

Family TO Family

TOOLS FOR
Rebuilding Foster Care

Walking Our Talk In the Neighborhoods

Partnerships Between Professionals and Natural Helpers

BUILDING COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS IN CHILD WELFARE, PART THREE

Background

The *Family to Family* Initiative was designed in 1992 by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The framework for the Initiative is grounded in the belief that reforms in family foster care must be focused on a more family-centered approach that is: (1) responsive to the individualized needs of children and their families, (2) rooted in the child's community or neighborhood, (3) sensitive to cultural differences, and (4) able to serve many of the children now placed in group homes and institutions. The Initiative has the following system goals:

- To develop a network of family foster care that is more neighborhood-based, culturally sensitive, and located primarily in the communities in which the children live;
- To assure that scarce family foster home resources are provided to all those children (but to only those children) who in fact must be removed from their homes;
- To reduce reliance on institutional or congregate care by meeting the needs of many more of the children currently in those settings through family foster care;
- To increase the number and quality of foster families;
- To reunify children with their families as soon as that can safely be accomplished based on the family's and children's needs—not simply the system's time frames;
- To reduce the lengths of children's stay in out-of-home care; and
- To decrease the overall number of children coming into out-of-home care.

As a result of the experience in *Family to Family* sites, a variety of practical tools has been developed. This booklet describes one such tool—Walking Our Talk in the Neighborhoods.

The Foundation's goal in child welfare is to help neighborhoods build effective responses to families and children at risk of abuse or neglect.

Reasons we Need New Approaches to Human Services Delivery

The late 1990s are difficult times in human services. Both workers and recipients are dissatisfied with the processes and outcomes of many of the models used to deliver services. Programs are too expensive. They don't seem culturally relevant. All too often, models cannot document that they achieve the results they claim. Taxpayers are often frustrated. Human services workers are often discouraged. Sometimes we feel overwhelmed by the problems we face.

As we all attempt to accomplish more with fewer resources, certain buzzwords have found their way into today's human services language. They include such concepts as empowerment and enhancing capacity.

Some of the trendiest buzzwords today are related to shifting roles of professionals and capitalizing upon the existing strengths of neighborhood residents to become involved in self-help, mutual aid, and mutual support. Pioneers like Frank Reissman have been making those concepts operational for decades, but most of us are still struggling to figure out how to bring them alive in our work. Our habits draw us back into previous behavior patterns like giant magnets. In addition, competition for funding makes ours an especially difficult time to risk doing new things or old things differently. We fear that trying new methods might jeopardize our ability to cling to current funding streams.

In the face of this uncertainty, we can easily fall into limbo, waiting for the path toward the future to become clearer. This would be a sad error, because it is precisely at these times of uncertainty that the status quo is the most amenable to change; and it is when, if we find the energy, the hope, and the faith, we can make enormous changes for the better. We have the opportunity to forge new partnerships that will allow us to

combine knowledge from many perspectives, creating deeper insights and more creative alternatives.

The purpose of this paper is to begin going beyond the buzzwords in specifying issues and alternatives, to raise awareness of challenges and solutions, and to provide some concrete examples for the ways partnerships can work.

Reasons we may all Gain by Increasing the Role of Natural Helpers

Our attempts as a society to strengthen families are not working as well as we would like. Professionals and bureaucrats alone have not been able to solve problems facing our families. We must include more people, more skills, and more resolve at more levels if we are going to make the differences we would like.

Limitations of Overreliance on Professional and Bureaucratic Solutions

Overreliance on professional helpers and formal agency and system solutions can fail to create strategies that are relevant to or congruent with the needs of the specific neighborhoods, because those in charge may lack information and understanding.

For one thing, it is expensive. Professionals' salaries are higher than we can afford if we are providing an adequate amount of help.

Overreliance on professionals can send the message to community people that they cannot help themselves and must be rescued. This attacks rather than enhances their sense of self-efficacy.

Common Constraints on the Way we View Professionals and Natural Helpers

We usually think of professionals as addressing intrapsychic problems. Neighborhood workers have been assigned to prevention,

or problems that aren't too severe. They are thought of as appropriate for concrete issues, like building speed bumps, getting streetlights installed, or getting drug houses closed.

In fact, all the problems are interrelated. Residents, community workers, and agency staff all have different perspectives on the causes and resolutions for difficulties.

