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W H E N  
T H E G L A S S I S

# HALF FULL

*By Dave Kinahan*

Asset-based community-builders don't mourn what  
low-income communities lack. They look for the  
assets needy communities have—then work to  
encourage, connect, and multiply them.



If you sent around a resume that listed your deficiencies rather than your skills, talents, and accomplishments, you'd have a hard time convincing anyone to hire you. Is it any wonder, then, that community development programs which focus on the deficiencies of distressed communities rather than the skills and talents of the people who live there have a hard time integrating low-income neighborhoods into prosperous American society?

Traditional community development programs begin with needs assessments—surveys of problems, such as unemployment, illiteracy, or crime—which are then used to create program plans aimed at fixing the problems. That's a mistake, says John McKnight, co-director of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute in Evanston, Ill., and co-author of *Building Communities from the Inside Out* (ACTA Publications, 1993). "Needs define what is absent in a community. Assets define what is present," he observes. "There is nothing I can do about teen pregnancy if I know there are 80 pregnant teens in a community. That information is useless. Needs assessments are done for people outside the neighborhood, not in."

McKnight is part of a growing movement of community builders who believe it's more effective to find out what assets needy communities have, and then work to encourage, connect, and multiply them.

Asset-based community builders look to local institutions, citizens' associations, and individuals for the skills needed to improve the neighborhood. When they find local citizens who are already engaged in improving the condition of their communities, they work with them to increase their impact. Community assets might include a local school that offers its basement as a meeting place, a Bible study group that is willing to adopt and clean a particular street, and neighbors who can care for children so parents can work.

This shift from the deficiency model of community building to a capacity-oriented model is occurring for two main reasons. First, historical evidence supports the claim that community development is successful only when citizens are personally committed

and involved in the work. This does not necessarily happen in the traditional server-client model of service. Second, traditional philanthropic organizations do not seem able to support all the new nonprofits that are being created these days. Unable to find all the support they need outside distressed communities, many nonprofit managers are taking a new look at the assets inside communities.

One nonprofit that's embracing asset-based community building is the United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta. Where it once was a funder of needs-based services through a limited number of nonprofit agencies, "we are now a mechanism to meet investment opportunities of groups out in the community," says GERALYN SHEEHAN, vice president of community investments at the organization. It's added two new tactical areas to its lineup of programs: increasing civic involvement and supporting economic development.

When the Georgia legislature began considering the implementation of the State Child Health Insurance program in 1998, the United Way became a catalyst in establishing one voice. Two groups were advocating for the same basic issue—health care for kids—but with two plans different enough to jeopardize each of their best intentions. United Way brought these two groups together, with policy volunteers and interested board volunteers. The United Way had never before used its web of relationships to build consensus around an issue, but it turned out to be a powerful tool. The United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta's board of directors (which includes representatives from businesses and community organizations in Georgia's 13 metropolitan counties) sent a letter to the legislature supporting the consensus of the meeting, the expansion of the state's Medicare program. The result was that the legislature approved Peachcare For Kids, a health plan that covers 113,000 previously uninsured children under age 18.

In another example, the United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta has begun a neighborhood-level small grants program that awards money to low-income, community-based entrepreneurs who want to improve their neighborhoods—by either starting a small business that provides needed services, or organizing a community initiative. In one

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community, volunteers from the local police force used United Way funds to buy teacher edition text-books so they could tutor young people. Since 1996, the United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta has awarded \$200,000 to individuals who are impacting their communities, rather than using that money to fund traditional agencies that provide services to "clients."

"We have recognized you have to build the strength of citizens as individuals to solve problems themselves," says Sheehan. Consequently, her organization's role has changed from grant-maker to community broker.

Asset-based community builders caution that the technique is no walk in the park. "If this work is easy for you, and the answers are clear, you are probably working at the periphery," says Sheehan. But for anyone who is committed to breaking the cycle of low-income neighborhood dependence on nonprofit service-providers, it's a step in the right direction.



## Gwinnett County, Ga.

• **The issue:** A 1996 youth health survey conducted by the Gwinnett Coalition for Health and Human Services, a group of nonprofits, churches, corporations, schools, and government agencies, showed disturbingly high levels of substance abuse, delinquency, and sexual activity among teenagers in Gwinnett County, Ga.

• **Asset-based approach:** GUIDE, a Lawrenceville, Ga.-member of the coalition, asked itself what such a needs-based pool of information was good for. Their conclusion: Not much. "We realized a lot of risk can't be eliminated," says Ari Russell, executive director of GUIDE. "You can't eliminate kids living with addicted families, you can't eliminate crime. You can build assets no matter how much risk exists." So, GUIDE used a small grant of \$30,000 from the BellSouth Foundation to facilitate a two-day event where community residents could plan how to respond to the survey. More than 200 people showed up.

• **Successes:** Regional communities have organized themselves into teams. The teams are in the process of developing lists of community resources and assets as the first step in connecting scattered individuals. Two groups are sharing their assets to put this information on the Internet: The Gwinnett Neighborhood Leadership Association will provide other communities with pages on its Web site where they can list their resource directories. Access Atlanta, a forprofit Internet service provider, is creating a Web site to support service learning (a graduation requirement) in local high schools. The site will connect students to service opportunities.

Several organizations decided to join forces to support ongoing education of suspended students. A church agreed to provide a location for the resulting tutoring program, schools agreed to supply teachers, and local nonprofit agencies agreed to provide funding for the project. "Each of these [communities] is so resource rich," says Russell. "It's just a matter of getting people together and help[ing] them learn what they can do."

• **Challenges:** At the moment, quantitative measurement of progress is difficult, even impossible. "It is easier to count how many kids come to an afterschool program than [to] measure the increased capacities of assets," Russell says.

## Minneapolis, Minn.

• **The issue:** Newly-arrived Latino immigrants in Minneapolis, Minn., struggle to establish themselves economically.

• **Asset-based approach:** Interfaith Action, a group of 30 congregations, runs leadership development programs for immigrants. "We held three meetings where we conducted a community talent inventory," says Sal Miranda, lead organizer for Interfaith Action. The inventory asked attendees what they did well and if they had ever thought of starting a business at home or in the neighborhood. Almost 99 percent of attendees said they had an interest in starting their own business. With the assistance of a local Community Development Corporation and a hired trainer, Interfaith Action created a program to teach immigrants how to start and successfully run small businesses in Minneapolis.

• **Successes:** Sixty Spanish-speaking entrepreneurs have graduated from the 14-week program. The businesses they've started "have reclaimed an area that was a distressed urban corridor," says Miranda. A Hispanic *mercado*, or market, in an unused building will soon house over 40 businesses on Minneapolis's Lake Street. "Collaboratives are key to this success," says Miranda. "If we didn't have the support of the local churches and CDCs this could not have happened."

—Dave Kinahan

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—Geraldyn Sheehan, vice president of community investments at the United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta

## Two Approaches to COMMUNITY-BUILDING

### Needs-Based

- Focus on deficits
- Problem response
- Charity-orientation
- Programs are the answer
  - More services
- Grants to agencies
- High emphasis on agencies
  - Focus on individual
  - See people as "clients"
    - "Fix" people
    - Maintenance

### Asset-Based

- Focus on assets
- Opportunity identification
- Investment orientation
- People are the answer
- Less services
- Grants, loans, contracts, investment, leverage dollars
- Emphasis on associations, businesses, agencies, churches
- Focus on community or neighborhood
- See people as "citizens"
- Develop potential
- Development

Source: The United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta