

# the Spokesman

SPECIAL EDITION

## PASSAGES 2000

*Live and Let Learn*



### SERVICE PLANNING FOR ALBERTA'S COMMUNITY REHABILITATION SERVICES

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#### ● PROCEEDINGS OF THE CALGARY, APRIL 1987 WORKSHOP

Recommendations of 20 focus groups.  
Featuring the views and stories of:

- W.O. Mitchell, "The Mean Magician"
- Ruben Nelson, "Maturing through Mutuality"
- John McKnight, "Communities That Help People"
- Michael Ozerkevich, "The Impact of Structural Change"

#### ● ANNOUNCING EDMONTON'S CONFERENCE NOVEMBER 5 -7, 1987

\$5.00

WORKSHOP PROCEEDINGS  
CONFERENCE REGISTRATION

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# STORIES AND VIEWS

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## COMMUNITIES THAT HELP PEOPLE

by John McKnight

I am a neighborhood organizer in disguise. I am basically here to talk with you about some things I'm sure you already know about the community.

I want you to think about the community in the past and the future. In the United States in the last ten years, we have experienced a systematic withdrawal of political and economic support for human service.

I'd like to reflect on experiences I have observed as less money and less government support have been available for human services in the United States. My guess is that you are approaching a kind of cutting back and withdrawal. Looking at this will help us think about and build a future.

I think it was about twenty five years ago that in the United States and also in Canada there was a major new commitment of funds, of people, a commitment to helping the vulnerable in society, through human services.

I worked in neighborhoods at that time, and I began to see in the community something I had never seen before. In our neighborhoods we began to see some new people.

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**Slowly it was revealed to us what it meant to be the focus of policies committed to solving problems through human services. We didn't know we were creating basic and profound change in the community.**

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The first one I saw was a teacher's aide, a person who came into the school to help the teacher. I remember when I heard about the teacher's aides I thought "That's wonderful, because our teachers are overburdened."

After the teacher's aide, other people started to show up. In one neighborhood here are some of the people who over the years came to help us.

First came the teacher's aide, then curriculum experts, audio-visual experts, drop-out counsellors, experts in alternative education, reading experts.

Then doctor's aides, neighborhood clinics with administrators, public health officers, experts on teenage pregnancy, vermin exterminators, police aides, police community relations experts, specialists in family violence, gang workers, anti-arson experts, welfare workers, disability workers, welfare advocates, budget trainers, eligibility verifiers, civil rights officials, legal aid lawyers, land clearance experts, allocation officers, housing developers, job coaches, economic development officers, unemployment counsellors, recreation planners, urban gardening advisors, energy conservation experts, and the managers, accountants and clerical people needed to support all of the foregoing.

Slowly it was revealed to me and other folks what it meant to be the focus of policies committed to solving problems through human services.

But I began to notice that folks in the neighborhood didn't come very often to the meetings of the neighborhood organizations any more. Something was being taught to them -- that the solution to their problem was in the hands of these professionals and experts. We didn't see we were creating three basic and profound changes in the community.

The first was that the human service system began to replace local community associations. Our churches and organizations that had been locally responsible began to withdraw to apathy, to forget, to be replaced. What had been centers of care were replaced by centers of service.

The second thing that happened was the neighborhood itself became a new place, a different culture. We were creating a serviced neighborhood, a neighborhood that often became an environment of programs rather than of citizens.

The third thing was that while we were replacing local community action and while we were creating an environment of service rather than of citizens, we didn't understand how costly this process really was.

The best study that helped us understand this was done three years ago in New York City. The study was an attempt to find out how much money was specifically allocated for low income people by the

federal, state and local government, churches, foundations and the United Way. They found out there was seven thousand U.S. dollars, that is nine thousand dollars Canadian, for every man, woman and child in New York City beneath the poverty line.

They went on to find out what happened to the money. The answer was that 37% of that money reached the low income people in income, and 63% of it reached them in services, in teacher's aides and vermin exterminators. So we discovered why poor people in New York were poor. Because they received one-third of the money appropriated for them in income and two-thirds in service workers.

What we didn't understand in our commitment to human services was that we had ignored or replaced community association. We created an environment that nurtured dependency and substituted service for income, in this case for people whose problem was by definition a lack of income.

Then along came inflation and Mr. Reagan and cutbacks and economic crises. We approached the cutbacks in the most purposeful way. I want to report to you how this was done incorrectly. Perhaps our mistakes will be of some advantage to you.

We didn't always do it the wrong way, but mostly we did. First, we ignored the community and its associations. We still didn't see that the principle problem-solving vehicle in a free society is citizens in association at a community level. Not volunteers. I'm talking about citizens. The people with the power and resources to decide how it ought to be solved.

We ignored community structure, association, citizens, I think because many people in human services don't believe in communities. They think communities are in the way. We also ignored them because they didn't look very strong to us because our human services were so powerful.

The second thing we did wrong was that we didn't come to grips with the fact that we had created serviced neighborhoods, environments of services. Instead we accepted the poorest of services that surrounded dependent people. But what we did was cut all of them back. We kept the administrative structure and cut back the front lines.

