

Volunteerism and Holistic Community Development: The Main Street Paradigm

Bill Woodrum
Associate Director
West Virginia State University Extension
P.O. Box 1000
Room 204, ACEOP Administration Building
Institute, WV, USA 25112-1000
Telephone 304-766-5747
FAX 304-766-4292
E-mail: woodrumw@wvstateu.edu

Abstract

The field of community and economic development in the not-for-profit sector has exploded in the past 40 years. During this time a great deal of emphasis has been given to the end effect these various organizations have had upon our community. From lending programs, to home building and entrepreneurial incubators there is a great depth of knowledge concerning the products that have come from various development efforts. Little attention has been paid during that time, however, to the social capital that builds these organizations and allows them to do their work. Inside of that limited field of study, even less attention has been paid to proper utilization and management of volunteers. This lack of focus on volunteerism's role in community and economic development has limited the efficacy of professionals in the field. A notable exception has been the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street program that preaches, and practices, holistic community development.

Key Words:

volunteers, community development, economic development,
revitalization, organizational development

The Need for a Paradigm Shift

A paradigm shift is needed in the way that the vast majority of professionals in the field of community and economic development regard volunteerism. Kuhn (1996) first proposed the term "paradigm shift" in the scientific community as it related to the evolution of scientific theories. The term has become more loosely defined since then to become more fully indicative of any change of sociological thought inside professional fields (Barker, Anderson, & Chen, 2006).

A shift is currently needed in the field of community and economic development (CED) when it comes to the field's relationship with and utilization of standard volunteerism practices. In 2003, the author presented a volunteerism session to a group of CED professionals for West Virginia University's Community Development Institute-East. These professionals represented various aspects of the CED field from economic development authority directors through various city and county public employees who worked in CED. The

program as delivered was a remedial lesson in attracting, developing, and utilizing highly skilled volunteers in economic development efforts. After the class, several participants responded that they had enjoyed the discussion very much, but that they never utilized volunteers in any of their work. However, when asked if they worked for a board of directors and/or focus groups, each replied affirmatively. Each of the board and focus group members, even those affiliated with the activities because of their employment, were, in actuality, volunteers that needed to be developed. Each participant would expand or contract their service role based on their satisfaction with the position in which they were asked to serve if the program would engage them in such a manner and the field must develop opportunities for participants from the easily identifiable demographics already present in our communities (Safrit, 1998).

Anglin and Herts (2004) suggested that the entire field of community development is in dire need of examination of the social capital that creates the system. They pointed to the movement's origination out of the social and political movements of the 1960s. These organizing efforts were made to pave the way for sweeping change in our communities and promoted the idea that concentrated groups of private citizens could come together to make an organization that would become an intermediary between government and the common citizen. The main problem in that the field, according to the authors, is that because of the dispersed and widely varied models that were used in community development, there was not much study given to what made the system work, or fail, especially in the area of developing social capital.

A Different Economic Development Organization

The leading organization in the promotion of holistic economic development (volunteerism tied to community development) in the country today is Main Street, a program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation since 1980. The Main Street program calls for holistic economic development of a community in the Main Street Four Point Approach to community revitalization (Dane, 2003). Dane posited that one of the problems with traditional community and economic development approaches is that they have focused on one or two areas and haven't taken a full spectrum approach to the issues that affect the district. The problem with this compartmentalization is that many times social issues are so interrelated that addressing only one element does not provide sufficient understanding and cannot solve problems that exist in complex and sometimes contentious environments (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001).

Main Street, however, uses only three of its four points in the Four Point approach in standard community development practices. While the first three points focus on design (the look of the street), economic restructuring (creating a viable business district), and promotion (holding events to get people onto the street) and are not greatly different from efforts that have been replicated in part by many organizations throughout the country to revitalize blighted areas, the fourth point provides a difference. The fourth point is nearly nationally unique among economic development organizations and focuses on social capital and volunteerism. Main Street's holistic approach adds organization as the fourth vital piece of the puzzle. Organization is about building the people who build the group and one of the specific focuses of this area is volunteer development.

In addition, Main Street stresses eight guiding principles that also help to set them apart from economic development organizations and initiatives across the country (Dane, 2003). These principles state that redevelopment must be comprehensive, incremental, built on partnership, asset-based, always of top quality, change-oriented, and implementation (or activity) based. The eighth step, self-help, stresses that the Main Street organization needs to reach out to the local residents, businesses, and property owners. This guiding principle posits that without the volunteerism of local stakeholders, no amount of investment will ever be successful in the long-term.

When taken together, the fourth point (organization) and the eighth principle (self-help) create a unique paradigm for economic development efforts in their grounding in volunteer management. Unlike most models of economic development that rely primarily on paid professional staff to create change for communities, Main Street's philosophy puts the volunteers into action working to solve a community's issues. To assist Main Street organizations in developing both episodic and long-term volunteers to work on revitalization, the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street Center provides many volunteer development resources. These include the typical subject matter-focused books for building facades, business planning, event ideas, etc., but they also have committee manuals that stress mainstream volunteer management strategies. Support material is provided on attracting, selecting, training, utilizing, and evaluating the volunteers that make the Main Street engine work.

This holistic volunteer utilization and development model has made Main Street uniquely successful in its efforts to revitalize formerly vibrant economic corridors in cities across the country. The Main Street effort nationally has generated more than \$31.5

billion in reinvestment in the 180 communities involved since 1980 (Main Street Center, 2007). These efforts have generated nearly 73,000 new businesses, approximately 330,000 new jobs and have also produced the renovation of more than 178,000 buildings. For every one dollar invested in the local Main Street organization, \$28.31 is produced in the local economy.

Selected References

- Anglin R., & Hertz, R. (2004). Limitations to organization and leadership progress in community development: An overview. In R. Anglin (Ed.), *Building the organizations that build communities: strengthening the capacity of faith- and community-based development organization* (pp. 13-26). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.
- Barker, P., Anderson, H., & Chen, X. (2006). *The cognitive structure of scientific revolutions*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Dane, S. (2003). *The Main Street board members handbook (2nd edition)*. Washington, D.C.: National Trust for Historic Preservation.
- Kuhn, T. (1996). *The structure of scientific revolutions (3rd edition)*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Main Street Center. (2007). Economic statistics: The Main Street program's success. Washington, D.C.: National Trust for Historic Preservation. Retrieved February 23, 2007 from <http://www.Mainstreet.org/content.aspx?page=7966§ion=3>

McAdam, D., Tarrow, S., & Tilly, C .
(2001). *Dynamics of contention*.
Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University
Press.

Frequency, potential, and demographics.
The Journal of Extension, 36(1).
Retrieved February 23, 2007 from
<http://www.joe.org/joe/1998february/rb3.html>

Safrit, R. D. (1998). Volunteerism in Ohio
cities and surrounding communities:

About the Author

William J. “Bill” Woodrum is the Associate Director of Extension at West Virginia State University. He holds a Masters Degree in Human and Community Resource Development from The Ohio State University. Bill has more than 14 years of service in field of community development and university extension, most often as a manager of volunteers, with organizations such as 4-H Youth Development, Big Brothers Big Sisters, and Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD). He currently serves as the president of the board of directors for the Charleston (WV) West Side Main Street Project, and is a member of *The IJOVA* Editorial Board.