Redefining Community

by John L. McKnight

"Life in a community is by definition a life that is interdependent."

It was in a small New England town that I first understood the limits of community services. The town was located in a state with one of the most humane and progressive systems for serving people who are labeled developmentally disabled. Very few were in large institutions; small group homes had proliferated; sheltered workshops were being dismantled; and a serious effort was under way in the schools to bring labeled children into the regular classrooms. In this town, I was taken to a group home for such people. The home was physically indistinguishable from the other houses on the street. Living in the house were five middle-aged men, most of whom had lived in this residence for nearly ten years.

It was with considerable pride that an agency director and public official took me to visit these men. They wanted me to see how their clients were "a part of the community" and the beneficiaries of an effective program of community services. When the opportunity came to talk to each of the men, I inquired about their lives, experiences, and relationships in the town. To my surprise, the response of each man made clear that they had almost no social relationships with their neighbors or the other citizens of the town. None of them could identify a close local friend or neighbor, and none was involved in any kind of organization, association, or club. When I asked the staff members whether they knew of any social relationships the men had in the community, they were unable to identify any other than a few shopkeepers.

Later I learned, by talking with other people within the state human services system, that the isolated circumstances of

these five men tended to be the rule rather than the exception. Nonetheless, they were described as "deinstitutionalized," as being "in the community," and receiving "community services." That was when I first realized that all of this community language obscured the basic fact that these men were completely isolated from community while surrounded by community services.

Civil society's mediating strengths have been eliminated.

One wonders how it is possible, in a small town of 5,000 people, to find a typical house and have five residents live there for ten years without any effective community relationships. Yet, human service systems designed to provide what are called "community services" often have managed to do just that.

Perhaps the issue can be clarified by defining "community services" more accurately. I would not want to suggest that there are services that will "make people part of the community." Rather, I mean to point out that services provided in small local places should not be called community services if they do not involve people in community relationships. Indeed, what are now called "community services" are often a major barrier to involvement in the community. Let's say, then, that the system in this state is now providing *local services*, not community services. And that the relocation of those services to local places has had almost no positive effect on the participation of labeled people in community life.

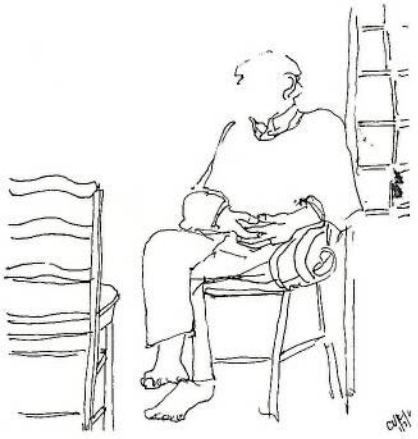
This failure of integration clearly limits the lives of the labeled people themselves. But the exclusion also limits the experience of local citizens. Most community members have infrequent opportunities to be joined in their community life by people who have been given one of the labels established by the service industry. Indeed, the common life of North America is so segregated that the absence of experience with those who are excluded has led many citizens to imagine that labeled people are somehow inappropriate for community life. Many have come to believe that labeled people are so incapacitated that their lives literally depend on separate and expert attention. Having accepted this proposition, most citizens lead lives in which they can only imagine, never see or talk to, labeled people.

How can incorporation of labeled people into community life be achieved? Before we can respond to that question, we must ask: What do we mean by community?

There is no universally accepted definition. However, one is so practically useful that it can become central to the work of those concerned about the incorporation of labeled people into community life. I am referring to an understanding laid out by Alexis de Tocqueville, the French count who visited the United States in 1831. What he found was that European settlers were creating a society different from the one they knew in Europe: communities formed around an uncustomary social invention — small groups of common citizens coming together to form organizations that solve problems.

Tocqueville observed three features in

how these groups operated. First, they were groups of citizens who decided they had the power to decide what was a problem. Second, they decided they had the power to decide how to solve the problem. Third,



they often decided that they would themselves become the key actors in implementing the solution. From Tocqueville's perspective, these citizen associations were a uniquely powerful instrument being created in America, the foundation stones of American communities. Tocqueville's understanding of community is helpful in thinking about the incorporation of labeled people into community life because it focuses on the collective relationships that we understand as an association.

