From the Ground Up:

Community's Role in Addressing
Street Level Social Issues

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ABSTRACT

There is no substitute for community in addressing street level social issues. The community can remove the visible problems from a particular street or neighbourhood either by confronting the problems directly or by displacing them through the promotion of legitimate activity. Rather than simply move problems to another neighbourhood, some communities seek to reintegrate those who have been marginalized as prostitutes, drug users, and the homeless. Sometimes it is these labeled people themselves who take the initiative to mitigate the problems. The only long-term solution is the prevention made possible by building strong and inclusive communities.

People will get involved to the extent that the effort is fun, shows results, utilizes the gifts that everyone has to offer, and starts where people are – their network, their passion, their block. Government and other agencies can help to build community capacity by operating in ways that are neighbourhood-focused, strength-based, and community-driven.

1. Introduction

I need to begin with a disclaimer. I'm uncomfortable with the term "street level social issues." When I was invited to write this paper, I have to admit that I didn't even know the meaning of the term. I asked what "street level social issues" refers to and was given examples – drug dealing, prostitution and homelessness.

Yet, these issues certainly aren't confined to the streets. As the initial report in this series explains, street prostitution is just the "tip of the iceberg" (*Hard Times: A Portrait of Street Level Social Problems in Western Canada*); most prostitutes work through escort services, massage parlors or someplace other than the streets. Likewise, large numbers of homeless people are living somewhere other than on the streets – often on the couches of relatives or friends. It is the street level presence of these problems that makes us uncomfortable, but it is important to acknowledge that the issues are much more pervasive and can't be resolved with a singular focus on the streets.

A second concern I have with the concept of "street level social issues" is the implication that these issues are products of the streets. In fact, there would be no drug dealers if there weren't buyers and, without johns, there would be no prostitutes. When buy-busts were conducted on the streets of Seattle's Central Area, whose residents at the time were predominantly African American and low-income, the police department discovered

that most of the buyers were affluent whites from the suburbs. Similarly, when I met with the residents of 118th Avenue in Edmonton, they joked about wanting to bus the prostitutes who were working their street to the suburbs in an effort to reduce the carbon footprint for the typical customer. And, we all bear responsibility for homelessness to the extent that we are not doing more to demand living wage jobs, to fund mental health services, and to site affordable housing. In fact, it could be argued that the causes of homelessness, drug dealing, and prostitution are more tied to the suites than to the streets.

When we associate the streets with nothing but the problems, we tend to look elsewhere for the solutions – largely to government, social service agencies, and other professionals. But, just as the problems aren't confined to the streets, the suites don't have a monopoly on the solutions. Some of the most effective responses to "street level social issues" come from the streets. Unfortunately, the tremendous untapped capacity on the streets is typically buried beneath labels such as "homeless," "prostitute," and "at-risk youth" that identify people as nothing more than a problem.

Nevertheless, I acknowledge that there is evidence of overwhelming social issues on the streets of our cities. Those issues are largely attributable to the breakdown of community in an increasingly stratified society. The drug dealers and the buyers, the prostitutes and the johns, the homeless and those with monstrous and multiple houses are all manifestations of

this phenomenon. The solutions begin with rebuilding inclusive communities and mobilizing their assets for the common good.

2. Community and its Relationship to Neighbourhoods

Neighbourhood and community are words that are often used interchangeably, but they are two different concepts. A neighbourhood is the place with which we identify. Communities are defined by our social relationships. Community is strong to the extent that individuals identify with and support one another and work together for the common good.

A neighbourhood can provide a good context for community. Community requires a *common identity* which a distinct neighbourhood, with its own name, business district, school, and unique characteristics, makes possible. The relatively *small scale* of a neighbourhood in a much larger city is conducive to people getting to know one another. Relationship building is further facilitated by a neighbourhood's *gathering places*, such as schools, parks, coffee shops, pubs, community gardens, farmers markets, trails, and other common areas, where people repeatedly bump into one another. And, neighbourhoods have a variety of *voluntary associations,* both formal and informal, through which residents work together for the common good. All of this builds community.

3. Community Approaches to Addressing Problems on the Street

Communities can exercise tremendous power when their voluntary associations are inclusive, active, and strategic. In community, people have the capacity to care for one another and the environment, to prevent crime, to prepare for and respond to emergencies, and to demand social justice. Strong communities can play a leading role in the mitigation, removal and prevention of problems on the street and in the reintegration of the people involved.

3.1. Removing Social Problems from the Streets

The instinctive reaction of most communities to problems on the street is to wage a campaign to drive them out of their neighbourhood. Such an approach is often criticized as one of NIMBYism or Not in My Back Yard. Critics rightly point to the inherent shortcomings; it does nothing to help the homeless or those caught up in drugs or prostitution and it usually just displaces the problems to another neighbourhood. Even so, it is difficult to argue when residents and small business owners complain that their low-income neighbourhood is bearing the brunt of the problems and that they don't have time to wait for longer term solutions. Typically, they hold the police department or elected officials accountable for removing the problems from their neighbourhood.

