CHAPTER FIVE

BUILDING INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY COMPETENCE AND CAPACITY

"Civil society is generally understood as the realm within which people can participate collectively and work toward a common interest."
(Van der Plaat, 2006)

"The enemy is not poverty, sickness and disease. The enemy is a set of interests that need dependency, masked by service"
(McKnight, 1995:99)

It has been said that a "service economy", one in which social services predominate can inadvertently create a "nation of clients", replete with social policies that create dependency (McKnight, 1995:98).

McKnight (1995:99) suggests that "the enemies of the right to authority – the power of people to act and decide – are governmental officials and bureaucrats who are fearful of a transfer of authority. They want "participation" but oppose popular control". If this is true, then delinking from the "service economy" may be the best approach devalued or disenfranchised people have to seek self empowerment. This would mean that communities must become much more competent in including and nurturing people with a range of health challenges.

A great deal has been written about building community in the past decade, but many case managers remain unfamiliar with this literature. This chapter will include some tips on how case managers and their clients can work collaboratively to build competence and capacity in their communities, whether they be communities of interest, or geographic communities.

Barbarin (1981) defined community competence as "community effectiveness in providing support systems for the physical and psychosocial needs of its members". Much of case management practice that is empowerment oriented focuses on this as a primary goal.

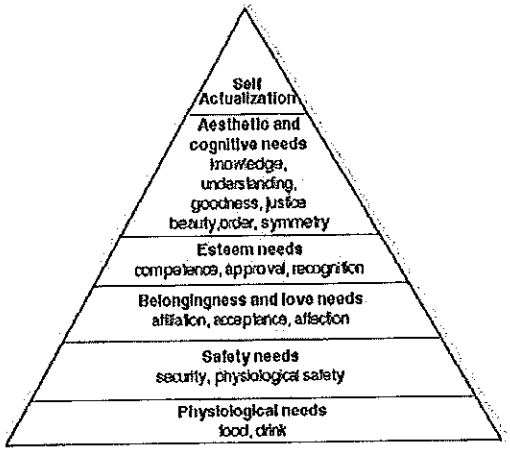
NO COMMUNITY SHOULD BE EXPECTED TO TOLERATE INCIVILITY, VIOLENCE, AND BEHAVIOR THAT IS THREATENING OR OFFENSIVE. THE GOAL IN HELPING TO BUILD COMPETENT COMMUNITIES IS TO INCREASE CIVILITY, TOLERANCE, AND TO CREATE A WELCOMING ATMOSPHERE THAT ALLOWS COMMUNITY MEMBERS TO BE THEMSELVES, WHILE PROVIDING FOR THE BASIC NEEDS DEFINED IN MASLOW'S HIERARCHY

Traditional approaches tend to focus on helping individuals who are devalued, labeled, and disadvantaged to "fit in" to rigid standards of normalcy or acceptability in their communities.

Empowerment oriented approaches focus on helping communities to better understand the needs of their members, and to build the capacity within communities to raise the level of support and comfort level to allow difference and diversity, while recognizing the need for certain norms and standards of behavior.

No community should be expected to tolerate incivility, violence, and behavior that is threatening or offensive. The goal in helping to build competent communities is to increase civility, tolerance, and to create a welcoming atmosphere that allows community members to be themselves, while providing for the basic needs defined in Maslow's hierarchy (below).

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



Case managers wishing to increase the level of competence in communities in order to meet the physiological, safety, belongingness, esteem, aesthetic and cognitive and self-actualization needs of community members, generally follow a protocol:

BUILDING COMMUNITY

"Every single person has capacities, abilities, and gifts. Living a good life depends on whether those capacities can be used, abilities expressed, and gifts given. If they are, the person will be valued, feel powerful and well connected to the people around them. And the community around the person will be more powerful because of the contribution the person is making."
(John McKnight, 1997)

Inventory of Community Assets

- Gathers and uses information from a variety of sources to determine what strengths a community has, and where the barriers are to more complete community participation for people who have been labeled or who are disadvantaged.
- Identification of community leaders and key decision makers
- Creates an inventory of resources that are available to individuals in the community, as well as a list of resources that are not currently available but could be developed

Collaborative Prioritization of Required Resources

- Organization of a meeting of community leaders and key decision makers and labeled individuals to begin to decide what resources are required as a priority, and to brainstorm ways that these resources might be built or delivered to the community.

