

THIRST TO CONTRIBUTE
**Fostering Personal Growth, Building Social Capital, and Strengthening
Community through Public Policy**

A report to the Annie E. Casey Foundation

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by
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Introduction

THIRST TO CONTRIBUTE

For the first time in its history, America faces the prospect that the nation's children will grow up less healthy, live less long lives, be less safe, and be less equipped to compete in the international economy than their parents.

In part, this is due to changing demographics in the population, but it also is due to the failure of public systems to respond in ways adequate to support children's healthy development – in the context of family, neighborhood and community.

Despite very significant public investments in professional services – health, education and safety – too many children face diminished futures. We must do better. All the evidence points to the need to more predictably support children's healthy growth and development.

For the past 30 years, I have been grappling with how current public service systems can succeed with children that they currently fail to reach in meaningful ways. This has led me to examine and advocate for family support programs and services, welfare program activities geared to family economic self-sufficiency, community-based child welfare reforms, early-childhood initiatives to strengthen bonding and learning in the early years, and place-based strategies to combine individual growth and development with community building.

Regardless of the specific field, the terms “community-based,” “strength-based,” “preventive and developmental,” “ecological,” and “family-oriented” have recurred in this work.

Yet, despite the growth in the use of these terms and the development of many exemplary and high-performing initiatives, efforts incorporating these concepts and terms into practice are generally exceptions to the rule and not part of most mainstream service systems.

The two essays offered here suggest that the reason for this is that the focus has been upon programs and professional services rather than strategies and participant interactions. It is not that current public programs and services do no good; it is that they are insufficient in promoting the long-term opportunities that vulnerable families and their children, in particular, need and deserve to have to succeed.

The fundamental challenge is to create, through public supports and investments, a different type of helping system that cannot be defined by curriculum, intervention protocol, or worker professional credentialing. Because it is a different way of looking at the public sector's role in the “helping world,” I have tried to explain it here in two ways. The first essay, more academic in orientation, describes the different bodies of research, experience and science that point to the importance of moving beyond a service approach to a community-building one. The second, more informal narrative describes specific personal experiences that have helped me look at a different way of “doing business” in supporting families and their kids.

I think we are at the point where we must recognize that, while there might not be “evidence-based programs” that we can replicate in helping families succeed in this way, there is certainly an “evidence-based need” to develop more predictable and intentional ways for public investments to support family growth and development along these lines.

In 2009, the Build Initiative partnered with the Strengthening Families Through Early Care and Education Initiative and the Smart Start Initiative to convene funders, practitioners and policy makers to explore some of these themes. The resulting “Thirst to Contribute” session got its name from a 2008 campaign advertisement from then-presidential candidate Barack Obama. The ad’s message? We all have a responsibility to give children “that thirst to learn.” Extending this to adults, we have to nurture our own “thirst to contribute” to others’ growth and development.

I hope these two essays will stimulate discussion – and more importantly, action – on the ways government can make investments that better address the needs of our children and our future.

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THIRST TO CONTRIBUTE

Mutual Assistance as the Missing Piece in Public Welfare Policy

Sheila was a commanding presence before an auditorium of 350 parents and high school seniors. She told of her background as a struggling single mother with a substance abuse background, often next to homeless, herself without a high school diploma. She talked of how she recognized in her three-year old daughter's eyes, a decade and one-half ago, that she had to do something different with her life, if her daughter was to have a future better than hers. Making change wasn't easy, but she got support that opened her up to new friends and she began contributing and believing in herself. She now heads the United Way fund drive in her community and runs a successful cleaning business that employs four other women who are finding their way, as well. She feels it essential that she give back to the community for giving her a new chance, thinking back when she couldn't speak up for herself or her daughter to anyone, let alone speak to 350 people with more education than she has had. Her daughter is excelling in school and will be the first in her family to go to college, under a full academic scholarship no less.

Almost everyone has heard such an inspirational story. These Sheilas are remarkable in overcoming adversity and deserve to be roles model for their families and their communities. Sometimes, a Sheila also may honor a mentor for starting here on her journey, an individual who got to know her, believed in her, and then held her to high expectations for using her talents to achieve success. In some measure, that mentor found and fostered Sheila's resiliency so she would to try anew. The faces in the helping professions – be it counselors, case managers, therapists, social workers, youth service workers or child welfare staff – brighten with pride when they talk about people like Sheila they have helped. But it certainly did not stop with that mentor. Sheila took risks to connect with others, master new skills and learn by doing and giving back to others. She bonded with others and contributed to their well-being, as well. Much of her own growth can be attributed to acts of reciprocity where she helped others as well as herself. While a mentor may have provided her with support and encouragement, Sheila ultimately strengthened her own resiliency by contributing to others, first motivated by the love for her daughter. She grew by assuming "personal responsibility" for her life and the lives of others, in a term that has developed strong resonance in the public-policy world.

For every Sheila, however, how many potential Sheilas are there that current publicly supported service systems fail to reach? How often do they fall short in providing individuals such opportunities for growth? How might public systems and investments better reach and kindle the spark within more Sheilas?

The Base in Science

There are somewhat parallel bodies of research literature – on resiliency, on risk and protective factors, on assets, and on reciprocity and self-help/mutual assistance – that have described the factors that contribute to success for all individuals, but particularly for those currently most vulnerable and at the margins of society.

Bonnie Benard, Nancy Sharpe-Light, and Nan Henderson have focused upon the concept of resiliency as a core element in healthy growth and development and how whatever resilient spark exists is kindled within individuals in their growth and development.¹ Benard, in particular, has extended the concept of “resiliency” from an individual attribute to a family, school and community level, describing resilient schools and communities as entities that have the same characteristics of continuous problem solving, effort and belief in success.² These attributes are very similar to those described as programs by Lisbeth Schorr in *Within Our Reach*.³

The risk and protective factor literature has its origins in the work of Catalano and Hawkins around troubled (delinquent) youth, and emphasizes that even those in high-risk situations can succeed if there are mitigating protective factors in their lives, with most of these related to positive social ties and the skills to use those ties to connect and contribute.⁴ Brain research has taken this to a biomedical level, showing that “toxic stress” – the presence of adverse conditions without mitigating protective factors – adversely alters the brain itself.⁵

Bob Benson and the Search Institute have translated these protective factors into 40 developmental assets that are at the base of successful youth development, and then extended these 40 assets to younger children, as well.⁶

The Doris Duke Strengthening Families Initiative has fleshed out five protective factors that contribute to preventing abuse and neglect in young children.⁷ This formulation has had particular resonance within state collaboratives of agency representatives, parents and advocacy organizations in work to expand the capacity of early childhood education programs to serve children and their families. Although applied specifically to the prevention of abuse and neglect, these five protective factors also clearly are relevant to healthy child development, early learning and school readiness.