■ *When an epidemic of drugs, gangs, and violence threatened her Southeast Seattle neighbourhoods, Kay Godefroy decided that the police department needed the community's help. So, in January of 1988, she established a Southeast Seattle Crime Prevention Council and started staffing a hot line. Nine weeks later, she had a list of 46 crack houses identified by citizens.*

The Crime Council took their list to the Chief of Police and demanded that he focus his resources on shutting down the crack houses. Crime Council leaders announced that they would return regularly for progress reports. Police officials at first resisted the idea of getting out of their cars and working with the community but, when the Crime Council persisted, they reluctantly agreed to pilot a community policing program in Southeast Seattle. For their part, Crime Council members volunteered thousands of hours for neighbourhood cleanups, graffiti paintouts, and the monitoring of crack houses.

The United States Department of Justice conducted an evaluation of the program in 1989 and found that it had resulted in a dramatic drop in burglaries and other crimes. The police department took the credit and expanded community policing to the rest of Seattle. Kay Godefroy expanded her efforts as well. Her Seattle Neighborhood

Group now supports crime prevention councils throughout the city.

Some communities are less patient with the police department. Rather than spend time trying to convince officials to take action, the community has taken the initiative to drive drug dealers from their neighbourhood:

- *In 1989, Seattle's Garfield Community Council responded to a rising tide of crack cocaine dealing and the attendant violence by drawing a line around their entire neighbourhood and declaring it a drug-free zone. They vowed that drugs would not be tolerated in Garfield, and they backed up their words with large Friday night marches through the streets of their neighbourhood. In the course of the marches they would stop to stand in silent vigil in front of the houses where dealers lived. The community's courageous stand had an impact: open drug dealing nearly disappeared. Seattle subsequently established official drug-free zones, doubling the penalty for drug dealing around parks and schools throughout the city (Jim Diers, Neighbor Power: Building Community the Seattle Way, pages 83-85).*

- *In the nearby public housing neighbourhood of Yesler Terrace, residents were fed up with the open drug dealing occurring beneath the street light at the corner of Yesler and Boren. Finally, a group of elders set up a table under the street light one evening and started playing cards. The card dealers effectively reclaimed the corner from the drug dealers.*

- *Recently, in Seattle's South Park neighbourhood, there was a problem with drug dealers and prostitutes doing business in front of the County Line Tavern. The tavern derived its name from its location on a street separating two jurisdictions. When the County sheriff's department arrived to crack down on illegal activity, the violators simply moved to the other side of the street. And, when the City's police department tried to take action, their targets would move back to the County side. The South Park Neighborhood Association finally put an end to this game of cat and mouse by holding more frequent meetings and doing so at the County Line Tavern.*

In their zeal to remove problems from the neighbourhood, communities sometimes cut off their nose to spite their face. Parks are closed or benches are removed so that they can no longer be used for illicit purposes. The problem, of course, is that these amenities are no longer available to law abiding citizens either. How does one build community without parks or benches?

- *The absurdity of closing public spaces in order to keep them safe came to light when an offending bench in downtown Surrey was "imprisoned" by an iron fence that permitted no visitors. A campaign was initiated to free the bench. The Whalley Business Improvement Association staged a trial at their community festival in July of 2007. After hearing arguments from both sides, the jury found in favour of the bench and decided that it should be liberated.*

With neighbourhood business districts as with public spaces, the most appropriate way to ensure safety is to focus not on driving illegal activity out but rather on attracting legitimate activity in. Simply getting rid of the problems won't attract law abiding citizens. They will continue to shop at the mall if all they want is a safe, sterile environment. Customers won't patronize the downtown or neighbourhood business district unless it offers something special – unique shops, fun events, personal service, or the opportunity to bump into neighbours. To the extent that a business district can lure these customers back, illegitimate uses will be displaced.

- *The area beneath the Aurora Bridge in Seattle's Fremont neighbourhood was largely hidden from view. As a result, it was the perfect location for all kinds of illicit activity. Most communities would have responded by erecting a fence or petitioning the city for increased enforcement.*

  Fremont is a neighbourhood of artists, however, and their unorthodox solution was to build a troll. Completed in 1991, the troll is so large that it clutches a real VW as if the troll had grasped it from the top of the bridge. Now, the community celebrates events like Trolloween and Shakespeare on the Troll. Tourists flock to Fremont in droves to see the troll and, when they do, they tend to shop in the local business district. A problem place has become a neighbourhood treasure (Jim Diers, Neighbor Power, pages 69-71).

The Troll under Aurora Bridge in Seattle's Fremont neighbourhood.

Seattle's historic business district of Columbia City had seen better days. It was losing business to big box retail outside of the neighbourhood. As more and more businesses moved out, more and more drug dealers and prostitutes moved in. By 1995, most of the stores were boarded up; there was more business being transacted on the street than in most of the buildings.

The community responded by organizing a town meeting where neighbours were invited to share their ideas for projects that would revitalize Columbia City. Town meeting participants immediately divided into groups to start implementing the projects of most interest to them. One group organized regular cleanups of the business district; another painted a beautiful mural on a graffiti-covered wall; and yet another converted a closed church to become a multi-cultural performing arts center.

Annual town meetings celebrated these accomplishments and resulted in additional projects. Volunteers established a farmers' market in the parking lot of the abandoned supermarket. A vacant store became a cooperative gallery for neighbourhood artists. Another became a nonprofit business where young people were trained to repair used bicycles donated by community members for use by the youth, foster children, and homeless families. Friday night Beatwalks brought people from throughout the city to enjoy music in newly established restaurants.

