

Working Solutions

For nonprofit & government members of the Points of Light Foundation

September 2003

Developing Effective Volunteer Based Partnerships with Tough Communities

Adapted by
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POINTS
OF LIGHT
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&
VOLUNTEER CENTER
NATIONAL NETWORK

Welcome to Working Solutions, a bimonthly collection of information and tips on a particular issue, designed to provide Points of Light Foundation nonprofit and government member volunteer managers with practical solutions to everyday challenges.

The September 2003 edition focuses on neighboring and volunteer based partnerships with tough communities as a strategy to strengthen families and transform neighborhoods.

Working Solutions is delivered by e-mail to nonprofit/government members of the Points of Light Foundation. If you require a faxed or hard copy version, please contact us. You can reach us at nonprofit.gov@PointsofLight.org or 202-729-6019.

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Bandana Shrestha is the Director of Model Programs and Partnerships at the Points of Light Foundation. Bandana is responsible for carrying out the strategies for the Foundation's *Family Strengthening and Neighborhood Transformation Initiative* supported by The Annie E. Casey Foundation. The initiative seeks to promote volunteering as one of the best strategies to strengthen families and transform neighborhoods, generate commitment and build capacity of national and local partners to adopt the Foundation's "neighboring" model.

Bandana has also worked as the Manager of Partnership Initiatives for the Foundation's Connect America Program - a national partnership of over 100 diverse national organizations working together to leverage knowledge, resources and volunteers to address serious social problems.

Prior to coming to the Foundation, Bandana worked with US and international nonprofit organizations focused on serving the needs of marginalized and underserved communities. Originally from Nepal, Bandana holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Linfield College and a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Oregon.

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I Introduction

Volunteering is a time honored American tradition. From the earliest days of the nation, volunteering – the simple act of neighbors helping neighbors – has been an integral part of American life. The oft-repeated example given when talking about America’s volunteer history is the proverbial “barn raising” - where members of a community would congregate at a particular neighbor’s homestead to work together to build a barn in a single day ensuring the success of the homestead and the family throughout the year.

The barn raising tradition grew out of tightly knit rural communities where being a neighbor meant lending a hand when needed and in turn being able to count on neighbors to be there to not only raise a barn, but make it through a hard winter or any other times of great need. But how does this concept of volunteering, based on an old model of neighbor helping neighbor in largely rural context, play out in modern day America?

The practice of mainstream volunteering today is very different from the historical legacy of the American “barn raising.” Today volunteering is seen as a largely middle-income phenomenon— something that people who have the luxury of time and resources do for those less fortunate than themselves as an act of charity or goodwill. In addition, the formalization of the sector and the professionalization of volunteer management itself contrast starkly from the past where the exchange between neighbors was reciprocal, organic, and informal.

This paper shares the key learnings on the nature of volunteering in under-resourced communities based on the Points of Light Foundation’s research. The paper explores the role that traditional volunteer agencies play in fostering and supporting volunteer mobilization in “tough” communities and the strategies organizations can take to effectively partner with low-income communities to mobilize volunteers.

What is a “tough” community?

A tough community is a community that has suffered from declining investments, unemployment, weak social institutions, and other challenges such as drugs, violence, segregation, lack of services, and inadequate social and economic infrastructure. A tough community is also a community that has inherent internal assets and strength in the people and families who live there and contend with extraordinary challenges.

II Neighboring – A Concept

Since 1996, the Points of Light Foundation has been exploring volunteering in low-income communities and promote it as an important strategy in strengthening families and transforming neighborhoods. From this work, we have learned that there is a rich and thriving tradition of self-help and civic engagement to be found in America’s “tough” communities.

Views sees low-income communities and their residents only as recipients of volunteer service. Our research shows that not only do members of tough communities provide volunteer services to one another, but this neighbor to neighbor service has and continues to be a source of survival for community residents.

Neighboring - the connections among residents that support positive individual and community behavior based on mutual respect, responsibility and ownership.

Though often not called “volunteering,” the act of neighbors helping neighbors plays a crucial role in family success and transforming distressed communities to places where children and families can thrive.

Occurring through community centers, neighborhood groups, churches, and just through everyday helping out, the service that is found in these tough neighborhoods is very similar in nature to America's volunteer tradition of old. Here "volunteering" is more likely termed "neighboring"—a fundamental exchange between neighbors. This constitutes a pact between members of a community where helping out one neighbor ensures reciprocity and the comfort of knowing that others will be there in your time of need.