While there is much depth, detail and nuance in these bodies of research, they essentially confirm the importance of human interactions based upon *contributing* as well as *receiving* support to individual growth.

Finally, the research on reciprocity and mutual assistance has shown the core contribution to human growth and development that giving back to others plays in almost all aspects of life.⁸ While there is mixed evidence on the specific effectiveness of self-help and mutual assistance groups to produce the specific results around which they are formed, it is clear that they create social connections and reciprocity in their actions.⁹ Self-help or mutual assistance group structures vary substantially, as do the reasons for their organization, but they also seem to share some common elements – an emphasis upon affinity-based networking, a commitment to support one another and the group along a common path, and an opportunity, if not an

expectation, for participants to take on new leadership roles on behalf of the group and its cause.¹⁰ They are essential to creating the “social capital” for community vitality as well as individual growth.¹¹

In short, science points to the essential underlying importance of self-help and mutual assistance both to individual growth and to community cohesion and prosperity.

The Disconnect Between Science and Policy

Clearly, there already exist multiple social groups that provide self-help and mutual assistance opportunities. They are ubiquitous and can extend from book reading groups to bowling leagues to church congregations to support groups for parents of children with autism to political parties – where individuals become members and identify with one another according to a common bond. Most people belong to multiple groups to fulfill different needs and interests in their lives, and these change as their life situations and experiences change.

Yet too many families are isolated, due to family circumstance, stress, poverty or the absence of safe places within their neighborhoods and communities to congregate. Because there are still costs – in terms of time, space, and opportunity – for participation, those without resources can have difficulty participating, and in particular initiating, such groups. Prejudice, including institutional racism, can play a major role in this isolation. While families in disinvested neighborhoods may belong to groups and networks, these often at best help them to cope and survive within current circumstances and not to produce change and growth for themselves and other members in their communities. Their opportunities for growth and advancement are limited by their current social connections. Some cultures actually stress such social connectedness and cohesion, but refugees and immigrants may find American society and its institutions difficult to navigate, and therefore find it difficult to continue those activities. Robin Jarrett’s research on families who succeed despite living in disinvested neighborhoods is revealing; they often do so by disassociating with their own neighborhood and community and establishing ties outside those boundaries, to leave as soon as possible.¹² While this may be functional and necessary for their own family’s growth, it is antithetical to community building.

What is not well-explored within this self-help and mutual assistance literature is how public systems can contribute to the growth and development of resiliency and reciprocity and strengthen protective factors, which ultimately must come from some form of group interaction and dynamics. In particular, there has been limited delineation of the elements or program attributes which are critical to ensuring that self-help/mutual assistance groups produce growth, reciprocity, and community cohesion.

In part, this is because there is a potential tension in public systems creating such networks that then challenge the authority of the public systems themselves. Community organizing activities have often found themselves “fighting city hall,” and some organizing strategies have had such community change objectives as their central organizing tenet.¹³ At the same time, there are very different types of community building efforts at work within communities, and many

indigenous activities are much less directed to shifting the balance of power in communities to promoting personal and collective advancement within the community.¹⁴ While there are some parallels between community organizing and affinity-based networking, the former is much more outwardly directed toward changing external conditions and the latter is much more inwardly directed to supporting and enabling individual growth and improvement. Efforts to bridge the two, particularly around addressing parenting concerns, such as through the women's centered PILOT's Community Center Campaign and the Chicago-based Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI) organization, in fact do so by creating networks and opportunities for mutual assistance.¹⁵

In part, this is also because there are at least perceived liability issues in moving authority and decision-making away from professionals and established standards to a much more fluid and organic process. Reliance upon a peer group whose members have histories of social problems and illicit activities can be problematic without sufficient oversight and protection against abuse. Alternatively, reliance upon a professional with standards of practice and professional accountability at least transfers that liability to the individual professional and away from the system. Groups formed around common affinities can produce negative, as well as positive, actions; gangs are predicated on codes of ethics and reciprocity within the gang.¹⁶

In part, this also is because the impacts of such activities are not easily delimited or defined, particularly as they extend beyond individual outcomes to group or community effects. Evaluating human growth and development in its broader aspects can be achieved by some forms of goal-attainment scaling or other metrics, but these do not easily fit into current program evaluation methods that require identifying and measuring discrete outcome indicators.¹⁷

In part, this also is because such efforts cloud the distinction between what is voluntary, community activity that should not be regulated in a free and open society and what is a governmental role. The demarcation between what government's limited role is in seeking to regulate behavior and what people have a right to choose and do for themselves can be blurred. Promoting secular humanism, social engineering and government intrusion into the family all have been employed as arguments against financing some "helping" systems to support families.

While all these play a role, the primary difficulty in launching new self-help/mutual assistance efforts is widespread doubt that such activities can be intentionally supported through public financing. They emerge organically and have their power because they do so – and they are not capable of being programmed or engineered. While government actually supports many of these voluntary institutions, particularly in more affluent communities, through tax preferences, support for charitable and civic contributions, and in-kind contributions of public spaces, government does not regulate them or otherwise intentionally work to create them.¹⁸

Manifestations in Exemplary Programs

At the same time, such self-help and mutual assistance networks are being re-invented within community-based programs across the country. They have many manifestations, but they generally build upon some common interest or affinity among individuals or families and create the time, space and opportunity for participants to get together around some common purpose. These common interests or affinities can be around family economic self-sufficiency, around children's healthy growth and development within family and community, or around other identified needs and concerns that often can isolate families.

From a family economic self-sufficiency perspective, Edgar Cahn built upon the Time Dollar program, initially established in St. Louis, to promote the concept of co-production as a community building and economic tool that creates a tangible value (time dollar) on individual contributions of time and skills to others, so resources are shared within low-income communities as a means of creating individual growth, community cohesion and pathways to economic stability and success.¹⁹

Similarly, Maurice Miller established a family independence initiative as a mutual assistance approach to helping families exit poverty, starting in the Bay Area of California. FII has employed a peer-led model of incentives and group accountability and support to produce dramatic change in the economic and social lives of participants.²⁰

Delancey Street in San Francisco has established a whole self-help social and economic community predicated upon ex-offenders helping one another re-enter society through mutual assistance.²¹

Community leadership teams, comprised of families on welfare, were established in eight Iowa communities around members' mutual interest in achieving self-sufficiency for themselves and their children.²²

Many immigrant groups in America have pooled assets within their communities to enable members to start businesses or send their children to college, thereby creating common community wealth through mutual support. While the dominant culture in America has a distinct emphasis upon individual initiative – and there are now programs to support Individual Development Accounts that enable low-income families to save and invest in their own family's future – the concept of Collective Development Accounts may be more appropriate for some cultures and certainly is a prominent feature of most native American cultures. In fact, sharing resources in low-income neighborhoods is common, although it often is for survival purposes (avoiding eviction, paying bail) rather than for future investment.²³

From a child development perspective, many home visiting programs establish support groups for the families they visit. These extend from family nights to ongoing meetings and leadership groups that advocate for themselves and others, often around providing a nurturing environment for all children in the community, with connections to schools and strong emphases upon educational success.