When these and other actions still failed to revive one block, neighbours painted murals of businesses on the boarded up doors and windows to make it look like the storefronts were open. Soon, real businesses wanted to get in on the action. Today, there are no empty stores in Columbia City, new mixed-use development is being built in order to respond

Murals in Columbia City, Seattle.

to demand, and parking is a bigger issue than crime (Jim
Diers, Neighbor Power, pages 155-160).

▪ *Once a thriving commercial strip, Lake Street in Minneapolis
had fallen on hard times. Between 1970 and 2000, most of
the stores were either boarded up or were home to sex
shops, liquor stores, and taverns. Street crime was bad and
getting worse. In an effort to turn things around, a local
nonprofit community development corporation purchased
and renovated an abandoned building strategically located
at the corner of Lake and Bloomington. They spent a year
unsuccessfully trying to persuade chain stores to move into
the building in this predominantly Latino neighbourhood.*

*Finally, the nonprofit organization learned of an emerging
business cooperative. A Latino church in the neighbourhood
had used a talent inventory to identify parishioners who
had operated businesses in Central America and others
who were eager to create a business utilizing their craft*

or cooking skills. They had organized a cooperative
of those willing to invest $1,000 and enroll in a 16 class
entrepreneurial training program.

In 1999, the cooperative began to operate the building
as a traditional marketplace. The Mercado Central
now has more than 40 incubator businesses including
complementary stores, restaurants and other commercial
services, all geared towards the Latino community. The
large common spaces are used for concerts, dances,
poetry readings, Catholic masses, and cultural events. The
concept has been so successful that the Somali community
established a similar marketplace in a former bakery and
the historic Collins Building now boasts a Global Market. In
addition to these neighborhood markets, Latino immigrants
have newly established over 400 businesses on Lake Street
(Geralyn Sheehan, Building the Mercado Central, Asset-
Based Community Development Institute).

▪ *Alberta Avenue is one of Edmonton's most historic
neighbourhoods, but it had also become one of the most
blighted. In 2004, the City Council supported a community-
driven planning process that recommended building on
local assets to revitalize the business district. Activists
mobilized the neighbourhood's many artists to stage a
highly successful Arts Alive Festival in December of 2005
and a second one in 2007. Meanwhile, they founded
Carrot, a volunteer-run coffee house featuring live family
entertainment on weekend nights and an arts market
every Saturday. A new snowboard shop helped sponsor
the Deep Freeze Winter Festival in 2008, complete with a
sledding hill, ice sculpting, and snow shoeing. Some of the
neighbourhood's many immigrants are establishing ethnic
restaurants. Local writers contribute to Rat Creek Press, a
free community newspaper. Today, the street level social
activity on 118th Avenue is largely positive and attracts
residents from all over Edmonton.*

3.2. Integrating Labeled People into the Community

As activists work to improve their neighbourhoods, growing
numbers of them are learning that drug dealers, prostitutes, the
homeless and other labeled people aren't problems that need

Mercado Central in Lake Street, Minneapolis.

to be removed but rather people who need to be integrated into the community. They understand that all of us, including the author and the reader of this paper, are part of the social problem and that each of us, including labeled people, have something to contribute to the solution. These activists also realize that their efforts to improve the neighbourhood may be exacerbating the problem of homelessness by contributing to gentrification. Moreover, they have seen the futility of simply moving some of society's most vulnerable members to prison and other institutions or from one neighbourhood to another. Following are some of the ways in which neighbourhood activists are seeking to align themselves with people whom others have labeled as problems.

■ *In Cincinnati, members of New Prospect Baptist Church have been serving homeless men through a soup kitchen in the church basement. Instead of just feeding these clients, the members decided to eat with them and to get acquainted. The congregants soon learned that most of the homeless men liked to cook, and the men were pleased to be invited to do so. Not only did the meals improve, but it became*

increasingly difficult to distinguish the providers from the clients. It wasn't about serving labeled people any longer. The goal was to utilize everyone's gifts in rebuilding a sense of community (Susan Rans and Hilary Altman, Asset-Based Strategies for Faith Communities, Asset Based Community Development Institute, pages 18-21).

■ *Mike Peringer works in Seattle's industrial neighbourhood of SODO. He was embarrassed by the appearance of 5th Avenue South, a major busway into Seattle that was flanked on both sides by the graffiti-covered backs of warehouses. Peringer wanted to create a more inviting gateway to Seattle for the 16,000 commuters and tourists who rode through each day. His idea was to paint murals the length of the two-mile long corridor.*

But, Peringer had an even better idea. Why not involve young people who had been arrested for graffiti in painting the murals? He worked with King County Court judges who agreed to offer his ArtWorks program as an alternative sentence. As they painted, the young people would be

taught work and life skills by community mentors. The summer mural project proved successful; none of the participants reoffended. ArtWorks grew to become a year-round program creating hundreds of murals for construction sites throughout the city in addition to the 40 murals that now constitute the Urban Art Corridor. Close to five thousand young people have benefited from the program over its first ten years (Mike Peringer, Good Kids: The Story of ArtWorks).

