OLR RESEARCH REPORT

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ENCOURAGING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

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You asked for examples of programs that community groups use to involve residents and property owners in solving a community's problems or improving a community's quality of life (i.e., civic engagement). Specifically, you asked for examples of grassroots programs that have been used to improve residents' quality of life.

SUMMARY

Attachment 1 describes five initiatives that foster civic engagement by placing residents at the center of a process aimed at improving a community's quality of life. Each stresses the importance of leadership and change from within a community and encourages community members to participate in making decisions that affect their community.

While all of these initiatives attempt to foster civic engagement, their methods vary. Some help residents develop the interpersonal skills to address a wide range of community issues (i.e., "network organizing" and "compassionate listening"). Others engage residents in addressing specific quality of life problems, such as blighted property or lack of social services (e.g., "community policing," "participatory budgeting," and "service exchanges").

APPROACHES TO ENCOURAGING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The initiatives summarized in Attachment 1 represent five different approaches to civic engagement. We provide an explanation of each approach below.

Participatory Budgeting

One way to foster civic engagement is to give community residents or their representatives a say in how the government spends money to address community problems. The government of Guelph, Canada, for example, allows the Guelph Neighborhood Support Coalition, which consists of representatives of neighborhoods and sponsoring agencies, to identify their spending priorities and vote on spending proposals.

Network Organizing

"Network organizing" is an approach used to help people, groups, and organizations acquire the skills and connections needed to effect change. For Lawrence (Massachusetts) Community Works (LCW), a nonprofit community development corporation, this often involves working in communities where neighbors hardly know each other and, thus, have little experience in working collaboratively to solve common problems.

Through LCW's "NeighborCircles" program, a LCW-trained facilitator works with a resident host to bring eight to 10 families together over dinner and conversations to discuss neighborhood problems and how they can address them. Circles that continued to meet after the third meeting have taken on a range of projects, including cleaning up playgrounds, improving street lighting, providing safe parking, and organizing block parties.

Community Policing

"Community policing" is a process in which law enforcement officials and community members work collaboratively to resolve specific problems and prioritize enforcement action when resources are limited. Residents participating in a Pittsburgh neighborhood's Oakwatch project use this approach to identify and report community problems, such as blight, to municipal officials and, as a group, communicate with enforcement officials to advocate for solutions and monitor their implementation.

Compassionate Listening

"Compassionate listening" is often used in strife-torn communities to foster reconciliation and prevent violence. In a community development context, it sets the stage for civic engagement by allowing residents to present their views without having to defend them. People trained in compassionate listening techniques train residents to ask noncontroversial questions and listen without passing judgment. The Listening Project, originally founded as the North Carolina-based Rural Southern Voice for Peace, uses this approach to help communities find common ground and create grassroots solutions to their problems.

Service Exchanges

"Service exchanges," such as timebanks, allow community members to give and receive services without paying for them with money. Commonly, volunteers receive one credit for each hour volunteered; each credit is worth one hour of another volunteer's time. This "time for time" system values each contributor's time equally. Service exchanges are especially valuable in communities with high rates of poverty or unemployment, as they allow participants to obtain services they could not otherwise afford. With over 250 members, the Cape Ann Timebank in Massachusetts is an example of a vibrant service exchange (a link to its website can be found in Attachment 1).

Several additional methods of strengthening civil society are discussed in the following OLR reports:

1. OLR Report 2011-R-0306 (local first campaigns' creation and purposes),

2. OLR Report 2003-R-0824 (neighborhood revitalization zones' creation and purposes),

3. OLR Report 2001-R-0561 (how neighborhood residents can collectively address problems undermining their quality of life; how a town can help residents become homeowners), and