Family resource centers often have family-led programs and activities, where particular parents lead activities and impart their own skills to others, often with parents sharing responsibilities for organizing and managing the meetings and providing child care, food and organizational resources, as well.

The Strengthening Families Initiative has employed a “World Café” model to engage parents and heighten their voices to support children within their neighborhood and communities.²⁴ In Connecticut, the long-standing Parent Leadership Training Institute has provided training and support to parents to become involved in civic life and activities.²⁵ Boards of both Head Start programs and Community Action Agencies have been avenues for both personal connections and leadership service for participants in those programs. Abriendo Puertas has been recognized by the Harvard Family Research Project as a breakthrough family involvement program involving Latino parents of young children, with a bottom-up mutual assistance approach to supporting families and their communities in creating environments that support children’s healthy development.²⁶

A number of such exemplary efforts – from such different starting points as the health, early care and education, and family and community center worlds – are described in *Village Building and School Readiness* – with their attributes displayed as the DNA double helix with the two strands reflecting staff and worker roles and their mutuality.²⁷

From a desire to better respond to a special need or condition, there are a wide array of self-help groups established at least loosely under the Alcoholics Anonymous model, some with twelve step programs and others without. Some are entirely peer-led while others involve professionals as well. Several, such as Parents Anonymous and the Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health, not only have focused upon children and the parent-child relationship but also have developed their own leadership programs and strategies for members and even extended their work to influencing public policies.²⁸ Clearly, The Arc (formerly American for Retarded Citizens) was a key advocacy network as well as support system to parents of children with disabilities. The Arc was instrumental in the enactment of the Individuals with Disabilities Act at the federal level and many programs and initiatives at the state and local levels. Such self-help groups, it should be noted, often have the advantage of membership from more affluent and connected members of society with the resources and opportunity to maintain them.

In addition to these, of course, there are continuously emerging (and disappearing) groups affiliated with community centers, YMCAs and YWCAs, housing projects and cultural centers that are based upon self-help and mutual assistance. Settlement houses designed to support the social and economic integration of immigrants into American society in the 19th century were based upon the premise of mutual assistance as well as housing and other support services.²⁹

At the same time, to the extent programs and institutions develop such support groups to afford participants to build their own resiliency through the opportunities for reciprocity and

leadership, they also support community building and cohesion, these groups often are viewed as by-products or valuable additional serendipitous events rather than as at the core of program mission. As such, they often are often very thinly funded and come and go based upon changes in funding, organizational support and leadership. Rarely is recognition or credit given for the successes they produce, if these are even documented or measured.³⁰ While all take pride in producing the time, space and opportunity as well as the mentoring from some Sheilas to emerge, they may only touch the service of the potential to do so. Often, the Sheilas that are produced are because a worker or program “went beyond the call of duty” or “took the extra step” by volunteering additional time to create those opportunities. Programs and workers that incorporate such self-help and mutual assistance activities typically do so with little instruction, guidance or reference to a body of practice wisdom on how to be most effective in that role.

Attributes of Effective Strategies to Promote Resiliency, Reciprocity, Personal Leadership and Community Building

As described above, fostering resiliency through reciprocity and personal leadership as part of a group can take many forms. At the same time, while simply providing the time, space and opportunity for people to get together can be of value, this does not necessarily lead to growth or change, particularly in acquiring skills and connections needed to move beyond where individuals and families currently are. If this work to foster human growth and community building is to be done more intentionally, concerted and with a greater predictability of impact, it needs to be better defined, resourced and embedded within organizational objectives and accountability. Further, the dynamics of such self-help or mutual assistance groups cannot simply be left to chance, but the “art” of creating, developing and maintaining such groups must at least be moved to a “craft,” if not a science. Almost by definition, such interactions cannot be routinized or ensured through development of a curriculum, set of training elements, or procedures and meeting agendas. They require that a more underlying set of attributes, principles and culture of work exist within the programs and organizational staff that create and support them.

The following list of attributes is provided as a starting point for describing the underlying characteristics that foster successful mutual assistance within a group of individuals brought together because of a shared affinity.

- *Empathetic Facilitation.* Exemplary programs have staff who organize and facilitate such mutual assistance groups, who are able to bring energy and forward direction to the activities, while letting the solutions and directions come from within the group itself. Such facilitation is different from case management, care coordination and counseling or family development services. If there is to be intentionality in the funding and direction for establishing such structures with public resources, this facilitative role must be defined and persons recruited and selected with the skills to fulfill that role and then supported within their organizations for doing it.

- *Persistent Outreach and Patience in Engagement.* Exemplary programs find ways to reach and connect with families who are not immediate joiners or connectors, recognizing that it takes persistence, creativity and patience in this task. They recognize that merely attending a first meeting or activity may be a huge step for some struggling and isolated families, and they create opportunities for actions that can lead up to taking this step. Some of the greatest gains come from individuals for whom it took months to bring to the point of being ready to come to a meeting and additional months to actually connect with and contribute to others.
- *Time, Place and Opportunity.* Exemplary programs create schedules according to the schedules of the individuals and families they serve, generally working to make them fit into their lives. For families with young children, this may involve providing child care or activities for children as well as adults. The times and places for gathering must be ones that enable participation, in safe and welcoming environments and with ways to get to and from the meetings.
- *Establishment of Boundaries (both participant and collective).* Exemplary programs know what they can produce and what is beyond their ability to address. They establish and maintain boundaries for what can occur within group activities and what participants must conform to as participants and members of the group. Such groups can be powerful forces in meeting participant needs and enabling growth and development. At the same time, they cannot substitute for some professional services or address some issues. They are not designed or equipped to respond to some behaviors and individuals.
- *Pathways to Leadership and Openness to Serendipity.* Exemplary programs help create pathways to leadership outside the group, as participants take on new roles and seek new challenges and opportunities. They respond to ideas presented by participants and create space, time, and opportunity for those to come to fruition, with an open structure for doing so.
- *Continuous Renewal and Adaptation.* Exemplary programs recognize that groups are based upon relationships among members and that passages, both joining and graduating from or leaving, a group are significant and must be recognized. They also recognize that most mutual assistance groups require some intimacy among members and cannot be continually expanded new members or grow beyond a certain size. These groups have their own lives and development, as participants start with one affinity to the group but then their own lives and interests change. They require continued renewal and adaptation, and some will end at the same time others are formed. In fact, continuous formation is likely to be essential to ensure that there are continued opportunities available for new participants to become engaged, contribute and lead.
- *Champions and Partners within the Community Power Structure.* Exemplary programs create strong bonds among participants, who largely are peers with a common affinity

and identity with the group. At the same time, there is value in and often a need to provide bridges for disenfranchised or otherwise marginalized individuals and groups with those in authority positions. These bridges can be facilitated by influential and connected champions and partners from the larger community. Such champions and partners are needed to secure the ongoing resources that programs need, and also for making connections that can take advantage of serendipitous opportunities that emerge and require larger community support.