- *Restorative justice programs operate in many cities. This is an approach that actively involves all who are impacted by crime – victims, offenders and the community – in the justice process. The goal is not to punish the offender but rather to promote accountability and to repair the harm caused by crime. This is the basis for reintegrating both the victims and the offender into community life.*

- *In the early 1990s, Edmonton community league representatives took the lead in advocating a new approach to prostitution. They formed a coalition that successfully lobbied the police to focus enforcement on the johns, sponsored a court house rally to demand higher fines for convictions, and organized a "johns GO HOME" walk. Today, the Prostitution Awareness and Acton Foundation of Edmonton offers prostitutes the support they need to free themselves from sexual exploitation.*

- *Upon leaving prison, a disproportionate number of sex offenders moved to Georgetown, a small Seattle neighbourhood that was both affordable and isolated. Neighbours were fearful and angry when two dozen ex-offenders were allowed to live in a local apartment building, but some of them realized that everyone would be better off if they got to know one another. Naming themselves the Georgetown Guardians, they arranged for training by the Department of Corrections. Then, they met with the ex-offenders in weekly sessions to get better acquainted, to monitor their progress in living independently and responsibly, and to offer support. They also welcomed these new neighbours to join in community activities. Ex-offenders became some of the strongest advocates*

for public safety, and problems with drug dealing and prostitution were abated.

- *West Garfield Park is one of Chicago's toughest neighbourhoods. Bethel New Life, the local community development corporation, led a Take Back the Streets Campaign in which residents organized street fairs and basketball tournaments, sold snow cones and hot dogs, and held prayer vigils on targeted street corners in order to compete for turf with the drug dealers. Simultaneously, they offered the dealers alternative jobs and training programs. Bethel New Life fills 500 full-time positions a year in addition to providing more than 1,000 affordable housing units, a holistic health center, a performing arts center, and much more.*

- *Having grown up in Seattle's Rainier Valley and now working as a truancy officer in a local high school, Gabriel Ladd has seen too many acquaintances killed through gang violence. So, this year he persuaded six of his friends, including two former members of the Crips gang, to join him in recruiting young African American men for Youth 180, named for the goal of helping gang involved youth to make a 180-degree turn in their lives. The recruits and their mentors meet together to discuss the challenges they face and to develop plans for leading successful lives; they participate in community service projects; and they reach out to other streetwise youth, encouraging them to join. "We're not waiting for some outside people, some police forces, to come in and solve our problem," says Ladd. "The only way to solve our problems is from the inside out" (Seattle Post-Intelligencer, July 25, 2008).*

3.3. Mitigating Problems on the Streets

Sometimes, as illustrated by the preceding case of Youth 180, a labeled community can't wait for the larger community to take action, so it must take the initiative itself. These self-help efforts are frequently focused on reducing harm to themselves, but they often mitigate problems for the neighbourhood as well.

■ *In an effort to highlight the growing problem of homelessness in Portland and respond to the desperate need for shelter, eight homeless activists squatted on city property just before Christmas in 2000. After a series of confrontations with the police, they eventually signed a lease to use a portion of a city composting site on the north edge of Portland for the creation of Dignity Village. Dignity Village now includes 53 dwelling units ranging from makeshift tents to straw bale houses. It also has kitchen and toilet facilities, gardens, and a computer center.*

Dignity Village is self-governed and managed. Residents elect a 13 member council and attend monthly meetings. They must perform 10 hours of work for the community each week and they hold one another accountable for a code of conduct. In return, they get a place to live as well as assistance in connecting with employment training, permanent housing, and other steps towards self-sufficiency.

■ *Responding to an epidemic of HIV and Hepatitis C in the Downtown Eastside, 2,000 drug users and former users are now members of the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users. The members elect a board of their peers to govern the organization and work together to implement the following objectives: "aiding users in the creation of and participation in the communities in which they live; planning actions to stop overdose deaths and the spread of health risks; and advocating for humane, sensitive and inclusive policies and treatment options for active drug users." Now ten years old, VANDU is a model that challenges traditional provider/client relationships and demonstrates the value of community-driven solutions (Jennifer Mallinen, "Case Study of VANDU," UW School of Social Work, 2007).*

Both of these cases illustrate the incredible untapped resources that exist in all communities, including those that have been labeled as nothing but a problem. Indeed, it's clear that no one could have been more effective than the communities of drug users and homeless people were in reducing harm to their neighbourhoods and to themselves.

3.4. Preventing Street Level Social Issues

While removing visible street level social issues might be the most expedient strategy for a neighbourhood, and while mitigation and reintegration are preferable to removal for those most directly associated with the problems, the only long-term solution to street level social issues is prevention. The challenge is to go beyond revitalizing the physical neighbourhood to rebuilding the social community and to do so not only in "problem" neighbourhoods but everywhere. After all, the problems and solutions are not confined to specific populations on specific streets in specific neighborhoods; they are societal in scope.

Research shows that weak communities (i.e., those with little social capital) face an increased risk of crime and social disorder and that crime and social disorder, in turn, further weaken communities (Robert J. Sampson, "What Community Supplies," *Urban Problems and Community Development,* edited by Ronald F. Ferguson and William T. Dickens, Brookings Institution, 1999). In order to prevent this downward spiral, the first order of business for citizens must be to build a strong sense of community in which neighbours know one another, support one another, and work together for their common good. A great place to start is at the block level.

Most cities have developed some kind of program for helping citizens organize their blocks in order to prevent crime. Typically, however, these block or neighbourhood watch groups mobilize when it is too late – after experiencing a crime wave. Participants are taught how to make their homes safe by installing security systems and watching out the window for strangers. Because the block groups are staffed by the police department and focused on public safety, they tend to be largely inactive between episodes of crime.