Professional efforts to solve intrapsychic problems are often hampered by poverty and homelessness. But lay people often counsel one another on everything from marital problems and child rearing to thoughts of suicide. Just as we are learning about the irrevocable linkages between physical and mental health, we need to come to terms with the fact that the distinctions we make between prevention and intervention are artificial. The distinctions we make among concrete services and psychological services are also artificial. Distinctions about what types of help require graduate degrees, and which can be done by friends and neighbors, are, in many cases, arbitrary.

We will all be more effective if we can share our perspectives and expertise to develop new joint strategies. These may be far more creative than any we could develop by remaining solely within our own frameworks.

Reasons we Need Natural Helper Partnerships

Human services workers and our community need natural helpers because the helpers know things that most professionals don't know; because they can help us to learn to do better; and because, with our support, they too can achieve more than they could otherwise.

I. Strengths of Natural Helpers.

Natural helpers understand their neighborhoods. They usually understand their own culture and more about other cultures in the neighborhood than people who don't live

there. They are usually more committed to resolving local issues because the challenges affect them personally. They usually have more trust and status within the neighborhood than outsiders do.

Natural helpers are more likely to hear about problems before they become so severe that intensive intervention is the only option. They are more likely to be available 24 hours a day to those they support. They are in a better position than professionals to provide long-term support.

They have different and necessary skills for helping. They are often more familiar with the intricacies of public bureaucracies than many professionals because their personal welfare has often depended upon this understanding. They know which strategies work and which do not within their neighborhoods. They have mastered the ability to function in physical and emotional conditions that may scare professionals, sometimes to the degree that professionals refuse to enter; sometimes to the degree that they cannot function well.

Natural helpers are more likely to provide support in the recipient's natural environment. They can support families who have been or would be unable or unwilling to receive services in more traditional settings. This allows for more effective and comprehensive monitoring regarding child safety.

2. Common Activities of Natural Helpers.

As policymakers begin considering a shift to neighborhood transformation from office-based talk therapy, we can easily present the idea of natural helpers or indigenous workers as new ideas. In fact, people have been helping one another since people existed, before college degrees existed, before licensing boards existed. Throughout time, even people with few resources have reached out to one another and been helpful. Below is a list of common natural helper activities going on in

*New ways
of actually
doing the
work needed
to be put
in place
in the
real world.*

Ultimately, we are all striving as individuals and communities to shift from blaming to helping, and to achieve a true, flexible, and mutually supportive collaboration.

most of our communities now, usually off the radar screen and separate from the formal helping system.

- Skill building, such as helping others learn to get and keep transportation, child care/baby-sitting, legal aid, housing, and employment; and helping others learn to do housework.
- Emotional support, such as listening, providing positive regard, being available, spending time, addressing issues of personal isolation.
- Community leadership and networking, such as organizing potlucks and center work parties or setting up skill/resource exchanges, laundry facilities, and care cooperatives.
- Resource acquisition, such as knowledge about where to find transportation and housing, buying and selling, trading things, using junk dealers, finding hock shops and garages, and creating informal food and clothing banks.
- Concrete help such as baby-sitting, fixing things, braiding hair, and gardening.

Reasons we Still Need Professionals

Advocates for neighborhood transformation and increasing respect for natural helpers are often misinterpreted as saying professionals are not necessary. In fact, they are necessary in many capacities.

I. Strengths of Professionals.

Although some of the things professionals do could be done (and, indeed, are being done) by natural helpers, many of their skills are invaluable in the change process, and are as relevant for neighborhood transformation as they might have been for the 50-minute hour. Some that are particularly valued by natural helpers include the following:

- Grants management
- Conceptualizing issues

- Training
- Evaluation
- Identifying strengths
- Fundraising
- Advocacy
- Service delivery
- Problem solving
- Mentoring

2. Ways Professionals Might Help Natural Helpers.

Some skills of professionals are hard won through years of study and experience. But we must remember that non-professionals also study their situation and gain skills and knowledge as they live, sometimes the same skills professionals learned at college.

Some skills commonly thought to be the purview of professionals alone are inaccessible to lay people only because of the jargon. We often talk of professionals' areas of interest in special language—borderline personality, resistance, denial, and attention deficit disorder. But it is possible to translate most of these terms into regular English that can be understood by all. Lay people can learn many of them one by one, even if they don't have a particular degree.

At the same time, just as lay people will never do brain surgery, there will always be especially difficult or violent situations that will require the help of those with many years of specialized training and experience. Our challenge now is to determine what skills can be taught to many others and what capacities should rightfully be thought of as professional domain.