III Role of Organizations

Often overlooked by nonprofits, outside organizations and volunteer practitioners, the neighboring that happens in tough communities takes place regularly through an informal process when people help one another and neighbors come together in times of need. Community members reach out to give what help they can in response to circumstances of family, friends, and neighbors. One can witness community residents purchasing food for a neighbor in need; organizing a block for safe streets; and offering neighbors safe places in their own homes when they are in distress.

There are many such examples of residents coming together for the safety and strength of their community. However, there still remains a significant disconnect between the efforts of these citizens and the ability of nonprofits, government agencies, and other traditional volunteer organizations to support and leverage these grassroots efforts. When they are seen merely as recipients of service these communities often becomes victims of imposed programs, hidden agendas, and unrequested services.

There is a critical need for nonprofits, government agencies, and other volunteer organizations to learn how people in tough communities connect, and what services can be rendered to help empower residents to find creative and sustainable solutions to address local needs. The capacity of neighborhoods to problem solve is tremendous when residents are provided the appropriate training and programs develop infrastructure and technical assistance on an ongoing basis for continuous growth and development.

The Research

Supported by The Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Points of Light Foundation has researched the nature and practice of volunteering in tough communities and its role in building strong communities where children and families can prosper. Focused on identifying how volunteering occurs in low-income communities and how outsiders can most effectively engage with the community, the research included dialogue sessions with community-based organizations and grass roots leaders, the identification of best practices and model programs, as well as innovation grants that supported community initiatives in eight diverse communities across the country.

The research helped Points of Light Foundation understand that volunteering happens in communities with few resources and that it looks very different than what occurs in more wealthy communities. By first understanding the most critical components in working with tough communities, outsiders will begin to value the ongoing efforts in the community, realize where they fit in, and then begin to develop the strategies that can be most effective in helping the community.

The three key ideas the research helped identify for working with low-income communities are:

- Helping community members identify and uncover their individual gifts and talents
- Helping residents become empowered to work on community issues and problems
- Recognizing the volunteering that is already occurring in the community and affirming that neighboring should be structured to provide an exchange for tangible rewards

IV A Shift in the Paradigm

According to community organizers the most effective way to “help out” in low-income communities is to shift one’s thinking about volunteering from a model of “charity” to a model of “citizen engagement and empowerment” that involves community residents taking ownership of problems and creating local solutions. This shift in thinking and the new model of working to promote neighboring and engaging of residents in tough communities calls for developing effective partnerships with local communities.

A Partnership to Strengthen Families and Transform Neighborhoods

Expanding its commitment to families in communities where conditions are tough, the Points of Light Foundation, along with other national organizations, is partnering with The Annie E. Casey Foundation in its national campaign to engage organizations to help children and their families do better by providing opportunities and resources that strengthen families and transform communities.

The Point of Light Foundation’s Family Strengthening and Neighborhood Initiative seeks to build connections with national and local organizations to strengthen families in under-resourced communities. By increasing volunteering by, in, and with tough communities and engaging organizations to dedicate financial and human resources, the initiative works to help improve conditions in communities. The major objectives of the initiative are to:

“Children do well when families do well, and families do better when they live in supportive neighborhoods.”
-The Annie E. Casey Foundation

- Create, build-upon and sustain the political and social will across the nation to use volunteering as a key strategy to strengthen families and transform neighborhoods
- Broaden the base of involvement and resources by engaging community leaders, faith-based communities, law enforcement, businesses, local and national health and human service organizations, governments, funders, and the media
- Promote and disseminate volunteering knowledge and recognize “effective practices” that strengthen families and help to transform tough communities

Everyone from national to local nonprofits, government agencies, grassroots community leaders can play an important role in helping to strengthen families and transform neighborhoods into healthy places to live.

To learn more about the initiative and how you can get involved, visit www.PointsofLight.org/organizations/building_connections.cfm or contact Bandanda Shrestha at BShrestha@PointsofLight.org.

V The Rescue: A Modern Day Parable

Though you have not told anyone, it has become known in your community that you are going through some difficult times. Without consultation with you, some well-intentioned people (we will label them ABC) you do not know too well and who have not discussed the issue with you, have decided that they are going to help you. One day they arrive at your door step to administer the “answer” to your “problems.”

Q: What is your most likely reaction?

A: You might feel relief that someone has come to help you out of a crisis and comfort knowing that someone cares about what happens to you.

However, as these well-intentioned people, who have not consulted with you, proceed to implement *their* plan on *your* behalf.

Q: What else might you feel? And how prepared and empowered will you feel to face the next crisis? Will there be another rescue?

A: You might feel insulted that they did not consult with you. Your feelings may seem to take second place to their “charity” project. You may also feel belittled because they always seem to “know better.”