In fact, the safest blocks are those where the residents focus not on crime prevention but on community building. Rather than seeking security behind closed doors, the key to safety is to open doors to community life. There is so much that neighbours can do at the block level to meet one another's individual and collective needs:

■ *In the Clinton neighbourhood of Garland, Texas, neighbours work together on weekends to renovate their houses. Collectively, the neighbours have all the necessary skills – a carpenter, plumber, electrician, concrete finisher, stone mason, etc. Elderly or disabled neighbours who aren't able to help with construction contribute in other ways such as preparing lunches for the work parties.*

■ *In Savannah, the city's Grants for Blocks Program provides up to $500 for projects initiated by neighbours (Henry Moore, Leading By Stepping Back, Asset-Based Community Development Institute).*

■ *In Airdrie, Alberta, the city furnishes free block party kits in order to encourage neighbours to use their street as a place to get better acquainted by sharing food, games, music and other fun activities.*

■ *Neighbours throughout the United States celebrate National Night Out Against Crime with block parties on the first Tuesday of August. In Seattle, more than 1,000 blocks participate.*

■ *In Redmond, Washington, the city produced short videos on policy issues as a basis for discussion at the block level and grassroots input to elected officials.*

Block groups can do so much more. Neighbours can support latchkey children and housebound elders. They can plant street trees, create a pocket park or community garden, pick up litter, and paint out graffiti. Tools and goods can be jointly purchased or shared. Neighbours can develop a plan for disaster response. They can educate one another about everything from recycling guidelines to the city's permit process. The possibilities are endless once neighbours begin to think of their block group as a vehicle for more than traditional crime prevention. Depending on how the neighbours decide to connect, young people could feel more supported and "broken windows" could be fixed. No matter what the goals, however, increased interaction should make for a safer block. When citizens throughout the neighbourhood become similarly organized, they will literally have building blocks for a strong and safe community.

■ *In Lawrence, Massachusetts, the local community development corporation trains facilitators for NeighborCircles, a program through which 8 to 10 families meet 3 times over the course of a month for dinner in a neighbour's house. They get to know one another and discuss whether there are issues or activities that they would like to cooperate on. If so, they continue to get together on a regular basis. In this way, Lawrence CommunityWorks has built a membership of nearly 4,000 residents. The organization has developed affordable rental and home ownership opportunities; created parks, playgrounds, and community gardens; provides economic development training; and supports Movement City, a program that involves 200 young people every week in exploring their potential through design, technology, and the performing arts.*

■ *Every Block a Village has been recruiting and training Citizen Leaders in Chicago's Austin neighbourhood since 1995. Today, more than 100 blocks are actively involved in the network. Neighbours share their skills and knowledge in person, and via the internet, with an emphasis on supporting local youth. Citizen Leaders from each block meet together monthly to tackle economic, social and health issues confronting the neighbourhood as a whole.*

Although block groups can be incredibly powerful, we need to guard against insular communities as our society becomes increasingly stratified. Robert Putnam contrasts bonding social capital (homogeneous relationships) with bridging social capital (heterogeneous relationships) and argues that both can have value but that the latter "generates broader identities and reciprocity" (Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone,* page 23). Because street level social issues involve all strata of society, bridging social capital is especially important to prevention. The following are some examples of efforts to create and maintain inclusive communities:

■ *Lois Smidt, a former welfare recipient in Ames, Iowa, recognized that everyone has poverty in their lives. For some, poverty is a lack of money. For others, it's a lack of meaning or relationships. Smidt built an organization, Beyond Welfare, whose members come from very different circumstances but who share the common goal of ending*

poverty in all of its forms. Members support one another with their individual needs and work together to advocate for social justice (Mike Green, When People Care Enough to Act, pages 44-53).

- *The Delridge neighbourhoods of Seattle are very diverse, both economically and ethnically. When the citizens came together to develop a neighbourhood plan, their goal was to improve livability while maintaining diversity and affordability, a difficult task in a market economy. Through their community development corporation, they created some tremendous neighbourhood amenities; importantly, low-income housing was built into every one of them – above both a new library and a new food bank and even nestled in a woods preserved by the community. And, when the CDC converted the first floor of an historic, closed school building to serve as an arts center where community members can celebrate and share their diverse cultures, the upstairs classrooms were renovated to provide affordable live-work units for low-income artists.*

In addition to being inclusive and mutually supportive, one other key role that communities can play in preventing street level social issues is to demand social justice. Street level social issues will continue as long as there are people who do not have access to a good education, living wage jobs, affordable housing, and comprehensive health care. History shows that these inequities will not be addressed unless the community insists on it. When the President of the United States can find hundreds of billions of dollars to fight a war but can't find sufficient resources to prevent veterans from becoming homeless, organized communities need to speak out. Likewise, Alberta's communities should demand that their government use more of its oil revenues to prevent the street level social issues created by the boom.

4. Stimulating Broad and Inclusive Community Engagement

Building strong communities is not easy. In *Bowling Alone,* Robert Putnam documents the decline of community life in North America. He blames poverty, suburbanization, television, and time pressure including a growing percentage of women

in the labour force. Others have added crime and increased professionalization and specialization to the list of culprits. Even so, my 32-year background in community building has taught me some simple rules of engagement that still hold true today.

4.1. Have Fun!

Of all the forces that are eroding community, Putnam claims that television is the greatest threat. That may be true, but if television is our main competition and we're losing, we're doing something terribly wrong. It shouldn't be difficult to make community more compelling than television.