Challenges in Developing and Maintaining Natural Helper/Professional Partnerships

Although we can specify many potential advantages of professionals working more closely with natural helpers, we can also point out many potential challenges. We must continually remind ourselves that neither professionals nor natural helpers

are homogeneous groups. Each relationship is unique. At the same time, some common threads are likely to run through many attempts at partnerships.

Possible Challenges for Some Professionals in Working with Some Natural Helpers

- ❑ Professionals literally may not be able to understand the language or the accent or some of the phrases used by natural helpers.
- ❑ Many times, in order to meet natural helpers, professionals will have to go into neighborhoods that frighten them.
- ❑ Some professionals may worry that natural helpers will usurp their roles and endanger their job security.
- ❑ Natural helpers are usually from different cultures than professionals.
- ❑ Natural helpers usually do not keep schedules the same way professionals do. They are much more flexible in responding to immediate needs. Professionals may take offense at lateness or missed meetings, when, again, it is a cultural difference rather than an insult.
- ❑ Because they often have fewer financial resources, natural helpers have fewer options in many emergencies. Cars are more likely to break down, airfares or tuition may not be available as planned. Professionals will likely become entangled in these predicaments.
- ❑ Professionals may risk credibility with their peers who may see them as betraying their particular profession and becoming allies of the wrong side.

Challenges for Some Natural Helpers in Working with Some Professionals

Natural helpers also risk interacting with someone who is again, literally, impossible for them to understand. Professional jargon,

acronyms, and concepts are often not only foreign but also insulting. Helpers may believe many professionals have absolutely no idea what it is like to survive under difficult situations.

Inadvertently, and sometimes intentionally, professionals shut natural helpers out of decisionmaking processes. This can be done through lack of eye contact, a raised eyebrow, failure to invite natural helpers to meetings, and polite nods but no real understanding when natural helpers speak.

These exclusionary behaviors are particularly painful to natural helpers because of the trendiness of including them. In many cases, the real power rests with the same power brokers who have always had it. Natural helpers are aware of meetings held without them, input regarded as token, and being put on advisory boards instead of boards of directors. The discrepancy between what professionals say they do and what they actually do makes it difficult for natural helpers to respect them, to keep trying to work with them, and to keep from being angry at them.

Professionals also frequently fail to understand the importance of a personal and long-term commitment to natural helpers and other residents of the neighborhoods where they work. If the relationships end when the grant is over, or when someone gets promoted, it is seen as another betrayal.

Challenges for Natural Helper/Professional Partners Together

When natural helpers and professionals do manage to forge bonds with one another despite the challenges, additional hurdles must be overcome in order to make significant progress.

We place unnecessary constraints on roles, making both professionals and natural helpers less effective.

Natural helpers ... usually have more trust and status within the neighborhood than most outsiders do.

I. Language Differences.

Current human services language frequently does not ease what the partnerships are trying to do. We often differ in the words and concepts we use. When one or the other's language or concepts is selected, the other partners may feel slighted.

2. Some Examples of Role Confusion that Can Develop in Natural Helper/Professional Partnerships.

Tension Between Responsibilities and Values

People naturally assume different roles within the natural helper and professional categories. It is a challenge to balance an acknowledgment of differences in authority and responsibility with the values of inclusion, respect, and equality.

Inherent Power Differentials

It is often unclear exactly what professionals' roles should be. Because professionals usually have more money and connections and experience raising money, group members can slide into viewing them as people who can provide a job. It is easy for professionals to begin to take more responsibility than is helpful, given the partnership's values of self-reliance and independence.

Tension Over Structure/Rigidity of Roles

Role constraints may limit one's ability to be an effective helper. On the other hand, a lack of constraint may mean a blurring of friendship, mentor, co-worker, and family roles. As partnerships strive to use everyone's strengths, the role of the program managers or supervisors (whether filled by professionals or natural helpers) may be disregarded. Supervisors may often have to speak up to remind people to let them know what's going on and keep information channeling through them.

Complexity of Individual Roles

Roles in natural helper/professional partnerships can get complex. A group of natural helpers may be made up of husband and wife teams, neighbors, and other friends and family members. Group members may switch among roles—friend, family, mentor, supervisor, boss, and co-conspirator.

Challenges of Relating to the System while Working with Natural Helper/Professional Partnerships

One of the main reasons we have few true partnerships among grassroots efforts and the system is that it is very, very difficult. Some of these difficulties are as follows.