Use of Existing Resources and the Building of New Resources

- Identify existing resources that are underutilized by clients, and discuss ways that these resources could be made more user friendly
- Identify the level of collaboration between existing community-based organizations
- Collaborate in creating "community goals" for resource building, along with tasks required to build the resources, who will have responsibility for completing each task, and timelines for completion.

Review

- Follow up meeting with community leaders, key decision makers and clients to determine success of community resource building plan and determination of what changes needs to be made.
- Celebration of successes and creation of new goals.

Provan (2004) has suggested that much can be accomplished by identifying strengths and gaps in interagency cooperation and collaboration in specific communities. The pooling of resources and expertise has long been a means of increasing community competence and sharing resources in a way that is helpful to clients. The formation of interagency groups in communities has sometimes led to new initiatives that have added value to communities and created new resources for clients.

However, if clients are to de-link from the service sector successfully, ultimately agencies should be expected to play less and less of a role, with community networks taking over more responsibility. Morrison et al (1998:107) have suggested that "families and children receive limited support in coping with the stress of everyday life in a modern, complex society. Consequently, neighborhoods and sometimes families are disorganized and unable to deal with the issues they face". It is suggested that the recreation of "social organization – the sharing of behavior and outlook in a community" may work wonders in providing the assistance that is needed. Wilson (1996:61/62) says: " Neighborhoods that feature higher levels of social organization – that is, neighborhoods that integrate adults by means of an extensive set of obligations, expectations and social networks – are in a better position to control and supervise the activities and behavior of children". They may also be in a better position to support the families and individuals in their midst who are struggling with the daily challenges of health and disability issues. By building on the assets approach outlined above, and integrating and expanding existing community resources, any community can be brought into a more socially organized state.

> *A local Toronto community noticed that it had a higher than usual proportion of older adults, many with physical and cognitive disabilities living within its boundaries. Many were struggling alone, or living with family members, unsure of how to properly support them, and exhausted by the daily demands their care required.*
>
> *Using a community asset approach, a local church determined that there were a number of retired nurses also living in the area, and it asked them to come together to determine some solutions to this problem, They decided to initiate a voluntary "visiting nurses" program to provide some immediate support and determine what was needed most. These experienced nurses were then able to work with their counterparts in existing health and social services agencies to ensure that appropriate levels of professional support were provided, supplemented by neighborhood support, with neighbors cooking meals for neighbors, and retired people spending time doing "friendly visiting" with neighbors to allow families respite and an opportunity to shop or take an evening or afternoon off. As more people became involved, a strong social network emerged that provided help, care and sustenance to local families. A public education event was organized with the help of a local elected official and the community received considerable information*

on what supports existed in the area, as well as an opportunity to meet others who had common concerns about providing assistance to these individuals and their families.

CONSIDER NEIGHBORS, FRIENDS, AND FAMILY AS RESOURCES

Sometimes the strongest advocates, supporters, or helpers are the people who live closest to our clients - their friends, and families. They may be very willing to support someone, but may be unaware of how best to do so. By organizing meetings with a client's support circle for social and educational purposes, everyone can benefit and support one another. This can build competence within a person's direct circle, as well as allowing the entire circle to benefit from one another's skills and strengths. Brother John may have accounting skills and can help with setting up a small business. Sister Marie may have contacts in the entertainment industry for free tickets to events. Neighbor June may have "handywoman" skills and can fix things that break in someone's home or apartment. Tom may be a sports fan, willing to invite your client over for a beer and to watch the game.