Cesar Cala, a community activist in the Philippines and now in Calgary, told me, "The problem is those GD activists." "GD activists?" I inquired. "Yes," he said, "the grim and determined."

We all know those sour activists who act like civic engagement is their cross to bear. They love to complain. Who would want to get involved with them?

The key is to make community life fun again. As my friend Jeff Bercuwitz says, "Why have a meeting when you can have a party?" Here are some examples of groups that build community by having fun:

- *In addition to creating the troll, Seattle's Fremont neighbourhood imported a giant statue of Lenin after the collapse of the Soviet Union and erected it in their town square; sometimes the statue is dressed as John Lennon with a guitar and shades. When the neighbours were upset with their elected officials, they simply erected a rocket and announced that it was aimed at city hall; they declared themselves the Independent Republic of Fremont and started issuing their own postage stamps. Each spring, the whole community works together to create elaborate costumes and clever floats for their Summer Solstice Parade which is led by dozens of naked bicyclists; the parade has been so popular that Fremont's artists have been invited to Taiwan for the past 10 years to help them stage their own fully clothed but equally fanciful parades.*

■ *When a resident of Elgin, Illinois retrieved a gigantic, blue wooden tulip from the dump, he planted it in his front yard and invited the neighbours to come over for a Blue Tulip Party on Friday night. The curious neighbours showed up and had a wonderful time getting to know one another over a delicious barbequed dinner. The event was so successful that another neighbour took the blue tulip, planted it in front of their house, and hosted a party the next Friday. The blue tulip continues to circle around the city of Elgin and connects neighbours in a way that is both fun and effective.*

■ *The Dickens community of Vancouver knows how to combine business with pleasure. They have drastically reduced street crime by taking pleasant walks around their neighbourhood as the Dickens Street Patrol. More recently, they started a jogging group with the slogan "Run like the Dickens." They sponsor a multi-cultural festival and music in the park. Their Guerilla Gardening teams have created community gardens and landscaped other formerly neglected public spaces. Where do they come up with such fun ideas? They hold their meetings in the Dickens Room of the local pub.*

■ *Concerned that cars had more space than the community did in San Francisco, a local organization hung a PARKing sign encouraging people to feed the meter on a street parking space. Then, they unrolled sod on top of the asphalt, installed a park bench and a potted tree, and proceeded to have a picnic in the street. Now, PARKing Day is an annual event when gray streets give way to green parks all over the city.*

4.2. Start Where People Are

Saul Alinsky, who is often described as the father of modern community organizing, complained that too many activists start with the world as they would like it to be rather than the world as it is. If you want to get people engaged, he advised, you need to start where they are. This is true on several levels.

First, the closer the action is to where people live, the more likely they are to get engaged. While there will undoubtedly be a larger turnout for a citywide meeting, there will never be a higher percentage of participation than if the meeting is held at the block level. A more localized meeting makes transportation and child care much easier. It also gives people a greater sense that their participation is important. After all, if they don't attend, who will? And, if they aren't present, they might be in trouble with their neighbours.

Second, if you want to get people involved, you need to be cognizant of their language and culture. This seems obvious in working with immigrants, but even when communicating with people who speak the same language as you, it is important to use words that are familiar to them. Too often, we use jargon or acronyms that comprise a sort of secret code known only by members of a particular profession or by hard core activists. Not only do we fail to communicate, but those whom we are trying to reach come to believe that they lack the expertise required for participation.

Third, in trying to recruit people, it is important to start with the networks to which they already belong. Too often, we think that people aren't organized simply because they don't belong to our organization. In fact, just about everyone belongs to at least one network, either formal or informal. They likely don't have time to join yet another group. Besides, they have developed relationships within their existing network that make them comfortable.

It is especially difficult to recruit people whose age, income, ethnicity or other characteristics set them apart from the existing members of your organization. If you want to create a multi-cultural community effort, it generally works best to identify and build alliances with the key networks involving people who are underrepresented in your membership. These local networks could be centered on neighbourhood, nationality, faith, education, business, recreation, environment, history, art, crime prevention, service, a hobby, or something else. There are literally dozens of networks in every neighbourhood. When these networks are aligned, the community can exercise tremendous power.

Fourth, we need to focus on people's passions. Too often, we try to convince people to care about our cause- what we are passionate about or what we are paid to promote. And, when

people don't join us, we call them apathetic. In fact, no one is apathetic. Everyone care deeply about something. People will get involved to the extent that we can tap into their passion. The key is to start, not with an answer or with a program, but with a question: "What is your dream or what keeps you up at night?"

Finally, in order to start where people are, you need to know their call. I learned this lesson from John McKnight, Director of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute. McKnight taught me that different kinds of people respond to different kinds of calls, just like ducks. Too often, though, we only use the loon call and wonder why only the loons turn out.

Typically, the meeting (not the mating) call is the one that we use. For most people, this is the worst possible call. They're afraid to come to the first meeting because they know they will be on the sign-in sheet and be sentenced to meetings for the remainder of their life. Those who have come to meetings usually see few if any results. And, many people are shy. They may attend meetings because it is the only option they are given, but they don't feel like they are making a contribution.

