

The Group Health Foundation  
Lessons Learned from Community Engagement

Commitment to Community  
Walla Walla, Washington  
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Commitment to Community (also known as C2C) is a program of the Blue Mountain Action Council (BMAC). BMAC's mission is to cultivate innovative services, in partnership with our community, to empower low-income people to meet their vital needs and achieve self-sufficiency. It envisions healthy, thriving communities where people are free of poverty, hunger and homelessness. BMAC offers a wide array of services, including job training and placement assistance, literacy training, providing housing for low-income people and assisting the homeless, services for veterans and their families, and supplying food products for Walla Walla's food banks.

C2C's mission is uniquely focused on neighborhood empowerment; we want to build a strong community by building strong neighborhoods. Ours is a grassroots, resident-led and resident-driven program that provides the guidance, expertise, and community connections to support building capacity in residents living in three of Walla Walla's most economically-challenged neighborhoods. We serve as a hub of trust for residents, and a point of entry for providers, government entities, educators, business owners, and others seeking to create intentional, sustainable relationships with people in the neighborhoods.

1.

We engage on multiple community levels. Developing social capital and building capacity means engaging a diversity of individuals and asking them to come to the table. Our primary mission is to engage the residents of low-income, mostly Latino neighborhoods, some with a significant number of undocumented people. We create relationships with the residents using the one-to-one intentional interview technique promoted by the PICO organization out of San Diego, California. We explore the needs of the residents, find out their dreams, and the level of their commitment to improve life for their families, and improve their neighborhoods.

We facilitate opportunities for neighborhoods to engage with other entities, such as the school district and the police department. These are mainly question and answer periods that often end with informal conversations between officials and residents. In addition to the substance of the conversations and presentations, the process builds capacity.

These efforts only work if they are sustained. The C2C team continually stays in contact with neighborhood residents, by phone, text, Facebook postings and messaging, sometimes by email, using the app called "Remind", and through personal visits and group meetings. Neighborhood meetings take place at least

once a month (sometimes, more often) to plan, to assess progress, carry out decisions, and reconnect. We are still calling the meetings. Ultimately, however, it is empowered residents themselves who must call and facilitate the meetings.

## 2.

Since our efforts involve capacity building, engagement and empowerment, we strive to develop opportunities for partnerships. Capacity should not be created solely in struggling low-income, minority communities. It also needs to be created in the greater community. Forming partnerships—with the intent of sustaining them—is one of the best ways to develop this capacity.

We strive to co-design and co-develop solutions to neighborhood issues so that multiple parties benefit. Activities we have facilitated include:

- Working with the Walla Walla Police Department to arrange Coffee with a Cop events; inviting them to neighborhood potlucks to engage with residents.
- Inviting the City Manager and a City Council Member to a neighborhood potluck to discuss and strategize how to address neighborhood issues.
- Inviting a City engineer to meet with neighborhood residents (twice, in two different parts of the community) to listen to traffic concerns and respond to requests for a stop sign (a stop sign was erected as a result, in both cases).
- Members of the American Association of University Women, the YWCA and others met with neighborhood residents for potlucks; presentations were made and relationships formed during the gatherings.
- Collaborations with the Walla Walla Community Council for the *Community Conversation* project which sought to listen to multiple and diverse voices in the Walla Walla Valley and develop priority lists of needs.
- Partnering with the 21 Century Community Learning Center afterschool programs to help create more parental involvement (and broaden their social capital) in class projects their children are developing.

## 3.

Systematic inequities that affect health—especially mental health—are present in this community, as they are in all American communities. Inequities here are primarily socioeconomic and racial. A former CEO of BMAC has coined a term to describe this condition: “the two Wallas”. Power differentials exist, and educational disparities, particularly among low-performing Latino students, are significant. Yet, ours is a community with a deep reservoir of goodwill. When intentionally engaged, the people of Walla Walla can and do focus on addressing some of these inequities. There is enormous potential present for addressing inequities and creating an inclusive future (more in the answer to Q. 6).

We address these issues by working directly with, and challenging, individuals to become engaged in finding solutions to problems and issues that impede their progress. We help them to harness the power they inherently have, but may not recognize. We teach them leadership skills, such as drafting a

meeting agenda, setting norms, facilitating a meeting, developing committee assignments, and public speaking.