It is apparent that this relationship is fraught with problems from the beginning. The person being helped is not very likely to buy into the project, making things difficult for ABC. They may even become resentful towards ABC making it impossible to create any positive long-term effects.

The situation described in this parable is a familiar exchange between an organization seeking to serve and a tough community. Let’s examine what things could have been done to make this a better situation.

Things to consider:

Was there trust between parties? _____

What could have been done to build trust? _____

Was this person empowered to help be a part of the solution? How could this have been different? _____

Would this person be capable of handling the next crisis if help were not available? _____

Was this person victim to stereotyping by the people at ABC, if so how? _____

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How might this person's confidence level have been affected by being belittled? What could ABC have done differently? _____

Was there a communication problem and what could have been done to fix it? _____

If you were with ABC, what else could you have done to make this more successful for both groups involved? _____



VI Essential Strategies for Effective Partnerships

Partnering with a low income community can be similar to other partnerships. The basic tenets of effective partnerships, such as managing the relationship, managing the work, developing a common understanding, still hold true.

However, partnerships with low-income communities that focus on community mobilization and empowering local people to take ownership of their community issues and to find sustainable solutions, also have some distinct differences from standard partnerships. These partnerships call for strategies that address the particular conditions of the community and needs of the people. Our research has helped identify essential strategies for effective partnerships with tough communities.

Seven Essential Strategies

1. Understand the Language

Learning the language and understanding the nature and history of volunteering in the community is an important aspect of developing a successful partnership with a tough community. Volunteers are abundant in tough neighborhoods and often have a long history of helping, but residents often do not refer to themselves as “volunteers.” Volunteering is not usually recognized or rewarded. Volunteers are more likely to be called *willing workers*, *block captains*, *community workers*, or *leaders*. Terms such as *helping out*, *giving back* or *neighboring* are normally used instead of “volunteering.”

The language and history of volunteering takes on additional significance when considering the increasing diversity in America’s under-resourced neighborhoods. Immigrants bring their own unique traditions of self-help and civic engagement and how these communities understand and characterize the exchange between neighbors is made more complex by the added layer of a second language. In such instances, outside organizations that seek to work in the community have to be intentional about their efforts to bridge the language and culture gaps.

Lastly, in addition to the differences in language and the nature of volunteering in diverse communities, organizations that seek to partner with tough communities also need to be aware of the terms they use to describe the communities in question. Terms such as “distressed” and “blighted,” are commonly used to talk about tough communities, convey a negative perception and can be disempowering to the community. Without getting wrapped up in semantics, using terms like “tough” or “under-resourced” can address this issue of language.

Characteristics of an Effective Partnership

- The community, its leaders and residents are viewed as partners, not as clients
- Clear partnership outcomes and roles are developed jointly with community input
- Existing initiatives and new projects are enhanced through partnerships
- Partnerships have a shared vision and neither the community nor the organizations imposes their views, ideals and expectations on the outcome
- Partnerships understand and respect differing perspectives and diverse voices
- Organizations are flexible and have patience because neighborhood efforts take time
- Organizations extend their resources to help build and enhance the community
- Organizations help neighborhoods see the benefits of connecting with services that exist along the margins of the community, i.e. local services, programs, and providers
- Organizations have a positive relationship with the community and maintain a continued presence

Common Terms Used in Low-Income Communities

The terms listed here were uncovered during research with neighborhoods. Definitions in your community may differ and you may also find other terms being used to refer to volunteers. Take time to fill in the space provided and define them as they would be used in your area.

Community Liaison: Resident representing the community to other neighborhood groups. _____

Neighboring: Building connections among residents that support positive individual and community behavior based on mutual respect, responsibility, and ownership. _____

Social Entrepreneur: One who uses financial profits to strengthen communities by building social capital. _____

Community Building: Developing a community by strengthening its social capital, increasing its financial capital, and building local infrastructure. _____

Community Leader: One who lives and works in their community who is committed to increasing the capacity of residents to accomplish goals and objectives of the neighborhood. _____

Street Walkers: Persons who walk the streets to check on senior citizens. _____

Block Captain: Civic representative for residents as defined by city blocks. _____

Other Terms to Consider

Neighbor: _____

Community Worker: _____

Community Organizer: _____

Social Activist: _____

Resource Person: _____

Residents/Caring Person: _____

Advocate: _____



2. Overcome Barriers

Obstacles that inhibit residents of tough communities from engaging in more formal volunteering include the lack of time, financial resources, child care, transportation, as well as other non-material barriers, such as low self-esteem and confidence. Organizations that seek to partner with and engage residents in community activities also have to contend with negative perceptions of volunteering or of volunteer organizations, as well as cultural and language barriers. By understanding common obstacles and being cognizant of challenges inherent in the nature of partnerships, organizations can adopt simple but effective strategies to ensure successful partnerships and effective citizen mobilization.