Then we did something you can see very clearly now in the data. We didn't really cut back on services, what we cut back on was income. We made people who are impoverished poorer in order to keep service providers from being hurt. And finally we decided not to give clients choices about the services that remained. There was a flourish, a move towards the idea but we had second thoughts.

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**We didn't always do it wrong, but mostly we did. We ignored the community and its associations. We created impoverished dependency. We cut client income to protect service providers. And we didn't give people choice.**

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We have done a lot of thinking about how to protect against creating impoverished service dependency. It seems to me that Alberta must be on the edge of having to decide how to come to grips with this question. It might be worth thinking about an environmental budget. You can examine your budget along six dimensions.

First, is your budget going to services or income? What is more liberating, service or income?

The second question is how much of the service allocation is going for medical care as against other kinds of service? Where are the services going -- to doctors, hospitals? Is that what we want? To medicalize people?

The third dimension has to do with whether or not your money is going for professional or expert services or is it going into community for lay support and community care?

The fourth dimension asks how much of your money is going for paid relationships as against relationships that express community life? How many people you say you are helping haven't a friend, are surrounded by nothing but paid friends?

The fifth dimension is one you all know well. That is, how much of your money is going for services that congregate people in any way, in residence or in work?

And finally, how much of your money is going for deficiency oriented rather than capacity oriented activities? I have seen some amazing people who are able to look at labelled people and see their capacities and bring them as a gift to community. I know that every community is waiting to accept the gifts. But we are blinded by our investment in deficiency and have failed to see capacity.

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**Three principles can guide you in deciding how to get along with less money. Put your priority on income. Invest in choice. And invest in the community. Only the community can give us love and power.**

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Now an agency can look at a budget along those six dimensions and find out whether you are investing in impoverished dependency or in the capacity for people to become citizens of the community.

Let me suggest three principles that will guide you back once you understand how your money is really being spent. The first is, put your priority on income, because income allows people to make choices, and people who make choices are citizens. The second principle is, invest in choice. Voucher, when you insist on giving people service rather than income. Third, invest in community. Not communities to help us, or volunteers or citizen participation, a commitment to support community organizations that use the gifts that people surrounded by services have been denied the opportunity to get.

After we understand the environment we are buying, we can look at the future and we will find that money is not our problem. Our problem is our vision. As I have met people I see three visions for the future. Two visions see the current fiscal situation as a crisis. The third does not.

The first vision is what I call the service vision. It is basically designed around the medical model. It sees the well-being of people expressed by surrounding their lives with service. A service vision can create an institution with no walls. You don't need walls to make an institution. What you need is to surround a person perfectly with service. That vision is impossible

economically. It is also impossible if you value citizenship because it never allows a person to be a citizen.

The second vision seems to be preferable. I call it the advocacy vision. It sees people surrounded by rescuers and arguers. Often this vision puts the labelled person in a peculiar situation where both the service and the community are seen as adversaries. Advocacy says we must protect this person from abuses. It is a vision that surrounds a person not with community or citizenship but with a different kind of professional. It substitutes service for income and has a basically alienated view of the community.

The third vision you could invest in is the community vision, the community and its association and ruled by its people, lay citizens, those who surround vulnerable people.

Why look at your budgets in those terms? Two reasons. The first is that the service or advocacy vision can never provide a person with care. I can pay you to serve her but I cannot say, "Care for her." The second reason is because neither in the service vision nor the advocacy vision are our people citizens. We are only citizens in community. We cannot be citizens in places where our economics, behavior, incentives, are controlled by others.

In my life, the two things most important to me are to experience care and citizenship, love and power. I want nothing less for every vulnerable labelled person.

People keep saying to me, "But how? What do you mean, invest in community?" I want to end by giving you a case study.

This is a story that takes place in a little town in Wisconsin called Spring Green. Spring Green has 1700 people. It's in dairy country. There are more cows in the county than there are people.

Is there a Canadian Legion Hall in your town? We have American Legions in the United States and there is a Hall in most towns. Ferdie is the commander of Post 1147 of the American Legion in Spring Green. Ferdie is about 58 years old.

We have Independence Day on July 4. We always have a big parade and the American Legion always leads off the parade. At the front of the parade there are three guys. Ferdie is the guy in the middle, middle-aged, pot belly, white shirt, blue jacket, carrying a flag. On either side are two other guys carrying guns that don't shoot.

Ferdie is also the cheese maker in town. Owns a little cheese factory. This is a story about Ferdie.

One day about six years ago a worker came to Spring Green and went to talk to a woman named Mary. When the worker got done talking to Mary, Mary got on the phone and called Ferdie. She said, "Ferdie there is a lady here I'm talking to that I want you to talk to." And Ferdie said, "Okay."

What you don't know is that Mary is Ferdie's older sister and the worker went to see her because she is very influential in town. After Mary understood what the worker wanted she called her brother Ferdie. As the worker drove out to the country where Ferdie makes the cheese, she was powerful beyond words because Mary has been running Ferdie's life since he was a baby.