- *Continuous Learning and Accountability.* Exemplary programs generally are part of learning organizations that are seeking continuous improvement and set high standards for themselves. Included in these is being accountable for their work, although the types of measures they set for themselves and their participants may not fall into the same discrete categories and metrics provided in most programs. Exemplary programs pride themselves on the results they and their participants achieve, and engage in constructive criticism and reflective practice to understand better how to identify and overcome barriers and limitations that they face.

As this list shows, this list of attributes does not lend itself to standardization or quality control through regulation, adherence to a set curriculum, professional licensing and standards for staff, or even definition as a discrete program model. The challenges to creating such mutual assistance programs where they do not exist and where there is only latent demand for them requires recognizing their fluidity and messiness. From an organizational perspective, they contain certain opposable concepts – “institutionalizing the voluntary,” “replicating the unique,” “mass producing warm, caring relationships,” “producing serendipity.”³¹ They clearly occupy a place between the “professional” and the “voluntary.” Even the notion of sustainability may need to be altered to recognize the life course of such mutual assistance networks and the need for multiple opportunities to participate that reflect the multiple affinities around which they may form and develop. The metrics and methodologies for evaluating their efficacy and effectiveness need to be appropriate, without sacrificing rigor in that evaluation.³²

Still, such efforts continue to be re-invented at the community level, within programs serving families and children that seek to be asset-based and consumer-driven – both because they are needed and because they are what families and children want. There are essential to the growth and development that is needed both for individual fulfillment and community.

Bridging Science and Policy: Implications for Philanthropy and Government

Obviously, there are many naturally occurring mutual assistance networks, some of which are largely social (recreational leagues of all types, organized group gatherings developing among friends or through faith or social institutions) and others more civic (community betterment organizations, parent-teacher organizations). Even as social institutions, however, these often provide opportunities for sharing information and help that benefits participants economically and educationally as well as socially.

While the role of government in regulating or dictating the operations of these networks should be and is very limited, in fact, government and society recognize and support them through tax policies regarding charitable contributions, property tax exemptions for religious and educational institutions, financing of parks and gymnasiums and donations of public space for meetings and activities. Disproportionately, however, such government supports and their benefits involve families and communities that already have resources available to them to aid their formation. These supports do not reach down to resource poor communities and low-income families in the same way they do for more affluent ones.

To do so requires both learning from exemplary initiatives and then designing structures and strategies required to better enable the replication of their attributes. As shown by Dunst and Trivette with respect to family resource programs, this involves a much deeper effort to create and sustain organizational cultures that take that asset-based approach to families.³³

It then requires opportunities, incentives and investments to create such attributes, potentially within entirely new programs and initiatives but also within existing organizations and institutions within disinvested neighborhoods or serving isolated, stressed and poor families.

Both philanthropy and government have a role to this end.

The current emphasis upon “evidence-based” programs and “results-based accountability” in public investments must be defined in ways that can support such practice. As the preceding has shown, there is an “evidence-based” need to develop programs and strategies that build resiliency through reciprocity and mutual assistance and there are exemplary practices that have shown promise in doing just that. While there are not yet a set of established strategies to more predictably develop such programs and strategies where they are not present, there needs to be concerted effort, through demonstrations and action research, to define those strategies as “evidence-based” and as deserving of investment as more discrete programs with more discrete programmatic objectives.

“Results-based accountability” implies that, as the emphasis is shifted from process to outcomes, there can be substantially greater flexibility or discretion in the development and implementation of programs and services. This further means that public financing and investments provide for this flexibility, particularly as it applies to recognizing the value of supporting mutual assistance and not seeking to tie accountability to the provision of professional services.

It is likely that new investments, which may initially come in the form of foundation initiatives but subsequently must be incorporated into public finance, need to be made explicitly in such mutual assistance efforts, if they are to gain traction and build a base of exemplary practice for successful diffusion. First 5 California and Early Childhood Iowa (formerly Community Empowerment)³⁴ are two state initiatives that have created the flexible financing and encouraged the development of affinity-based mutual assistance networks of families with

young children. Similar investments could be made in such community-based efforts at both the state and federal levels.

Such financing can be contrasted with much more discrete efforts in the early childhood world to expand preschool programming and to establish home visiting, both of which largely adhere to a professional model for improving child development. While both preschool and home visiting could incorporate mutual assistance into their structures, most do not have that as a charge or necessarily an allowable investment within programs. In particular, while home visiting may foster resiliency and impart knowledge, it is likely to be incomplete in its help of families to the extent that there are not networks of peers for parents to connect with and provide mutual support and growth. In addition to direct funding for mutual assistance itself, public investments could create more flexibility and incentives to existing programs with which families attach and connect to provide that time, space and opportunity for mutual assistance.

Returning to Sheila, someone from the helping world of public programs – a Head Start program, a nurse home visitor, or even a child protective service worker and counselor – may have identified and kindled her resilient spark. But it didn't stop there, and she would not have achieved what she did if it did stop there. She exerted effort to achieve success, but in the context of others who she helped as they supported her along the way. If her mentor from the helping world also provided some navigation and opportunity to make such connections with others, the mentor likely went "above and beyond" the boundaries of that job. Creating these opportunities for the many Sheilas, both for those who have been identified by a mentor in the helping world but whose help stopped there and those who are still waiting to be identified is the biggest challenge and opportunity to service financing and delivery for truly succeeding with children and families that current public system responses have left behind.

THIRST TO CONTRIBUTE

A List of Strategy Prerogatives for Building Leadership, Social Capital and Community

Introduction: What We Really Know About What Works

Motivational interviewing, appreciative inquiry, health realization, bridging and bonding, time banking and co-production, community asset mapping, community leadership teams, action circles, community and world cafes, mutual assistance and self-help, cultural reciprocity, family resource centers, centers for working families, enabling component, community schools, storytelling theaters, youth prevention leadership projects, family place libraries, developmental surveillance, microlending and enterprise, peer learning networks, parent-professional partnerships, transformational leadership, affinity networks.