In fact, everyone will get involved if they hear their call. Most people respond to the social call of community meals, parties and festivals. Shy people may respond to the volunteer call as a tutor or mentor. And, everyone seems to love the project call. With projects, unlike with meetings, people make a short-term commitment and they see results. There's a role for everyone – young people, elders, people with disabilities, architects, artists, construction workers, etc. The more varied the calls they utilize, the more broad-based and inclusive the organization will be.

4.3. Strive for Results

While it is important to start where the people are, it is crucial not to leave them there. This is especially true of people who have felt powerless and are getting involved for the first time. They need to see results if they are going to stay involved. So, you probably don't want to start by working on world peace or global warming. Alinsky talked about the importance of focusing on issues that are immediate, concrete and realizable. Once people have a sense that they can make a difference, they will be more ready to tackle the larger issues.

4.4. Utilize People's Strengths

Activists tend to focus on the problems in their community. As a result, they look outside the community for the solutions and overlook the abundant assets that exist in every neighbourhood and in every individual. Everyone has gifts of the head (knowledge), heart (passion), and hands (skills). Identifying ways in which people can contribute those gifts to the community is a wonderful way to get them engaged. Again, this is especially true for labeled people such as prostitutes, drug users, at-risk youth, immigrants, and homeless and disabled individuals.

4.5. Celebrate Success and Recognize Caring Neighbours

Getting results is important, but much of the potential value is lost if you fail to celebrate your success and thank those who made it possible. Neighbours need to know that people like themselves were responsible. The sharing of such stories inspires people about what is possible when they work together and build on their assets. Public recognition also motivates those being recognized to do more.

■ *In 1994, the Seattle Times ran a story about neighbours feuding over a fence and encouraged its readers to contribute stories for a new feature entitled "Neighbors from Hell." This incensed Judith Wood, a neighbourhood activist, who wrote a letter to the mayor describing the many ways in which neighbours enriched her life. She urged the mayor to proclaim the Saturday before Valentine's Day as Neighbor Appreciation Day.*

The citizens of Seattle have been celebrating every year. A student art contest results in a greeting card that people use to thank their neighbours. Neighbourhood associations throughout the city sponsor events to recognize and promote caring neighbours. And, the Seattle Times has been much more diligent in featuring stories about good neighbours. (Jim Diers, Neighbor Power)

5. Moving Towards Effective Partnerships

Before describing how government can best support community initiatives, it is helpful to examine the differences between community associations (e.g., neighbourhood associations, mutual assistance associations, many churches, etc.) and agencies (e.g., nonprofit organizations, business, government, etc.). Community associations have an open membership and operate democratically. They have little or no staff or budget. Agencies, on the other hand, are top-down and rely more on staff and budgets than on volunteers.

Another key difference is that associations mobilize citizens around their assets while agencies focus on providing services to meet customer needs. Agency services can play an important role in addressing street level social issues. Agencies can also be a valuable partner in supporting community initiatives but, to do so, they have to fundamentally change their orientation towards the community – from customer to citizen, from needs to assets, and from serving to empowering. Before they can empower the community, agencies must first cease the harm that they inflict on community and begin removing their own obstacles to effective partnerships.

5.1. Do No Harm

Ironically, in their sincere effort to help the community, government and non-profit organizations often do it a disservice. They impose their own agenda which distracts the community from its priorities. They waste the community's time with studies, planning, and other processes that bring no benefits to the people involved.

Most egregiously, agencies tend to violate the Iron Rule of community organizing: "Never do for people what they can do for themselves." Agency leaders often speak for the community. They provide services that were formerly the community's responsibility. They foster dependence by funding community leaders.

I'm not necessarily arguing for fewer or smaller agencies. There clearly are needs in communities that are best served by agencies. And, most agencies don't have enough resources as

it is to adequately address those needs. Agencies should focus on what they are uniquely capable of and allow communities to do what they do best.

5.2. Remove Obstacles

It is extremely difficult for the community to partner with agencies as they are currently constituted, because agencies aren't accessible. Government offices are typically located far from where people live and open during the same hours when most people work. Specialized language and bureaucratic procedures make it challenging for people to participate. Community volunteers can't possibly be involved in the totality of their neighbourhood, because every aspect of the neighbourhood (e.g., public safety, parks and recreation, human services, public health, housing, economic development, transportation, arts and culture, etc.) is associated with a different agency, each with its own staff, meetings, plans and programs.

Government tends to be both too centralized and too segmented to relate to communities. Top-down decision-making doesn't accommodate the community's voice and cookie cutter programs and regulations don't respect unique neighbourhood design or community culture. Professional experts often discount the wisdom of communities, and they work in silos that make it difficult for them to share the community's more holistic perspective.

5.3. Build Capacity

When agencies start to make room for community and to remove obstacles to partnership, the next step is to assist community in rebuilding its capacity. Agencies must be careful to do so in ways that empower the community and don't lead to further dependence. Appropriate capacity-building roles for agencies include leadership development, assistance with outreach and networking, and programs such as those described below that encourage the community to identify and utilize its own assets.

6. Hallmarks of Effective Government-Community Partnerships

There are three hallmarks of effective government-community partnerships. When they are in place, they allow government to do what my former colleague, Henry Moore, described as "leading by stepping back."