There is much work to be done to effectively address power differentials in our community. We believe that our capacity building work gives people the opportunity to realize the extent to which their power can impact their lives, and their neighborhoods. For example, we have successfully prepared many residents to speak at city council meetings (some, more than once) to voice the needs of their neighborhoods. In almost every instance of such public testimony, the city government responded by directing resources to the neighborhoods. When residents assert and advocate for themselves they are taking steps to confront power differentials. They own the process, and the outcome. And this process creates something usually unexpected: the power to be transformative. When people realize that their power can transform their lives, that their own decisions and actions can dictate their destiny, it can be healing to neighborhoods that feel they have been forgotten or abandoned.

As residents declare themselves by voicing their needs, they make others in the greater community, in positions of power, aware of conditions in the neighborhoods. Because people can so comfortably exist in a higher income social strata they can be oblivious to the inequities that contribute to the suffering of others. When residents of low-income neighborhoods advance their issues, they enlighten some who might not have otherwise understood the extent of inequities in the community, or their impact on certain groups of people.

#### 4.

In the three low-income, predominantly Latino neighborhoods where we work, we engage residents with intentionality. We have developed a culture of engagement, because relationships are everything. The community also recognizes us as bridge builders. And although we cannot respond to every issue or crisis, we believe we are seen as honest brokers who have a unique connection to the people who reside in distressed neighborhoods.

At the same time, we do not lose sight of the clear goal to withdraw, in a timely and thoughtful manner, from the role of intermediary once people connect with each other (including individuals representing institutions, such as local government) and have begun to invest in the relationship. It is critical to the sustainable success of the community that people engage directly with each other, and not generate an artificial dependency on a third party who “speaks” for someone else.

This particular aspect of our model—to decline to continually be the intermediary—is one of the most difficult challenges we face. People who normally do not talk to each other (e.g., Latino v. white) are understandably anxious about taking the first steps toward engagement, or are flummoxed by each other’s cultures. There is safety in certainty, even though certainty isn’t working well for anyone. Persistence, and resilience, has helped make us make gains in our work, although this has not been an unbroken line of success, primarily when it comes to personnel (see bullet points in no. 5 below).

We interact with residents to ask *them* to identify and prioritize *their* needs. From the beginning, we extend the invitation to them think and dream about what they would like their neighborhoods to be. We then help them develop a plan to reach their goals. We do this through one-to-one intentional interviews, and group meetings. Organizers work to establish a rapport, and build trust. Building such trust can be (but not always is) challenging when working with undocumented individuals.

One key to success is *continual* engagement and follow up with residents to a) nurture relationships; b) shore up the resilience of residents by providing them skills to access their own power; and c) sharing opportunities that are present in the greater community. Organizers communicate in a number of ways, including text messages, Facebook instant messaging, phone calls, and home visits.

Bridge building helps us address inequities by inviting members of the greater, higher-income, white community to interact with residents of the neighborhoods. We invite residents to intentionally participate in the process. We coach the residents on how to advocate for themselves. However, in a wider context, we actively encourage and challenge people to engage with each other, to take risks by stepping out of their comfort zones to build relationships that are mutually beneficial and are essential to building a thriving community.

## 5.

We have learned many things from our challenges, obstacles and missteps. A significant and ongoing challenge is this: low-income, marginalized people, especially non-native English speakers, ***don't know what they don't know***—and are often unable to access services, benefits, capital and power, or demand dignity and civil rights. The informational disconnection from the greater community can be (and is) substantial. This is a result of at least two factors: 1) a deficit in communitywide social capital; and 2) a lack of access to collecting the vast amount of information available through the internet.

An attempt to remedy the second factor resulted in a significant lesson learned. Almost all residents in our neighborhoods have smartphones. And almost all are paying (in some cases, exorbitant) monthly fees for services they are not using, especially email and internet access. We successfully petitioned for a summer intern (a Latina) from Whitman College to teach the residents how to maximize the use of their smartphones, and communicate with their families out of the country using email, and not relying on text or WhatsApp. Other advantages include online bill pay, especially for utilities (a significant number of the neighborhood residents continue to take time off work to pay in cash).

Despite her diligent efforts at door knocking, distributing leaflets, partnering with the local public library to hold classes and working closely with the team lead, her efforts largely failed. Not only were there cultural obstacles (the certainty of cash payment and the comfort of telephone conversations), we failed to tangibly link the advantages and advances of the smartphone to their lives. We might have been successful had we asked the intern to show people

how to take better home movies with their smartphones; how to edit the video; how to post it online; and how to use email send the link to friends and relatives.