In my 30 years of working “to link research and policy on issues vital to children and families” (my organization’s mission), I have come across a diverse array of exemplary community initiatives, usually ones that have developed organically. Often, there has been a passionate individual or group of leaders that has attracted the attention of an enlightened funder willing to go outside the mainstream in defining what means “help.” In essence, these efforts have moved from a service to an opportunity approach to human development.

Often located within this country’s most distressed neighborhoods and working with its most vulnerable children and families, these initiatives somehow have taken hold where others have not. They display irrefutable signs not only of improving the lives of individual children and their families but also of helping to build community. They most often include actual “family-friendly” places where residents get together and help support one another.

The list of terms above represents some of the different ways that these initiatives and their leaders define key aspects of their work. Some of these have strong theoretical and empirical underpinnings. Although most have not been subject to traditional evaluation, the programs have produced compelling evidence of their ability to engage residents, build relationships and new leaders and foster individual and community resiliency.

They grow out of different disciplines and from work with different constituencies, but they share some common approaches – strength-based, family-centered, community-embedded. Collectively, they also have produced an array of tools and strategies (many on that list) that deserve to be shared more broadly.

What they face in the way of challenges is their own sustainability and growth. They do not represent interventions around a specific presenting issue that can be easily defined and placed within current public service categories that receive funding. They serve an enabling role that

must extend beyond a specific, point-in-time intervention – and provide a continuity of opportunities for individuals in their communities. Most public funding is tied to discrete activities or interventions that are based upon a professional service model rather than a family empowerment and mutual assistance one. Few outside funders are willing to fund these initiatives in perpetuity, and most foundations have some expectation that success will itself produce needed financing, from public or other private sources.

As a result, these initiatives often remain as oases within their neighborhoods and communities, operating on a small scale and within a particular domain of activity (health, early care and education, after-school youth activity, etc.). They usually do not get to the size or scope to establish a critical (or turning point) mass of activity that might help further community transformation and create synergy across multiple community service and support systems.

In short, they offer the elements for a comprehensive, community-approach to supporting and strengthening families and building communities – but their work needs to be scaled up if their full community-wide potential is to be realized.

In addition, this “scaling up” needs to build upon what makes these initiatives effective, which involves both furthering the diffusion of the approaches listed above and ensuring fidelity to the underlying attributes that make them effective. That means investing in human and social capital within neighborhoods in very different ways than traditional services operate.

What We Need To Do to Move Forward on What We Know: A Personal List of Strategy Prerogatives

It is common for initiatives that focus upon systemic or community change to describe their “lessons learned” that can guide future actions and initiatives. These often stop short, however, in identifying what contributed, and did not contribute, to changing people’s lives at the grassroots levels. Here is my personal list of strategy prerogatives, based upon the “lessons learned” from exemplary community-based initiatives that should be incorporated into future efforts to develop, scale up, and sustain such approaches.

1. Identify and use people’s assets; they are needed for the community.

It has become commonplace in the helping professions to stress the need to identify people’s strengths as well as their problems. Often, however, this extends only to the identification of assets and not to their use. A youth in the juvenile-justice system is identified as having strong musical aptitude, but this does not mean that he is provided additional musical instruction or given opportunities to perform. Instead, he may be warned that continued unlawful behavior will result in loss of access to his music. If given the opportunity to pursue his musical talent, however, that youth might entertain others and even decide that continuing his musical pursuit was more important than continuing the activities that got him into trouble. At a minimum, it might bring some pleasure to his life.

When I once talked with Yoland Trevino, who directed the Vaughn Family Center in Pacoima, California, how she identified and made use of individual's assets, she looked at me with surprise. "Everyone who walks in the door is a blessing," she said. "My center and the community have so many needs; everyone has gifts to give and I just make that possible." While Yoland does that innately, it is a talent that can be transmitted and learned. Moreover, it is the only way to truly build community, to draw upon one another's assets for a larger good. There may exist some literature and even training curricula on how to help frontline staff acquire such talents, but I have not been able to find it. If any program staff in most community programs are even assigned the task as asset development, they generally are expected to pick it up on their own.

2. Start but don't stop with existing neighborhood leadership and existing governance tables.

In developing ties within a neighborhood, Rainbow Research indicates that existing community-based organizations and their leaders can provide an "introduction to the community," but existing neighborhood leadership rarely is sufficient for the community building work that is needed. There is no reason to expect that existing neighborhood leadership and community-based organization capacity is any more altruistic, inclusive, integrated and collaborative, or intimately connected to residents, than is the leadership in affluent communities. Building leadership is a political process, one that must recognize, navigate and sometimes challenge what existing leadership exists.

Existing leadership can be threatened by the emergence of new leadership; but new leadership needs to emerge. This is particularly true when there are existing governance tables where neighborhood leaders have seats. These leaders are unlikely to want to give up those seats and relinquish any power and connections they may have. The challenge, then, is to create new tables that can meaningfully engage nascent leadership and enable them to hone their leadership and organizational skills. Further, if the only option for leadership is to sit at governance tables, the talents of many potential leaders will be wasted. There does need to be a critical mass of new authentic involvement and activity, but there needs to be more of a focus upon expanding involvement and ensuring it is rewarding than on constructing formal governance structures for this purpose.

3. Create opportunities to lead: Leadership is not learned in a classroom.

My kids did not acquire what leadership skills they have through enrollment in specific leadership development programs. They had opportunities to take on leadership roles in substantive areas where they had a particular passion. Too often, initiatives develop youth leadership councils or parent leadership training programs and curricula that may provide useful information on how to serve on and chair or lead boards and committees or facilitate groups – but then do not provide any practical avenue for doing so in the individual's own area of passion and expertise. While leadership training programs can be helpful, they have to be relevant to the opportunities and interests of those for whom they are intended. They should not be the cart driving the horse. At least as much time, effort and resources should be devoted

to supporting residents in identifying their own next steps in taking action on behalf of themselves, their passions and their community – in creating the opportunities for practicing leadership.

4. Invest in facilitation, but recognize that facilitation is not case management and requires particular skills and dispositions.

A key missing piece in many poor, immigrant and minority communities is the time, space and opportunity for people to get together, support one another and plan and act for the future. “It takes time being poor,” and working simply to get by can sap energy. People can easily be discouraged about the potential for change, or for seeing themselves as being strong agents for change. Motivational interviewing or appreciative inquiry can help bring out individual’s hopes and values and opportunities for change, but people also need the time, space and opportunity to act on those hopes and the steps they see for change. Good case management or counseling can be an effective first step in drawing out individual hopes and dreams, but beginning to realize them largely requires interaction with others. While individuals may have networks of family and friends with whom they interact, these often are not sufficient to support growth toward economic self-sufficiency or to fulfill larger dreams. Peers even can be a barrier to that fulfillment, as peer culture largely is based upon current peer reality.

