LOCAL GOVERNMENT PERSPECTIVE--BUILDING CAPACITY IN MARION COUNTY: MOBILIZING COMMUNITIES FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

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Introduction

Most would agree that welfare reform in Oregon has been a success. Caseloads have dropped considerably as welfare clients have entered the workforce, but the emphasis in Oregon has been on support for families, including child care subsidies and assistance for teen parents who are enrolled in an educational program. Questions remain, however, about how Oregon will continue to sustain families who are no longer on welfare—should the economy decline—and whether caseloads will continue to drop as significantly in the future as the state moves towards working with a population that is more difficult to employ (health and mental health issues).

From a county perspective, concerns move beyond the balance sheet of state welfare caseloads. It is believed that "welfare reform" will occur only by truly devolving authority to communities so that the system of support fits each community's unique circumstances. Oregon views devolution as an opportunity to build sustainable communities. It recognizes communities as the context for family life: healthy communities are needed to support healthy families. Oregon also recognizes that state and county social services are, by themselves, insufficient to achieve the outcomes that Marion County has identified. The Center for the Study of Social Policy expressed this approach in the following statement:

"Central to their efforts to improve outcomes for children and families, many states are shifting the traditional role of state government from one of delivering services to one of setting policy direction and catalyzing and facilitating change to better meet the needs of communities .... As communities take on more responsibility for improving outcomes for children and families, they realize the need to build their own capacities to develop, analyze, finance, implement, oversee, and monitor a strategic plan that leads to better results for children." (Franke 1996)

Throughout Oregon, in each of its 36 counties, local commissions on children and families have been appointed to advise county commissioners on policy. Their role is to develop a comprehensive plan which creates a "web of supports" for all children and families. Through this local process, representatives are brought together from social services, schools, law enforcement, businesses, the faith community and so on.

In developing a comprehensive plan for Marion County, the necessity of engaging communities was recognized. Under county leadership, there is now a community progress team representing each high school catchment area—local governance organizations which involve community members in designing the policies and assigning the resources which will support children and families.

Through its community investment initiative, Marion County has mapped the service delivery system and has collected data community by community. Marion County is now in the process of disseminating the information to benefit community decisions. Each community progress team has also been provided flexible funds to apply towards community programs which support children and families.

Community Governance

The Center for the Study of Social Policy described community governance as 'the decision making process by which a community improves its operations of... programs in order to advance broadly supported strategies to achieve desired results ...' This definition encompasses several premises:

- Children and families live in communities.

- Strategies to ensure healthy children and families will thus happen at the community level.

- Public support for such strategies is essential for success.

- Civic energy for community problem-solving happens when community members are active participants in decision making.

As aptly stated by Chrislip and Larson, "Simply making government more efficient and consumer-driven ignores the desire of citizens to have a larger role in public life and to act as partners with government in addressing the needs of the community. Reinventing 'governance' must fundamentally change the relationship of citizens and government."

Why focus on community governance? Once upon a time, people lived, worked, shopped, attended school, gathered information and shared friendships within self-contained geographic boundaries. In 1998, a world economy, global media, the Internet, cultural diversity, and political organization around common interests have stretched community boundaries and brought about a concurrent decline in community attachment. The "professionalization" of education and social work also significantly influenced a diminishing sense of community responsibility to solve social problems. People simply paid their taxes and let the professionals do the work.

So, are declining communities a problem? Yes, for several reasons. American founders believed that there was strength in a society with a common purpose and a diversity of ideas. These principles underpin the very essence of our government. Sociologists assert that individuals find their roots within communities which provide boundaries for safety, natural resources and a sense of heritage.

Most importantly, families and communities are interdependent. Families are supported—or not supported—by the community which surrounds them. Even the best education and social programs will be marginally effective if the surrounding community environments and values are unhealthy. Children and families do not live in a vacuum. Addressing the community conditions is an essential component of any comprehensive strategy to assure the well-being of children and families.

Research Support for Healthy Families and Healthy Communities

A recent study financed by the National Institute of Justice, National Institute of Mental Health, and U.S. Department of Education determined that the level of community "cohesion," referring to social trust and a shared willingness to intervene in the lives of children, was a reliable predictor of juvenile crime. Lower crime

rates were found in urban neighborhoods exhibiting community cohesion where risk factors of poverty, unemployment, racial discrimination and single-parent households would have predicted otherwise (Sampson et al.).