It should seem obvious that communities are collective associations. They are more than and different from a sense of friendships. One can have a friendship with a labeled person in an institution, for example, but that does not mean the person has been incorporated into the community. A community is more than just a place. It comprises various groups of people who work together on a face-to-face basis in public life, not just in private.

The kinds of associations that express and create community take several forms. Many of them are relatively formal, with names and officers, elected by the members. They may be the American Legion, the church bowling league, or the local peace fellowship.

A second kind of association is not so formal. It usually has no officers or public name. Nonetheless, it represents a gathering of citizens who solve problems, celebrate together, or enjoy their social compact. These associations could be a poker club, a coffee klatch, or gathering of neighbors who live on the block. The fact that they do not have a formal name and structure should not obscure the fact that they are often the sites of critical dialogue, opinion, information, and decision making that influence the values and problem-solving capacities of citizens. Indeed, many Americans are primarily influenced in their decision making and value formation by these informal groups.

Community services involve people in community relationships.

A third form of association is less obvious because one could describe the place where it occurs as an enterprise or business. However, much associational activity takes place in restaurants, beauty parlors, barber shops, bars, hardware stores, and other places of business. People gather in these places for

interaction as well as transaction. In the eighteenth century, some of the most basic discussions about the formation of the government of the United States and its Constitution occurred in inns and taverns, and similar settings provide the backdrop for some of the most fundamental associational life today.

These three types of association represent the community from which most labeled people are excluded, and into which they need to be incorporated if they are to become active citizens at the associational center of a democratic society.

Once we have understood the nature of the community of associations, we can begin to look at ways to incorporate excluded people into this community life.

Some people who have been excluded forge a path back into community on their own. This is usually a heroic struggle that requires great commitment and persistence. And while we know that this escape into inclusion is infrequent, it is equally clear that life in the community is the dream of many of those labeled people whose lives are surrounded by nothing but services.

A second point of entry into community life is created by family and friends who almost always have a vision for the labeled individual that reaches beyond access to community services. They see that the good life is not just a fully serviced life, but one filled with the care, power, and continuity that comes from being part of a community.

A third point of entry into community is the one I would like to focus on in this article. It is a process involving individuals who assume a special responsibility for guiding excluded people out of service and into the realm of the community. In varying degrees, this phenomenon occurs in many places.

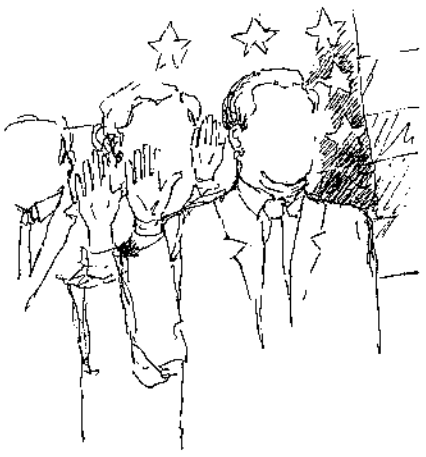
At Northwestern University's Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, for the past eight years we have been engaged in a continuing study of the initiatives of these individuals who serve as what we call "community guides." The guides are unique, unschooled in their efforts, and informed by their own individual creativity and insight. While it is difficult to generalize about these people, it is possible to describe some patterns of their work.

Effective guides do not just introduce one person to another; they bring a person into the web of associational life that can act as a powerful force in that person's life. And they bring the individuals into life as citizens by incorporating them into relationships where their capacities can be expressed — where they are not simply defined by their "deficiencies." Most guides are people with a special eye for the gift, the potential, the interest, the skill, the smile, the capacity of those who are said to be "in special need." Focus-

ing on these strengths they introduce people into community life.

Several guides we interviewed had previously worked in service systems, and told us they had not realized that their entire understanding of the people they called clients was focused on "fixing" them. They report that their most basic change in attitude, allowing them to be a guide, was to stop "fixing people."

A second attribute of most, but not all, effective guides is that they are well connected in the interrelationships of community life. They have invested much of life's energy and vitality in associational activity. Based on these connections, they are able to make a variety of contacts quickly because "they know people who know other people." This is why most guides come from community life rather than service systems. A person interested in human service can spend money and receive training that will give that person the capacity to fix others. There is, however, no school program, curriculum, or money that can connect a person to associational community life.