Moving beyond how to manage within the current environment to how to change the environment requires peer support, mutual assistance and chances to exert leadership – with facilitation that nourishes a culture for change and growth. Facilitating such group processes requires group processing skills that establish and maintain underlying group guidelines and operating principles but also provide an openness for group solutions. In a narrow construct, family team decision-making within child welfare has provided that opportunity, with its own facilitation based upon establishing clear ground rules and expectations for decision-making and agreement of parties to reach those goals, but then enabling the family team to develop its unique solution.

Facilitation skills and dispositions in a group setting are different from those in an individual counseling or case management one, as they must be attuned to multiple roles and responsibilities and dynamics. They must promote reciprocity and opportunities for different types of leadership from different members of the group.

Rarely, however, are the goals for successful facilitation articulated, and even less common is it for there to be explicit staff development and support for such work. If these roles exist, they often are at the bottom of the hierarchy within their organizations, with little attention provided to them. They need to be at the top.

5. Don’t think that naming an activity or program gives it any real meaning.

At a foundation meeting focusing upon creating “centers for working families,” several of us observed that different groups were defining these centers differently. Some saw them as

comprehensive workforce centers that would do a more concerted job of linking parents with employment and child care and other community services they needed to be employed. Others saw them in a career ladder-building role, working with families to move from low-wage employment to higher-wage employment through further skill development and stronger connections with the business community – with dual customers of businesses and employees.

When our group thought about it and asked what “working families” might want to help them in their lives – which often involved balancing caregiving and breadwinning responsibilities – we concluded that many simply wanted a break from their work, respite and support. After working all day and coming home to children who were waiting for them and had their own demands (for attention, food, clean clothing, etc.), they also had household tasks to perform. A “center for working families” might simply be a place they could go with their children to have a good time, where someone else took on some of the responsibility for getting a meal together and cleaning up afterward and supervising the children in activities they enjoyed. Parents might enjoy connecting with one another, and even doing some planning and sharing of resources and support. If facilitated, such actions also might lead to helping families build their own employment capital and secure better jobs, and certainly could assist them in linking up to other community resources.

Clearly, different people will project different roles and goals for a “center for working families.” Too often, I have seen a program “named” and then projected as the solution to a range of individual and community needs that it is ill-equipped to meet. It fails to develop its own focus, or finds that its focus is far different from the many perspectives of what it should be from those who selected the name. Naming a program does not give it substance or real meaning.

6. Recognize that staff recruitment and selection is more critical to success than program and curricula design.

Two decades ago, I was asked to develop a good job description for a frontline worker in a family-support program charged with engaging vulnerable families and facilitating their growth. I approached the assignment by seeking out friends of mine who seemed to have assembled vibrant staff who made these connections. Of course, most didn’t have formal job descriptions – but they did have a lot of insights of what they looked for in individuals they hired:

- A person who knows no strangers
- Authenticity
- Someone who can tolerate ambiguity and see more than one avenue to success
- A good sense of humor
- Someone with a positive, grounded life of their own who doesn’t project on others
- A realistic optimist

They further could tell me how they interviewed for these jobs and found persons who would fit. Later, I read *Urban Sanctuaries*, which is the best description I have seen of what makes youth service workers effective in connecting with youth. While there are many things you can teach, you have to start with people who have those attributes – both a knack and passion for the work. Moreover, those that first step forward are not necessarily those with such skills. In their discussion of the role of community workers in the Ford Foundation’s Fair Start program, Robert Halpern and Mary Larner recount that the first people who were identified or stepped forward as community leaders and hired to do outreach work often did not work out. They may have been very good in some community advocacy and leadership roles, but fostering others in their growth (even into leaders) was not one of them. Sites often went through a painful process in replacing such individuals. They found they could find people from within the community with the orientation and aptitude for being effective frontline community workers, but they had to look in the right places. Recruiting and then selecting the right staff for the work is absolutely critical to success. Many things can be taught, but others cannot.

7. Make it fun and meaningful for participants, and they will return and bring their friends.

When I asked Liz Chun, a developer of Play+Learn Groups in Hawaii, how to keep parents involved (attrition being a problem for many home-visiting and family-support programs), she said, “If the children have fun, the parents will come back.” As a parent whose children at that time were young, this made a lot of sense. I did drag my kids to some activities, but I knew the cost and toll – on them and me. Alternatively, I went to places that I otherwise would not have gone because my kids wanted to go and enjoyed it, and this enjoyment rubbed off on me. Emma Goldman’s “If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be part of your revolution,” is certainly relevant.

Actually, this really isn’t difficult to do, provided one moves away from thinking that one needs to “get to the heart of the problem” and “solve it” in the most efficient manner. People like to get together, particularly when they can chat with others, have an opportunity to relax and share experiences, and get respite from having to simultaneously make a meal, fold the laundry and supervise their children. Over time, most are willing to reciprocate and contribute to the cause, setting up or providing food, organizing a speaker or giving a ride to another participant. Reciprocity is a critical element to building resiliency and fostering leadership.

8. Engage in persistent and creative outreach: Unleash the desire to connect for those who have been let down in the past.

I have heard a very similar story from almost every program I have visited that I viewed as truly engaging and supporting families and their growth. In home visiting, it is about a family who never seems to be reachable and never home, even when appointments have been scheduled. In family-centered work, it is about a family who rarely shows, and doesn’t react or participate when there. I learn about these families because they invariably are brought up when I ask about successes, where programs have seen families truly blossom and grow – those they felt most excited about. In the case of a home visitor, it is persistent efforts to make contact that

ultimate breaks down the family's distrust that the home visitor is like others who have offered to help, only to disappoint. "I thought you would be like all the others, but you kept showing up. I finally decided you might be for real." In the case of a family center, it is making sure the welcome mat is out. "I needed to know enough to trust before I would open up. I had to feel safe, and that took time."

Some struggling families have long histories of abandonment and disappointment, of individuals saying they want to help but end up wanting to control. Often, the most critical step in personal growth is overcoming this distrust, provided that there is something there that is worthy of trust. Once that happens, the energy that is unleashed can amaze.

9. Embrace the fact that people are smart in different ways.

If programs are to build upon assets, they need to identify them. When I was visiting some family-support programs we established in Iowa to take a two-generational approach to welfare reform, I found that several, independently, had initiated "makeover" nights where a parent participant helped others in selecting their colors, doing their nails and hair and related activities. As a feminist, my initial reaction was one of some skepticism, but I later found that this was a powerful way for some women to assert or reassert their worth and value. Moreover, there were people who really could help them in the process. The leaders in putting together makeover nights were different from the leaders in helping others navigating the school system or tutoring children.