Difficulties in Even Meeting One Another

Although it is possible that systems representatives may meet natural helpers as clients, it is very rare that they run into each other on equal grounds. They usually do not live in the same neighborhoods, attend the same churches, or participate in the same leisure activities.

Lack of Awareness of One Another's Cultures

When they do meet, professionals and natural helpers are often doing essentially different dances, and they begin treading on one another immediately. Professionals have a fairly formalized way of greeting each other, making a few neutral comments about the weather or some news event, and then diving into a very linear agenda. Natural helpers do not separate their helping roles from themselves as people, so that they are more likely to either plunge into informality and warmth, which bewilders professionals, or to withdraw completely or react aggressively in response to methods of talking that seem to them to be forced and indirect.

Personal Histories

Natural helpers and professionals usually begin their relationships with stereotypes about one another. Most have had direct

personal contacts; all have heard about hopeless clients or uppity professionals who have done significant damage to others.

Natural helpers have had both good and bad relationships with professionals and may tend to divide them into those two categories. Their experiences with the system may have been bad. They might have a tendency to react negatively to system-like requirements, such as attention to cost-effectiveness, or guidelines about areas of focus and emphasis. Many of these requirements are non-negotiable, and angry reactions do nothing but distance natural helpers from the system they wish to change.

Difference in Definitions of Partnerships

As mentioned before, it is fashionable now to talk about partnerships and the words are everywhere. Natural helpers may interpret invitations to join together in two ways:

Yeah, another token gesture, or Maybe things are changing.

When natural helpers go into meetings with the mindset that maybe things are changing, they expect an equal voice, an equal amount of air time, a full share of the decisionmaking power and of the money. Only rarely are these expectations met.

Many natural helpers have had personal or close experience with the state public assistance, child welfare agencies, and housing authorities. They may have felt humiliated and powerless in their interactions. In trying to develop partnerships, miscommunications may have occurred or promises may not have been kept.

These experiences make it hard for them to expect the best from professionals or to develop the trusting relationships needed for a real partnership.

Budget Constraints and Other Pressures on Public Agency Staff

Most public agency workers are expected to do far too much with too little. Child deaths and staff problems seem to appear on the

front page of the newspaper almost weekly. These problems make it difficult for staff to find time to work on new directions, because so much is demanded of them in responding to and trying to prevent disasters.

Categorization of Funding

Sources of funding often restrict what they will pay for and the kind of credentials staff must have. Many of the specific tasks of mental health professionals, qualified chemical dependency counselors, or child welfare specialists are already being done or can be learned by natural helpers. These restrictions, and the underlying belief that the tasks can only be done by professionals, limit the ability of professionals to look at alternative ways to serve families.

Confusion About Roles

The public agency may not be sure how a natural helper/professional partnership group will fit on the spectrum of service providers. They may already have paraprofessionals who go in and do housework or other concrete tasks; they may have transportation people and volunteers; and they will have all the professional agencies. They may not know how this partnership differs from these categories, and it can be difficult to clarify this.

Differences of Opinion on How to be Helpful

The most painful experiences can come when public agency recommendations and perceptions of events differ from those of the natural helper partnerships. Natural helpers most often identify with the clients and their powerlessness over the system. Many will be very sensitive to stereotyping, a failure to perceive strengths, and any other interactions that may humiliate family members. At the same time natural helpers may need the money and support of the public agency. They may realize that if they alienate

Professionals need to keep thinking about communication, cooperation, and service to people in the community.

*Professionals ...
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public agency workers, they may not get more referrals. They can be caught between objecting to some practices and preserving their own integrity. This can be extremely difficult.

Some public agency workers have been disappointed many times by the families they try to help. Some of them may tend to go into long, vague complaints of inadequacies, diminished capacity or personality disorder that probably would not sit well with natural helpers, especially if they do not acknowledge or look for the strengths that people may have.

Some Unanswered Questions About Professional/Natural Helper Partnerships

- Which tools commonly used by human services professionals can be transferred for use by neighborhood workers?
- How do they need to be adapted and/or supplemented by and for various cultural groups?
- How many of the techniques used within family-based services can be used by natural helpers and paraprofessionals in neighborhoods?
- How much can they learn to train their peers?
- How much of what neighborhood workers and residents are already doing can be packaged and transferred to professionals?
- Can some neighborhood workers make new careers by becoming trainers?
- How well will neighborhood workers be able to design, develop, implement, and evaluate their own service strategies and models?
- What are the limits of neighborhood workers' capacity to provide their own help?
- What are the most cost-effective roles for professional workers and agencies in the future?