Having friends and supporters offers social support – one of the best ways to improve quality of life. Having strong social support has been shown to reduce physical ailments and lift spirits, and it is one of the best things an empowerment oriented case manager can help a client to achieve.

It is wise to have a great number of people as part of someone's social support network, ensuring that your client is not depending too heavily on only a handful of people. Similarly having a variety of supporters ensures a broad range of skills and knowledge.

Being a friend and supporter of others is equally empowering. Encouraging friendships with others who struggle with similar challenges may help to improve their lives as well as your clients'. Having "movie nights", or "discussion evenings" at each other's residences, or setting up buddy systems where people check on one another is a good way of building additional social support, and it provides an opportunity for clients to offer their skills, abilities and gifts to others.

CONSIDER INDIVIDUAL CLIENTS' CAPACITIES

"Being misled by labels, we tend to forget that "disabled" individuals, just like everyone else have deeply felt, personal needs for dignity, for pleasures, for friendship, for hope for the future, and for a useful place within the community. When these needs to give are denied, their lives become sad and empty"
(Kretzmann & McKnight, 1003:69).

Kretzmann and McKnight (1993:69) suggest that community "is composed of a series of partnerships which unlock the potential of each of the participants". If that is true, then those with whom we work, who have been largely excluded from community participation need to be seen as individuals with skills, abilities, knowledge and personal gifts to offer others. Since disability and other labels have "served to obscure [people's] other qualities which are quite similar to all the rest of the members of a community" (Ibid), it is important to begin to re-empower our clients to take a more active role in their own communities.

If people with disabilities and those who are otherwise labeled are to take an active part in their communities, it will be necessary to help them to do so by following a few simple steps:

- Outline the gifts and capacities that each person has;
- Compile the key assets of a community, including local individuals, citizens' organizations, not for profits, and publicly funded organizations like hospitals, libraries, parks, schools etc
- Begin to build partnerships between people with disabilities and these organizations

- Further expand the mutual support network outside the boundaries of the community (McKnight & Kretzmann, 1993:71)

USE OF COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Every community has libraries, religious institutions, public parks and gardens, community theatre, or other meeting places. There are often clubs, lectures, sports and other leisure activities being offered. There may be local yoga and tai chi classes, adult learning opportunities, or workshops. All of these are open to all members of a community, and clients may wish to take part, but may need someone to attend with them at first. Broader community exposure to clients with particular life challenges helps to educate people, and it may result in new friendships.

Clients can be helped to nurture their social support systems by ensuring that they share good news as well as bad with their supporters. By volunteering to help others, clients can sometimes gain new friends and contacts, as well as basking in the feeling of having a purpose and doing something worthwhile.

Community Capacity Building – The Basics

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has".
(Margaret Mead)

Building new community capacity comes from the grassroots. It happens where members of a community believe something has to be done. It may involve getting new playground equipment, forming a Neighborhood Watch, starting study circles for students, building a cooperative day care initiative, forming police/community relationships, or starting a citizen's organization to stop unfriendly development from occurring. Whatever the cause, it starts with a meeting. At the meeting individuals can choose an executive from among those who have leadership skills and appear motivated to get something done. The first meeting often involves brainstorming some potential actions, and having individuals take on responsibility for tasks. As tasks get accomplished the community organization moves closer to its goals. These goals can be reviewed periodically and new tasks developed and assigned until the goals are reached.

Community organizations can be ad hoc, or intended to function over time. Ad hoc groups have more flexibility in achieving goals and can disband when their goals are met. More permanent groups usually codify rules and policies to ensure effective operation of the organization over time.

Whichever way case managers decide to work with communities, getting people together over coffee in someone's kitchen, or organizing a public meeting in a school auditorium, capacity building often begins with a small committed group of people.

IN SUMMARY

Community is built by people deciding to collaborate and work towards a common goal while problem solving, and brainstorming ideas. Sharing resources and supporting one another can work wonders in addressing knowledge, services, and information gaps in communities. No community is perfect. All could be made better. When case managers and clients work together to bring about positive changes in their communities, both are enriched and the community is better for it.

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