The Search Institute, through its research, identified 35 characteristics of healthy communities. Examples are:

- The community thinks and acts inter-generationally. Most adults establish sustained relationships with children and adolescents, and most adolescents establish sustained relationships with younger children.

- Neighbors and community residents build caring relationships with youth and express this caring through dialogue, listening, commending positive behavior, acknowledging their presence, enjoying their company and involving them in decision making. They know neighborhood children and adolescents by name and take time to get to know them.

- The community invests in expanding and strengthening its systems of youth clubs, teams, and organizations.

- The community prizes cultural strengths and traditions. Particularly for youth of color, this heritage includes the concept of elders, the primacy of inter-generational relationships, respect for authority figures, the value of caring for others and a wisdom about what matters. Being in touch with and affirming these strengths represents an important dimension of cultural compe-

tence—in addition to knowledge and contact with cultures beyond one's own.

- Local government—through policy, influence, training and resource allocation—moves asset development and community-wide cooperation to top priorities for planning, policies and funding allocations within the municipality (Franke 1997).

The Public Sector and Community Building

Governments—federal, state and local—have an interest in promoting healthy families and healthy communities. Influences include:

- The push for devolution of federal funds to community-based initiatives (which must have the capacity to implement them).

- The desire for efficiencies because of shrinking public sector resources.

- The expectations of taxpayers to see results from government-sponsored initiatives.

Yet, educators, social workers and policymakers alike have reached the consensus that government-sponsored social services alone have not been able to solve our social problems. A Lane County poll asked residents where they sought help when faced with a child-rearing problem. "A trusted friend, parent or neighbor" was cited by 54 percent; 46 percent consulted school teachers or counselors; 38 percent turned to the family doctor; and 23 percent conferred with clergy. Only 8 percent looked to publicly-funded social service agencies for help (Oregon Survey Research Laboratory). Marion County also conducted a survey which mirrored these trends.

Public policy which focuses only on developing social services for the 8 percent misses the 92 percent—with the opportunity to strengthen that interdependent network of support for all children and families. The Harvard Family Research Project Evaluation Exchange summarized this concept:

> "Many traditional government programs designed to remedy disadvantage... focus on individuals without regard to the communities or the families in which they live. In contrast to this piecemeal approach, the practice of comprehensive community development builds on the idea that neighborhoods are like ecosystems, interconnected so that the health of each part depends on the well-being of the whole." (Lund, 1997)

Community Mobilization in Oregon Communities

Community mobilization is a vital part of improving outcomes for Oregon's children and families. It involves mapping community needs and strengths; encouraging connections among businesses, the faith community, schools and social agencies; and creating family-friendly public policies. Local commissions on children and families in counties throughout Oregon have been at the forefront of engaging communities in supporting children and families.

Examples of county strategies to build community capacity and civic engagement follow:

- **Civic Involvement.** Volunteers for Willamina of Yamhill County sponsored a town hall forum about teen pregnancy. Local data shows that the Willamina community has a high teen pregnancy rate. A crowd of high school students, including many teen mothers, health officials and interested citizens voiced concerns about a lack of

activities for teens and learned about successes from the local STARS prevention program. Several Community Progress Teams purchased "Baby Think It Over" dolls for school-based teen pregnancy prevention projects

- **Social Support.** The local commission in Wasco County brought partners together in 1994 to design a process and implementation plan of home visits for parents with young children. Over the course of two years, organizations with an early childhood interest worked together: the Mid-Columbia Medical Center (hospital), county public health and mental health providers, Head Start, migrant education, the child care resource and referral agency, La Leche League, the teen parent program, state Adult and Family Services and Services to Children and Families, Oregon State University Extension, and the Wonder Works Children's Museum which offers play groups. What the partners discovered is that some families were eligible for home visits from as many as twelve different agencies! Once the partners recognized the benefits of collaboration, they were able to break down turf, reach consensus on a program design and contribute to the project.

Conclusion

In Marion County, and across Oregon's 36 counties, county commissioners are looking at community building as a key strategy in implementing sound public policy for healthy children and families. Bruner and Parachini stated:

"The past several decades have produced powerful evidence that social programs focused

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on reducing specific problems in individuals are not effective over the long term in either changing individual lives or improving the community conditions that helped shape the problems. Policymakers and intervention designers are therefore moving toward initiatives that attempt to improve the lives of individuals by reshaping key social elements in their communities. This usually involves a shift from reliance on strategies designed by "experts" toward reliance on approaches that involve local residents and organizations."

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