For instance, providing volunteer-based child care can enable parents with young children to participate. Similarly, holding meetings in a central location in the neighborhood can address the issue of transportation for those without access to public transit or a personal vehicle. Getting a staff or volunteer who speaks the same language to work with community members who don't speak English will not only address the issue of language and cultural barriers, but exhibit the organization's commitment to understand and work with the community on its own terms.

Common Obstacles

Read the following obstacles and solutions and take time to consider what your own solution might be.

Lack of Trust - Residents distrust the establishment and new people in the community to solve issues for them.

Solution: Build trust. Get to know the leaders and the people in the community. Listen to what they have to say. Carry through with commitments. _____

Stereotypes – Mutual stereotypes and especially outside agencies' negative perceptions about residents based on socioeconomic status are major barriers to effective partnerships.

Solution: Have a discussion with your organization about attitudes towards the people you serve. Consider creating policies that support diverse community stakeholders. Are there community members serving on the board? Recognize outstanding community volunteers and try to dispel myths by building personal relationships. _____

Low Esteem/Confidence - Community members may not believe change is possible. They may not see their skills as valuable.

Solution: Build confidence. Do an asset inventory with the community. Show community members they have assets and skills to share and that a wide variety of skills is needed—everything from cooking to cleaning a yard or comforting a child. Build time for reflection after a volunteer project to consider the relationship between the activity and the overall result within the community. Help show that each skill used to complete the task was needed. _____

Volunteer Based Partnership; with Tough Communities;

Cultural misunderstandings - There are cultural barriers that hinder finding common ground.

Solution: _____

No quick fixes - The pervasiveness of problems in tough communities, such as poverty, drugs and crime often means there are no immediate resolutions.

Solution: _____

Want quick fixes - Organizations and residents are not willing or unable to make long-term commitments. Many look for instant gratification and face the difficulty of sustaining positive change without long-term commitments.

Solution: _____

Lack of education and training - Lack of access to prior training and formal education can be a hurdle and organizations need to identify local leaders and develop competencies and skills in upcoming leaders.

Solution: _____

No community buy-in - There is a lack of ownership of solutions. Lack of people, particularly men, willing to become involved, means it is often difficult to recruit residents as volunteers.

Solution: _____

Lack of resources - Challenges of daily survival and other obstacles, including institutional red tape, funding, and other resources, are real barriers to partnerships and mobilization.

Solution: _____

Transient families – Without access to supportive networks, families often can be unstable and transient in nature.

Solution: _____

Communications – There are different definitions of family, volunteering, neighborhood, and sometimes even a different language altogether that hinder effective communication.

Solution: _____

Lack of Transportation - Not all community members may have reliable transportation to attend meetings and planned projects.

Solution: _____



3. Empower the Communities

For volunteer efforts to be sustained and the program implemented effectively, residents have to own the issues and solutions and must witness the benefit of their involvement in solving their communities' social problems. The traditional model of charitable volunteering with an outsider "parachuting" into a community to rescue the residents can, in the short run, address some immediate problems, but unless residents are empowered, the efforts will be short lived at best and totally unsuccessful otherwise.

Empowering residents means many things from community members defining the problems, setting the priorities, developing the plans, making decisions and implementing the plan. In this model of empowering the local community to help themselves, the organization often becomes a catalyst and a partner, leveraging its monetary, human, and other resources to support community efforts.

4. Cultivate Skills and Talents

Many residents of traditionally underserved and under resourced communities believe they have no talents or skills to bring to the table. Effective partnership with tough communities necessitates that organizations are intentional in helping identify and cultivating the gifts and talents of local residents. Translating these skills and talents into important assets often means showing the connection between a project's success and the residents' contributions.

5. Strengthen Existing Leadership

Cultivating existing leadership is fundamental to working with tough communities. Part of identifying and developing local leadership is recognizing different leadership styles and being cognizant of a community's unique cultural context.

Strengthening the internal capacity of community members to lead and engage in community activities, and fostering and supporting new leadership translates to sustainable community efforts. In addition, local leaders help build community trust and ensure that the local perspectives and experiences are considered and understood by outside organizations that seek to help the community.

6. Acknowledge Volunteering as an Exchange

Residents in tough communities face many challenges that make volunteering difficult. Receiving something tangible in exchange for their time, talents, and efforts they contribute to better their communities, can make volunteering more attractive and feasible for residents. It is important for organizations to understand that it is okay to receive something in exchange for volunteering and that volunteering is really an exchange. In addition, volunteers need to be rewarded for their contributions in ways that make sense to them. In tough communities, an appropriate exchange could include meals, services such as tutoring, child care subsidies, and job opportunities.