My mother taught a third-world cultures course at Iowa State University and she used graduate students from emerging nations, mostly pursuing degrees in agriculture or engineering, as her graduate assistants. This proved to be a wonderful strategy, as it provided those assistants with much-needed income to stay in school and it gave Iowa students cross-cultural educational experiences that went far beyond classroom instruction. The graduate students were the experts in their culture and the discussions with students were livelier and more real than could be provided by a cultural anthropologist in that culture. The fact is that different people have different strengths, passions and skills, and these need to be recognized and enlisted. The same holds for staff, and it is particularly important to find good matches across staff and participants and to have sufficient diversity among staff and their own backgrounds to be able to make connections with very different types of people and very different kinds of intelligence.

10. Start where residents are, and not where systems would like them to be.

A frequent comment I receive from those in professional service systems that seek to engage families about the difficulty of doing so. Despite a variety of outreach efforts, families don't show up, or those that show up do not get engaged. "We've tried everything we can think of," I've often heard, "but we cannot seem to break through."

At the same time, true grassroots organizations virtually never see engaging families as an issue.

Usually, professional systems invite participation on the professional systems' own turf, and they often provide implicit ground rules for participation. They have decided what roles families should assume, and they expect families to be at that level of responsibility. It is participation on the system's terms, and even where this may be where some parents will end up, it is not where many of them start. The structure sets parents up for admonition and frustration, so why would they want to continue to show up?

Professional and client relationships rarely are ones of equality – establishing settings where the playing field is more level is key to successful engagement. Again, this requires facilitation rather than management skills.

11. Nurture the parent in everyone: Children are a great motivator.

Ralph Smith, now vice president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, ran a Children's Initiative in Philadelphia that worked with some of the toughest young men in Philadelphia and sought to reconnect them to society. Often regarded as pariahs in their own communities, many of these young men were fathers. Ralph found that, while the street culture was strong and made it difficult for them to entertain change for their own benefit, the Initiative could connect with them to create a better life for their children, in some instances to be the father they had never had. In short, they would do things for their kids that the street wouldn't allow them to do for themselves. Bryan Samuels, now head of the Division of Children and Family Services in the Obama Administration, early in his career as a community activist interviewed gang members in North Lawndale in Chicago and asked what their community most needed. The top three responses gang members gave were job training and counseling, health care for their mothers and girlfriends, and educational opportunities for their younger siblings. These are pretty altruistic choices, ones that focus upon family and the future.

Virtually all parents want their children to grow up and succeed. If they see realizable actions to create opportunities for their children, parents often will do extraordinary things to make them possible. Focusing upon children often results in benefits in adult growth, development and well-being.

12. Help people win at the middle-class game.

Ruby Payne has done a great deal of work training to teachers in how to address the needs of children and families in poverty. She frames much of her work around understanding how different the experiences and skills required to live in poverty are contrasted with the experiences and skills for living in the middle class. She describes the skills needed to live in poverty as involving a certain bonding with others and sharing what few resources come one's way with those with the most immediate need. In contrast, she describes the skills those in the middle class learn as accumulating their assets for their own future use for one's own family and its growth.

We wanted to get the perspective on how those struggling to advance out of poverty viewed Payne's analysis, and we asked the participants in our Community Leadership Teams (groups of families on welfare seeking to get ahead under the then-new Family Opportunity and Personal Responsibility requirements). They agreed with much of Payne's analysis, but they also raised some fundamental questions about characteristics of their lives and relationships that they valued and did not want to give up. They wanted to "win at the middle class game," but they didn't want to give up what they valued in their lives. If a parent can achieve greater economic success for her family, but only by leaving her sister, neighbor and best friend behind, the economic success will come at a significant cost.

13. Value diversity, but recognize fundamental values that bring people together.

Lip service is often paid to embracing diversity, without recognizing that there are real differences in cultural practices. Recognizing these differences is important – and recognizing how these differences shape overall world views is essential to working, even when the goal is to change world views. The United States has a particularly strong orientation to individualism, personal achievement, products and materialism, and democratic and egalitarian relationships. Other cultures have a greater emphasis upon family, collective well-being, process and spirituality, or hierarchical relationships.

Children learn how they are treated by others at a very early age. When their home culture is different from the dominant culture, their own identity and sense of worth can be challenged. Some of the values in dominant American culture – tolerance, equality of opportunity by race and gender, adherence to democratic decision-making – may not be universal to all cultures but are ones that are underpinnings to living in American society. Understanding why cultures establish hierarchical and classist values is important, but that does not mean practice of them will be allowed in society. Other values in dominant culture – toward individual achievement and competition versus collective activity and collaboration, toward profit and materialism in contrast to stewardship and spirituality – can benefit from cross-cultural examination and recognition of alternative approach.

People of the dominant culture often may be unaware of the relativity of some of their values and beliefs and the fact that these can and should change, over time. When I once talked with my mother about different cultural practices and the fact that child abuse was common around disciplinary practices over toilet training in the African American community, my mother proceeded to describe that toilet training among many tribes in sub-sahara Africa occurred naturally, as children were wrapped and on their mothers backs while the mothers carried them in their daily work. When the child was put down and unwrapped, the loosening of the bonds resulted in defecation. In China, the slits on the backs of pajamas facilitated children in relieving themselves. She went on to add that, while she was growing up in the pre-Spock era, there was a common phrase, "Spank your baby dry." American culture in the 1920s was much closer to African-American culture today with respect to toilet training.

We all can benefit from learning from the richness of culture, in learning more about ourselves as well as others. “Cultural reciprocity” has been coined as a term for fostering such understanding in serving families and may serve as a means for conveying such actions, provided it moves beyond being a “buzzword” to a becoming a set of practices and actions.

14. Create the time, space and opportunity for synergy.

Quinton Baker, who has been successful in helping poor rural community members address public health issues, contends that the first step toward community engagement involves “hanging out in the community,” listening and getting to know about people’s real lives and where they like to get together and what is important to them. Barack Obama learned such lessons in his work as a community organizer in Chicago, as he relates in the second part of *Dreams of My Father*.

Building relationships takes time and understanding, knowing about people and how they play, pay and pray. Different people will gravitate toward different settings and activities, so there is need for multiple approaches and diverse opportunities to connect. “If the only way for people to contribute was through attending meetings and develop strategic plans,” one friend told me, “We would be using one-hundredth of the human capital available to us and have a pretty sorry society.”

Defining participation and involvement narrowly or in professional terms foreshortens understanding – particularly of the strengths and opportunities within a community. There is some value of repetition and redundancy – not everyone steps up at the first chance to participate, particularly in something new.