The third common characteristic of community guides is that they achieve their ends because they are trusted by their community peers, and not because they have institutional authority. This point is a correlate of the second. If guides are well connected, it is because they are trusted. And that trust is the result of their having invested their lives and commitments in the lives of others in the informal web of associational life.

In working through a framework of trust, the guides do not identify themselves with systems. They do not say that they are from the Department of Mental Deficiency, Division of Experimentation, Bureau of Community Programs. Instead, they say, "I'm a friend of your sister Mary, and she said that I should ask you about the choir that you direct. I have a friend who loves to sing and has a beautiful voice, and I think that you might like to have her in your choir." In this way, the guide is introducing a person who is excluded based on her capacity to sing. She is making the introduction through a relationship with a trusted relative. She is seeking engagement of the excluded person in an association of community life — a local choir. In two sentences, the guide is able to bring together the capacity, the connectedness, and the trust that are the visible pathways into community life.

The fourth characteristic of almost all community guides is that they believe strongly that the community is a reservoir of hospitality that is waiting to be offered. It is their job to lead someone to ask for that hospitality. The belief in a hospitable community is a critical ingredient in the work of successful guides. Their vivacious expectations of success make it clear that they are "making an offer you

can't refuse" when they introduce an excluded person to a citizen active in associational life. They are not apologetic or begging or asking for charity or help. Instead, they are enthusiastically presenting the gift of one to the hospitality of the other.

In our experience, we have found that guides' belief in a hospitable community is well founded. Indeed, many guides find that their belief in the community grows even greater as they consistently find that there is a broad community readiness to incorporate people who have been excluded. This is not to say that every person in every neighborhood is hospitable — we all know this is not the case. But the guides we interviewed report that the great majority of people they have encountered are receptive and open to diversity. It is the obvious task of the guide to relate to this part of the community rather than focus on those who are negative or resistant.

> The good life is one filled with the care, power, and continuity that comes from community.

Unfortunately, many people in human service systems have had negative experiences as they have tried to parachute small institutions called group homes into neighborhoods. Frequently, the local residents will resist this professional vision of "community integration." However, the very same neighbors, asked to meet and involve one person named Sam Jones who has been labeled developmentally disabled, will welcome that person into their collective life. Just as every individual has capacities and deficiencies, every community has hospitality and rejection. A community guide knows the terrain of hospitality and avoids the mountains of rejection.

A fifth characteristic of most effective community guides is that they learn that they must say good-bye to the person they guide into community life. This is not a natural step. Nonetheless, most guides report that they have learned that in order for the fullness of community hospitality to be expressed and the excluded person to be wholly incorporated as a citizen they must leave the scene. They are guides, not servants.

While most guides are people who do not need "policies" to guide them and are, in fact, unsure of what a policy is, there are those in systems who need policies in order to understand practice. For such policy and system operatives, it is possible to summarize the elements of the work of guides in the following policy statement: "It is our policy to reduce dependence on human services by increasing interdependence in community life through a focus on the gifts and capacities of people who have been excluded from community life because of their labels."

Contained in this policy statement is the recognition that there are many dependency-creating human services. It is those services that the guides attempt to replace with associational life. However, it is also clear that there are human services that do not create dependence and could be designed to support community life — like income supplements, independent living

aides, and specialized medical services. There has been very little systematic study in this area. A preliminary hypothesis is that services that are heavily focused on deficiency tend to be pathways out of community and into the exclusion of serviced life. We need a rigorous examination of public investments so that we can distinguish services that lead people out of community and into dependency from those activities that support people in community life.

Finally, we are reminded that the policy statement indicates that it is our goal to "increase interdependence in community life." It is critical here that we emphasize the word "interdependence." The goal is not to create independence — except from social service systems. Rather, we are recognizing that every life in community is, by definition, one that is interdependent — filled with trusting relationships and empowered by the collective wisdom of citizens in discourse.

Community is about the common life that is lived in such a way that the unique creativity of each is a contribution to the other. The crisis we have created in the lives of excluded people is that they are disassociated from their fellow citizens.

We cannot undo that terrible exclusion by a thoughtless attempt to create illusory independence. Nor can we undo it by creating a friendship with a person who lives in exclusion.

Our goal should be clear. We are seeking nothing less than a life surrounded by the richness and diversity of community. A collective life. A common life. An everyday life. A powerful life that gains its joy from the creativity and connectedness that comes when we join in association to create an inclusive world.

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