Those would have been small but significant steps in capitalizing on the power of a smartphone to enhance the lives of the residents. The potential of the smartphone to give people in these neighborhoods unlimited and empowering access to information remains largely untapped.

Other challenges and obstacles encountered include: a) convincing people that it is worth believing in hope; b) presuming that resilience runs deeply enough in neighborhoods to inspire and serve as a buffer to disappointments or setbacks; c); an inadequate capacity in the mainstream, dominant white community to connect to low-income, minority people, or unwillingness to address inequities and racism; d) lack of an effective mass communication medium that allows the program to instantly, seamlessly and repeatedly communicate with a large number of people for reasons such as scheduling meetings and passing along opportunities in the community. Lessons learned include:

- A sense of safety and security is critical to the success of a neighborhood. But the premise for investing should be focused on the residents themselves—not on crime. People who live in low-income communities, especially children, are not destined to be criminals. Although government and philanthropic metrics can often focus on crime statistics, that is an inverted way to measure hope. It is the investment in people that will ultimately empower them to demand more of themselves, and of the institutions that are supposed to support their success in life.
- When it comes to building capacity in the community, to doing empowerment work, there must be a commitment to hiring *highly* competent, resilient, compassionate and ethical neighborhood organizers. Resilience in organizers or any neighborhood worker is essential for progress; it is central to success in the neighborhoods. Resilience needs to be modeled for those who struggle with their own life traumas, or with believing in their own power.
- Community capacity building cannot be a one-way street. The work to build capacity and grow leadership in our neighborhoods is important to and for the residents. But the capacity to connect and engage must also be developed in the dominant, more powerful segments of a community. It does little good to convince people in marginalized neighborhoods to risk reaching out to the dominant community if their efforts will be ignored or rebuffed. Worse, it could reinforce their belief in the futility of trying, reduce resilience, and erode trust. A win-win culture of engagement must also be developed in the dominant community for the entire community to thrive.

## 6.

The greatest reason for hope can be summed up in these words: This stuff works. The words are simple; the work is not. In past years, neighborhood residents waited for ideas and initiatives to come to them. That has largely

changed. Engaged residents have taken the lead in establishing priorities for their neighborhoods, and volunteering for improvement projects. In the 2017 neighborhood Christmas parties, residents agreed to plan, create committees, assign responsibilities, make asks for cash and in-kind donations, manage the events and hold each other accountable—a textbook demonstration of self-empowerment and capacity building. The pride in ownership was palpable.

Better still: Some residents in one neighborhood felt so empowered by their Christmas success they formed a neighborhood association with the help of an Organizer. They elected officers and drafted a mission statement. They want guidance from C2C; they will set the direction. They are ambitious and determined to insert themselves into the policy conversations of the greater community. They are hopeful that they will be seen, and heard.

Last month, 21 residents from the three neighborhoods volunteered for about five hours to sort, box and distribute food during a community mobile food bank project. Together with other volunteers, these low-income neighborhood residents helped distribute just over 11,000 pounds of food to others in need. They joyfully served, enhanced social capital among themselves, and demonstrated a capacity to invest in a communitywide effort.

The leadership team of the city government approached C2C with a request for cultural awareness training in order to better connect with the Latino community. We have delivered the first of four phases of a training program. This is the first time a local government has made such a request of our program. The training regimen includes one-to-one visits with neighborhood residents, invitations to the residents to visit city officials in their offices, and development of individual sustainable engagement plans for each department director.

The mayor recently made an ask of the planning committee for the annual Children's Day celebration (that takes place in a park in a Latino neighborhood) to change park location and join with the city in a Summer Parkways celebration. Residents accepted. For the first time ever, they worked jointly with the mayor, Parks Department and others to host a successful community event. Huge strides were made in building relationships.

These are only some of the developments that portend a more equitable future in our community. Barriers and obstacles to equity, instituted over generations, will not vanish overnight. But the self-empowerment we have witnessed, and the goodwill in the community, gives us hope. By definition, grass roots movements like these do not follow a linear path. People are at the heart of this empowerment movement. We walk alongside them as guides, coaching, encouraging and supporting them on their journey. As confidence, resilience and power grows among these residents, we transition to other marginalized neighborhoods to offer the same empowerment model that has shown so much promise.

This stuff works.