4. OLR Report 96-R-0109 (how a community can improve its social capital).

Attachment 1: Community Initiatives Fostering Civic Engagement

Project	*Community*	*Purpose*	*Method*
Guelph Neighborhood Support Coalition www.nh.org/online/issues/146/canadianbudgeting.html	Guelph, Ontario, Canada	Fostering civic engagement by allowing residents to democratically decide how to allocate part of a municipal or public budget through a series of neighborhood, district, and citywide assemblies	**"Participatory budgeting"** Basic steps: 1. Community members identify spending priorities 2. Members elect budget delegates to represent their neighborhood 3. Delegates transform the community priorities into concrete proposals 4. Public employees facilitate formation of project proposals and offer technical assistance to delegates 5. Community members vote on which projects to fund 6. The municipality or institution implements the chosen projects - Examples of projects include small capital projects (community center improvements) and community events (support groups, carnivals, summer camps, language classes)
Lawrence Community Works (LCW) http://www.lawrencecommunityworks.org http://www.nhi.org/online/issues/140/LCW/html	Lawrence, MA	Creating a network of relationships that supports inclusive, democratic decision-making at the institutional, neighborhood, and city levels in a way that feels fun, safe, and productive	**"Network organizing"**: a strategy that downplays formal leadership roles and structures by allowing residents to decide how they want to address a problem and interact with existing networks of smaller groups - Participants pursue projects that capture the imagination and attract people's time and energy, such as: 1. *NeighborCircles*: LCW-trained facilitators convene a group of neighbors in a city block for a series of dinner discussions/house meetings; topics include getting to know each other; identifying common challenges in the neighborhood, developing a specific project to tackle challenges; average activity: three meetings, disbanding after the project is complete 2. *PODER Leadership Institute*: 14-week program that trains participants in organizing, power analysis, collaborative governance, and facilitation skills; introduces participants to community leaders; program ends with a culminating community campaign or project that participants implement

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Oakwatch: The Oakland Code Enforcement Project http://www.opdc.org/programs-services/community/oakwatch-oakland-code-enforcement-project/ http://www.heinz.org/grants_spotlight_entry.aspx?entry=1101	Oakland neighborhood, Pittsburgh, PA (New Haven's Newhallville neighborhood has a similar, but more comprehensive, program. It is described here: http://www.bostonfed.org/commdev/c&b/2013/summer/it-takes-a-village-communities-tackle-crime.htm)	Improving the quality of life for residents, employees, and visitors of the neighborhood by enforcing codes on negligent property owners, housing violations, parking violations, disruptive behavior, excessive noise, and underage drinking	**"Community policing"** - Supported by the community's nonprofit development corporation (Oakwatch consumes about 20 hours of staff time per week) - Chairpersons are long-time community residents - Residents report problems to Oakwatch in addition to 911 or 311 (a non-emergency hotline for issues like potholes and graffiti; callers issued report tracking number) - Staff, with the help of residents, (1) compile information on 911 reports and 311 tracking numbers, (2) prioritize and pursue code enforcement, and (3) monitor outcomes - Monthly meetings held to update community members on problem properties and get updates from the mayor's office, Bureau of Building Inspection, city council, University of Pittsburgh, health department, and police - Focused on 10 problem properties per month - Conduct door-to-door outreach to college students who rent in the neighborhood (communicate principles of being a good neighbor)

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The Listening Project http://www.listeningproject.info/results.php	Many communities have conducted a listening project for community development purposes (including communities in Florida, Georgia, Virginia, and West Virginia.	Purposes include: - Bringing together strife-torn communities - Identifying problems and issues that people care about - Including often unheard or unheeded voices - Fostering the emergence and development of new community leaders - Generating creative solutions for community needs and problems - Disseminating issue-related information and determining need for additional information - Forming uncommon coalitions and alliances through which diverse viewpoints can resolve, rather than clash over, difficult issues - Promoting insight, empathy, and understanding among people with conflicting views - Creating long-term capacity for grassroots community building	**"Compassionate listening"** - Local volunteers trained in non-violence and active listening techniques interview residents about their problems and concerns and debrief the community about the results - Results are used to develop community-based goals, strategies, and resources for implementing specific plans

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Timebanks http://timebanks.org/ http://www.capeanntimebanks.org/Home.html http://www.npr.org/2012/09/22/161380937/time-banks-help-spaniards-weather-financial-crisis http://www.generocity.org/2013/time4time-a-currency-free-service-exchange-between-neighbors-kicks-off-in-northwest-philly/	Many communities have created timebanks (for a list, see, http://community.timebanks.org/) TimeBanks USA is an organization founded to promote timebanking. Among other things, it helps communities and organizations implement special initiatives based on timebanking principles.	The reasons for starting a timebank vary depending on a community's needs, but may include: - Providing incentives and rewards for work such as mentoring children, caring for the elderly, and being neighborly - Building an infrastructure of trust and caring - Treating everyone's time equally - Providing an alternative to the top-down approach common to social services	**"Service exchange"** - Five guiding principles: - Everyone is an asset - Some work is beyond a monetary price - Reciprocity in helping - Social networks are necessary - A respect for all human beings - One spends an hour doing something for a service exchange member, in order to earn a "time dollar" (time as a currency) - One can use that time dollar to buy an hour of another member's time - Service is tracked and reported online - Timebanked activities include: car rides (e.g., trips to airport or medical appointments), budget and tax preparation, child and pet care, shopping, minor home repair, house painting, holistic therapy, home organizing, interior design, gift wrapping, mending and alterations, computer help, web design, garden and yard work, moving assistance, cooking, cleaning, private lessons, classes and tutoring, editing, translating, companionship

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