When the worker got to the cheese factory to talk to Ferdie, he listened to the worker carefully because he knew that whatever happened here, Mary was going to hear about it tonight. Communities work by trust and obligation, not certification and money.

The worker said to Ferdie, "Do you remember Charles Symbles?"

He said, "I remember but I remember his mother better. She lived next door at one time."

"She died early, you remember that," the worker said. "When she died they sent her son Charlie to an institution. Now Charlie lives in a group home in the next town. But his home is here in Spring Green. I was wondering, Ferdie, if Charlie could join you and go to the Legion Hall. He could do something there. He could also meet some people."

Ferdie was really taken aback. He said to the worker, "Well you know Charlie wasn't in the big war and you had to be in it to be in the Legion."

The worker was a person who knew about community. So she said to Ferdie, "But Ferdie, he is fifty-four years old. He would have been in the war if he hadn't been in the institution."

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**As the parade came down Main Street, I knew what had happened. I knew Charlie was finally safe.**

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Ferdie knew that was right. That pulled the rug out from under him. And he knew if he said no, Mary would come down on him. So he screwed up his courage and went to the Legion meeting that evening.

When he got there the meeting was in full course. The cards were on the table, the beer bought. He sat down and after a while he said, "You fellas remember Charlie. Well, he is in a group home in the next town and I was wondering if it would be all right for him to come here some time."

They were all sort of stunned. Charlie had been away for over forty years. Then somebody said, "Well Ferdie, he wasn't in the big war."

Ferdie reached for his trump card the worker had given him and said, "But Charlie would have been in the war if he hadn't been in the institution." The guys thought about it. They decided to give it a try. So Ferdie brought Charlie in a few nights later, to the Legion Hall.

It wasn't two weeks before Charlie had become the bartender. Charlie would stand there and guys would come over and get beer. You know how it is with bartenders, people tell them things. Now Charlie doesn't talk, he just listens. So these guys would come and tell him their troubles. Charlie came to be closer to more men than even Father Gilbert.

When spring came they all went out to play baseball and Charlie went with them. In two weeks he had become the equipment manager.

One day late in the spring Charlie was walking down the road by the feedmill. There was a flash storm. Ralph Oit had left the windows open. The flash storm brought water down on the feed sacks. Ralph rushed outside to get somebody to help him get that feed out

of there and there was Charlie. He and Charlie got all the sacks out to dry. Ralph was impressed. He hired Charlie in the afternoons.

Ferdie bought a computer, put it in his office and turned the switch on. You know what? It does nothing. He was disappointed. But Charlie hung out a fair amount at the cheese factory and he turned it on and began to touch the keys. He began to spend hours in front of the thing. Ferdie realized that though Charlie doesn't talk, he does talk with the computer.

Ferdie told Mary who was the school principal, "He is talking to that computer." Mary drives twice a week to take continuing education courses. She said to Ferdie, "I can take Charlie over to extension, because they're giving computer courses." Mary began to drive him back and forth. Charlie learned a lot. And he began to show people in Spring Green how to use computers.

Out of this whole thing Mary became very fond of Charlie. Mary's son John went away to University. Her only son. So his room was vacant. She decided to invite Charlie to come and live in the boy's room.

She called up the worker and said she wanted to see if Charlie could come and stay with her. But she was afraid. She didn't know about the money situation and she knew he needed some special medical care. The worker came and talked to her and said, "Don't worry Mary. We have it arranged so Charlie will get additional money from his job that will allow for his medication from Dr. Thorn right here in town." So Charlie moved in.

So there he is. He has got real care, friends, he is involved in recreation, and he has a job. He has a special gift for those computers. He lives at home and has no worries.

But he has a great worker, a worker who understood how communities work. After she introduced Charlie to the people of Spring Green she let go, because she

didn't have a service vision or an advocacy vision. She had a community vision.

Can you imagine a meeting where an agency director would say, "We got this fifty-two year old guy named Charlie. I want you to make him the best friend of fifty people, get him a job, put him on a ball team, make him a computer expert and find him a home." How many workers would it take to do that?

There is a last part of the story.

Two years ago Charlie walked into Ferdie's office and found Ferdie dead. We were worried about what this meant for Charlie. It was June. On July 4, Independence Day, I was there to watch the parade. When the parade turned down Main Street, there were three people, two with guns and one in the middle with a flag. The one with the flag was Charlie.

And I knew what had happened to Charlie. I knew he was finally safe. No worker could ever keep Charlie from falling back into an institution. In that group home he would have grown old and gone back to an institution. But now he is safe. He's safe because Spring Green is not a dependency of an agency. It is the place that surrounds Charlie.

**The community is the only safe place for our folks.** Community is a powerful place, sometimes a tough place, where people are vulnerable, people die, care and finally live out their lives as citizens. A sweet place where every Charlie needs to be.

**JOHN MCKNIGHT** is Associate Director, Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, Northwestern University, Illinois. He is also a lecturer, consultant, researcher, and student of the transformation underway among welfare states of the western world. This is a condensed version of John McKnight's talk. To order a transcript of the complete talk, see page 24.