6.1. Neighbourhood/Community Focused

Effective partnerships are locally based rather then centralized. They are focused on whole neighbourhoods or communities rather than on separate functions. Consequently, the community can easily participate and the resulting actions are both integrated and culturally appropriate. The following are some tools that have been used to help government move in this direction:

■ *Seattle and many other cities have established little city halls in neighbourhood business districts, shopping centers, libraries or other decentralized locations. Not only do these facilities enable citizens to access a wide range of city information and services in one convenient location, but the coordinator for each little city hall also serves as an overt double agent, helping both government and the community to accomplish their goals by working together (Jim Diers, Neighbor Power, Chapter 3).*

■ *Many cities have established interdepartmental teams with a neighbourhood focus. The City of Toronto, for example, has organized 13 Neighbourhood Action Teams "to support integrated City service planning and delivery from a neighbourhood perspective." These teams include City representatives from Community Housing, Children's Services, Culture, Facilities and Real Estate, Economic Development, Parks Forestry & Recreation, Property Standards, Shelter Support and Housing, Social Development, Social Services, Police Services, Public Health, Public Library, and the Toronto School Board. External stakeholder participation is as varied as East Scarborough Boys and Girls Club, Native Child and Family*

Services, Seneca College, Toronto Catholic School District Board, and West Hill Social Services.

6.2. Asset-Based

Effective partnerships begin by focusing on a neighbourhood/ community's strengths rather than its needs. These underutilized resources include the gifts of every individual, voluntary associations, and the local physical and natural environment, economy, and history and culture.

■ *In 1989, Seattle developed the Neighborhood Matching Fund as a powerful incentive for communities to mobilize their assets. The City provides cash for community-initiated projects when matched by an equal community contribution of cash, volunteer labor, and/or donated goods and services. Over the past 20 years, the City's $50 million investment has leveraged $70 million worth of community resources, more than 4000 projects have been completed, and tens of thousands of citizens have worked together to make these projects possible. The program has since been replicated by cities throughout the world including Victoria, Vancouver, Calgary, and Edmonton (Jim Diers, Neighbor Power, Chapter 4).*

■ *Involving All Neighbors is a Seattle Department of Neighborhoods program that involves persons with development disabilities in community life by focusing on their gifts and connecting them to existing community initiatives (Jim Diers, Neighbor Power, Chapter 2).*

The asset-based approach also recognizes that local agencies have underutilized resources that could support community priorities. For example, schools facilities could be open after hours for community use. University faculty and students could learn while engaged in community projects. A hospital could purchase its supplies from small businesses in the neighbourhood. A corporation could train and employ people whose labels make it difficult for them to find work.

6.3. Community-Driven

Finally, and most importantly, effective partnerships should be led by those who will live with the outcomes – the community. It is not enough to decentralize services or to mobilize underutilized assets. The community must have a voice in deciding how those resources can best be used.

■ *In the late 1990s, Seattle gave communities the power to create their own neighbourhood plans. The community could define the scope of work and use city funds to hire a planner who was accountable to them. In return, the city insisted that all stakeholders be involved in the effort, that outreach be targeted at labeled groups, and that the entire community be given the opportunity to vote on the final plan. The 38 neighbourhood planning efforts involved 30,000 people and resulted in over 5,000 recommendations. Broad-based community ownership of the plans meant that the city was held accountable for implementation. Equally important, the community took responsibility for those recommendations that it could best implement (Jim Diers, Neighbor Power, Chapter 6).*

■ *Other cities give communities a strong voice in developing the government's budget. In St. Paul, neighbourhood representatives draft the city's capital budget. The city budget of Puerto Allegro, Brazil is based on widespread neighbourhood-level discussions.*

Of course, the community's voice must be broad-based. Too often, self-appointed leaders, whose mouths are bigger than their constituencies, claim to speak for the community. Government has a role in insisting that the associations with which it partners be democratic and inclusive. Government should also provide associations with the training, technical assistance, and other support they need in order to adequately represent the community.

7. Conclusion

In summarizing the community's role in addressing street level social issues, I can't improve on the words of Waterloo, Ontario's Regional Police Services and their Community Safety and Crime Prevention Council: "By far the largest number of activities that maintain or restore neighbourhood vitality are led by neighbourhood residents. Citizens' efforts create strong and sustainable neighbourhoods while service efforts tend to be short lived and problem focused...Crime is a complex social issue with roots in economic, social, cultural, family and individual conditions that can be known and are open to change. There is greater success when partnerships are present and citizens become engaged with creating solutions for their neighbourhood. Committing ourselves to a holistic approach, progressively moving from community-based toward community-driven action, will increase the commitment of community residents and grassroots organizations" ("Working Together to Prevent Crime: The Integrated Model from Crime Prevention," August, 2005).

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Our Vision
A dynamic and prosperous West in a strong Canada.

Our Mission
A leading source of strategic insight, conducting and communicating non-partisan economic and public policy research of importance to the four western provinces and all Canadians.

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In 1970, the One Prairie Province Conference was held in Lethbridge, Alberta. Sponsored by the University of Lethbridge and the Lethbridge Herald, the conference received considerable attention from concerned citizens and community leaders. The consensus at the time was that research on the West (including BC and the Canadian North) should be expanded by a new organization. To fill this need, the Canada West Foundation was created under letters patent on December 31, 1970. Since that time, the Canada West Foundation has established itself as one of Canada's premier research institutes. Non-partisan, accessible research and active citizen engagement are hallmarks of the Foundation's past, present and future endeavours. These efforts are rooted in the belief that a strong West makes for a strong Canada.

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