many private organizations and consultants can provide these trainings, a variety also exists through local university and Cooperative Extension outreach programs. Such training and management can help ensure that volunteer resources are maximized, and that the volunteer process is beneficial to all involved.

- *Broad-based local representation* inclusive of the diversity in the local population is absolutely essential to the development of community. For any development effort to be effective, local committees and development efforts need to be reflective of the local population. Volunteer groups should be reflective of the age, gender, race, and ethnic makeup of the locality. Without such local representation the potential for select groups to be excluded, ignored, and eliminated from decision-making exists. More importantly, this reflective grouping of volunteers brings together the entirety of local experiences, skills, formal/informal knowledge, networks, and resources. Volunteers that are representative of the population are vital in that they maximize resources/skills for action, help guard against action being dominated by power elites, and ensure that the general needs of all local groups are met. Volunteer administrators would do well to issue formal invitations to participate to local groups which may be underrepresented.
- *Leadership development.* The ability of local volunteers to develop

leadership capacities, assume leadership roles, and manage groups for results is vital to long-term community development efforts. Leadership training through a variety of academic, Extension, government, or private sector sources would help better empower local communities and transform volunteers into proactive leaders.

- *Training for needs assessments and asset based planning.* Volunteers and their groups require the ability to assess general community needs, but even more importantly the training to identify local assets, possibilities, and strengths on which unique locally-based social and economic development can originate. Training programs in community asset mapping and asset based planning would be useful, and can often be provided by university community development specialists, Extension programs, and regional rural development centers.
- *Increased skills based training to better prepare volunteers and their organizations as they attempt to achieve their goals.* Included would be training in the areas of grant writing, managing conflict, negotiation strategies, understanding local decision-making, and mapping power structures. Similarly, training in methods for working with local power structures would also help volunteer groups to position themselves for success. Sources of such trainings would include state development agencies, university outreach programs, and community development institutes.

Conclusions

The discussion and presentation of community presented in this article is not meant to present a romantic or idealized notion of local harmony and solidarity. Our localities are often dominated by self-interest, outside development interests, distrust, conflict, and other negative conditions. This, however, does not mean that the development of community cannot take place. Instead, such conditions speak to the need for focused locally driven volunteer efforts to bridge divides, self-interest, and other obstacles in the search for solutions to common general needs.

Community emerges out of voluntary interaction between diverse social groups, often with clashing or at least distinctly different points of view. This interaction facilitates the coming together of volunteers to assess their common needs, increase awareness of issues facing all residents, and to identify volunteer efforts available to meet general needs.

This article has sought to reclaim the central role that volunteers play in community development. Volunteers are an essential and far too often forgotten element of effective community development. They are the basis on which development is envisioned and implemented. While outside entities may be seen as the basis for development, volunteers are the workhorses and visionaries that facilitate social change. It is, after all, these volunteers that are most aware of local life, culture, resources, and other context that can best be garnered when attempting to improve local well-being.

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