The professional service world tends to be structured a regimented, diagnosis-treatment-effect model, where the diagnosis is made by the professional based upon the professional area of expertise. Often, however, there is not a single diagnosis or presenting condition, but multiple interactive factors that give rise to different approaches and potential solutions. “Hanging out in the community” is rarely regarded as a reimbursable activity, but it may be essential for building relationships, understanding both problems and opportunities and moving toward community solutions.

15. Define the prize: lead and educate on accountability and results.

The policy world for children and families has become infatuated with randomized trials and program outcome accountability for any new or modified service strategies (although existing services often are not held to the same standards).

Increasingly programs are asked to define and measure themselves in terms of indicators of well-being that have been defined from above – family employment and self-sufficiency, school completion, child abuse prevention, teen pregnancy prevention. Debates rage over what constitute “evidence-based” programs and practices. Sometimes, these seem to be used to

eliminate investments that do not have quantitative studies showing enduring impact as they are to work to expand investments in programs that show evidence of success.

Rarely do the outcome measures that are defined as program goals by policy makers truly reflect what exemplary programs do in building resiliency at the individual, family and community levels. The tendency among many programs and advocates either is to reframe their work as if they can achieve those ends (as they are clearly desirable to both families and policy makers) or to resist such accountability on the basis of being put into an inappropriate box. Clearly, there are times when programs and advocates may need to either make claims they know are not entirely reflective of what they do and might achieve or to make clear that the accountability standards are inappropriate to them.

There also is the potential for being proactive on the issue of accountability and results – to move to do what in the end is needed to educate policy makers and the public on the appropriate way to help programs continuously improve and produce impacts and for systems to invest sufficiently across programs to be able to achieve results needed to truly close the gap in results (which requires going well beyond investing in a few interventions which can make claim to high returns on investment).

This begins with accepting responsibility and accountability for demonstrating results, but doing so in terms consistent with what programs and services are designed to achieve. When I was asked by a foundation grant officer what one indicator would be most appropriate for holding home-visiting programs accountable for impacts, I answered in one word, “Resiliency.” It wasn’t the indicator that was being sought by the grant officer, but it was the exact type that we need to develop, promote and defend.

Of course, “resiliency” isn’t one indicator, but a range of growth potentials at an individual, family and community level that are realized through initiative. It may look different from one family or community to another, and it may be hard to measure by a simple metric, but it is real and worthy of measure. Moreover, if we are to succeed with families and children that current systems fail, core to this work is restoring reasoned hope and fostering resiliency. It is not a fuzzy concept, but it is not a simply measured one, either. Families are messy units of analysis, and their growth does not fit comfortably into regression equations. That, however, does not mean that it is not essential to develop valid ways to measure what programs are trying to do – for continuous learning and improvement, identification of special strategies for different groups, and ultimately for reasons of accountability.

Yet accountability must go both ways – policy makers need to be accountable to making sufficient investments both in effective service strategies to foster this resiliency and in quality professional service systems to ensure that gains in resiliency occur and are then not undermined by the lack of subsequent opportunity to achieve success. The professional service systems need to be accountable to contributing to this resiliency and not devaluing mutual assistance and community building in their work.

My experience has been that programs that are proactive in holding themselves to high standards, clear in explaining why their work is essential, and willing to be accountable are held in high regard by policy makers. Perhaps even more important, they are needed to educate policy makers on how to develop accountability systems that establish fair expectations on all systems serving children and families. There are colleagues in the evaluation field who can assist in this work, and a cadre of researchers and evaluators needs to be activated. Again, the goal is to hold individual programs and practices accountable for their role in producing community results, but to hold the overall system (and its decision-makers) collectively accountable to producing those overall community results.

16. Emphasize the need to close the gap in results and not simply receive high rates of return on investment.

Advocates have made effective use of research on several early-childhood programs that modeled program impacts and projected long-term “returns on investment” from those programs. These findings and projections have had particular resonance with lawmakers and corporate-sector leaders and have led to increased advocacy for additional early-childhood investment.

While the studies themselves are heartening for showing the long-term impacts of these early-childhood programs across multiple dimensions of well-being, they also show that none are “silver bullets.” They reduce but do not eliminate the risk of poor outcomes in the later years for children at risk due to poverty and other family stresses. As point-in-time interventions focusing upon some, but not all, of the factors that contribute to resiliency and success, the programs more than “paid for themselves,” but did not achieve all that could be achieved for the children, families and communities they served.

Society has responsibilities to fulfill, and many of these can not be assessed on a financial, cost-benefit metric. There is little economic value in many of our services to seniors and those with disabilities, but they are the right thing to do. Closing gaps in opportunity and outcomes that exist due to discrimination and its legacy of real and perceived lack of opportunity are imperatives for an American society that prides itself on equal opportunity.

If advocates embrace the return on investment rhetoric as the primary rationale for public policy action, they run the risk of selling short both the need and opportunity for change. It is not good enough to boast about a long-term savings to society while closing only one-quarter of the achievement gap among our nation’s children.

Conclusion: It’s simple but it’s hard (which makes it worthwhile and fulfilling).

None of this is rocket science – at least not in the sense of requiring a detailed knowledge base on combustion and propulsion. The importance of relationships, resources, reciprocity and resiliency – of family and community – to healthy growth and development is part of everyone’s experience and understanding.

At the same time, it is a lot more straightforward (and certainly linear) to propel an inert piece of metal through empty space than it is to predictably nurture human growth and development. John Mattingly once described his work changing the child welfare system to equip foster parents to serve in the role of reunification partners as “it’s simple but it’s hard.” The concept is simple, but the execution requires a change in the way services and supports are now financed, managed, supported and held accountable. At the frontline level, the research of Carl Dunst and Carole Trivette has shown that sustaining the family support philosophy and practice within a program requires continuous nurturing – in transmission to new staff as they are added and in opportunities for renewal and reaffirmation of staff who stay on and themselves grow. It requires continued education and support within administrations and policymakers.

One cannot lose sight of the simple and undergirding message, but one has to be persistent, creative and passionate in helping everyone involved in policymaking, administration, service delivery and advocacy truly understand that message and embed it within their own work.

It is simple, and it is hard. “It is simple” means that it is not beyond all but a few people’s grasp – it is something that everyone can contribute to producing. “It is hard” reflects the fact that growth and development occurs through hard work and change, not easy and comfortable actions. Ultimately, however, that is what fulfills us, particularly when we are connected with others who are doing the same.

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alyce.mastrianni@cfcoc.ocgov.com; Melissa Busi
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Attachments: ThirsttoContributepaper.doc

Cathlin, Janis, Alyce, and Luanne,

It was great seeing you all at the COP meeting.

As we discussed, I am sending you the paper I did for the Annie E. Casey Foundation on the importance of supporting mutual assistance networks in our policy work.

Thanks.

Charlie

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