Grassroots Leadership

Community leaders play an important role in mobilizing and engaging community members as volunteers. Residents look to such leaders to provide leadership and guidance in solving conflicts between neighbors to interfacing with outsiders. The wealth of experience and knowledge that grassroots leaders have can be further leveraged by facilitating access to training, coaching, mentoring, and other leadership development interventions, as well as by providing opportunities for leaders to have a leadership role in the partnership.

Trainings, such as the Points of Light Foundation's "Leadership Skills for Community Leaders," that build essential competencies such as communication, decision making, community mobilization, visioning, and mentoring, can equip leaders with necessary tools and know-how to lead the community effectively.

The accompanying manual for the training is available at the Volunteer Marketplace Catalog
www.PointsofLight.org/catalog.

7. Ensure Community Readiness

Ensuring community readiness to partner with outside agencies, and engaging community members takes time. From building relationships, developing a common understanding of problems, prioritizing issues, organizing citizens to developing committed and able leadership — community building and resident involvement requires patience and flexibility. In addition, communities sometimes need help resolving conflicts or problems that are preventing residents' involvement.

Beginning with acknowledging the extraordinary challenges faced by the families and residents who live in tough communities and adopting strategies that address these challenges, organizations can begin to develop a partnership based on mutual respect, trust, and understanding.

VII Conclusion

Working together offers all involved a chance to decrease the stereotypes and prejudices that contribute to the isolation and disconnection of low-income communities. As our population continues to diversify, it will be particularly important for nonprofits, government, businesses, and traditional volunteer organizations to build partnerships across neighborhoods, cultures, and economic strata in order to engage and serve members of all communities.

Not only does volunteering enable people to do good and serve their neighbors, but it remains one of the best strategies to build community and link people, especially those in tough communities, to the essential connections they need to do well.

What do Families need?

Families in tough communities need supportive neighborhoods and three essential connections to:

- *Economic opportunities*, such as opportunities to build assets, access affordable housing, job skills, and a chance to make a livable wage
- *Social networks*, such as a network of friends, neighborhood groups, role models, mentors, places of worship, and other positive social reinforcements
- *Services that work*, including education, health care, child welfare, and youth development

The Points of Light Foundation invites you to join other national and local partners and Volunteer Centers who have committed to strengthening families and transforming neighborhoods by affecting long-term positive change in the lives of children and families who live in tough communities.

Join us by adapting the learning of our research presented here to your work with tough communities and celebrate neighboring and other successful strategies that expand the base of support, knowledge, and enthusiasm for strengthening families and neighborhoods.

For more information about the Family Strengthening and Neighborhood Transformation Initiative, contact Bandana Shrestha at BShrestha@PointsofLight.org.

VIII Resources

Points of Light Foundation Resources

- Family Strengthening and Neighborhood Transformation Initiative webpage: www.PointsofLight.org/organizations/building_connections.cfm
- **CommunityINVOLVE** list serve – a moderated listserv geared to the needs of volunteer managers, grassroots leaders and community organizers engaged in community building work that strengthens families and transforms neighborhoods. Members can share *and* learn about effective practices, leadership development, funding and training opportunities, as well as tools and products relevant to community building, volunteer management, and grassroots leadership. To join, e-mail CommunityINVOLVE-subscribe@yahoogroups.com
- 1800 Volunteer Family Cares Link www.familycares.org
- Family Volunteering webpage www.PointsofLight.org/organizations/engage_families.cfm
- *A Matter of Survival: Volunteering in, by, with Low Income Communities**
- *Leadership Skills Manual for Community Leaders: Increasing Leaders' Capacity to Mobilize Volunteers**
- *Essential Strategies for Partnering with Volunteers in Low Income Communities: Building Effective Partnerships*

*by the Points of Light Foundation and supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Available through the Volunteer Marketplace Catalog www.PointsofLight.org/catalog

Other Online Resources

- The Annie E. Casey Foundation's Technical Assistance Resource Center (TARC) www.aecf.org/tarc/
- The Alliance for Children and Families www.alliance1.org
- Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) Campaign <http://eitc.info/>
- National Community Building Network www.ncbn.org/
- National Training and Information Center www.ntic-us.org/
- Neighborhood Funders Group www.nfg.org/

The information shared here has been adapted from research findings that are captured in *A Matter of Survival: Volunteering in, by, with Low Income Communities*.

[NOTES]

