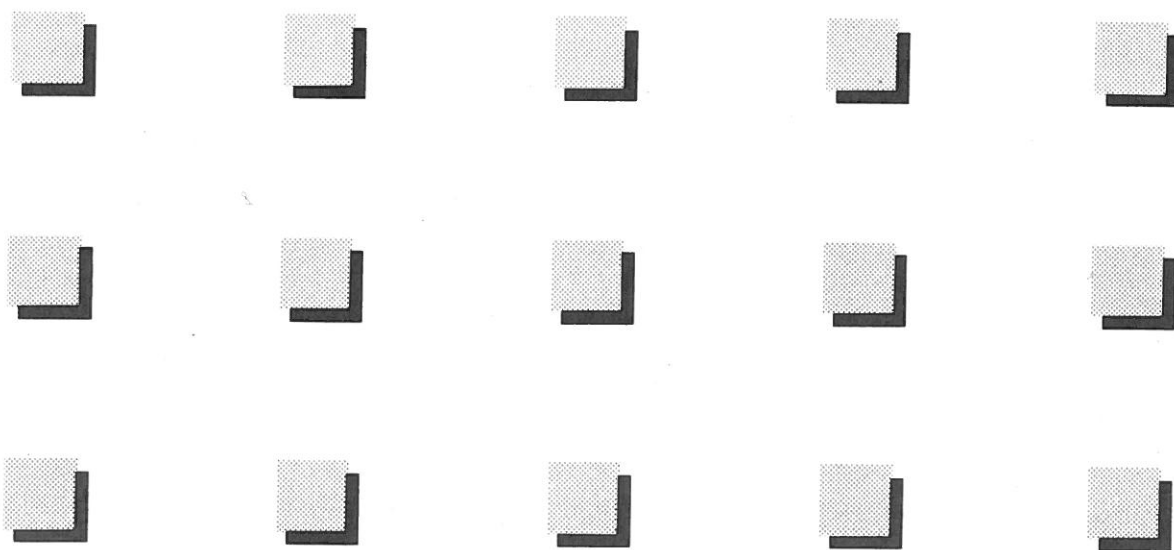


**NURTURING
THE GRASS ROOTS:**

NEIGHBORHOOD VOLUNTEER ORGANIZATIONS & AMERICA'S CITIES



CITIZENS COMMITTEE FOR NEW YORK CITY, INC.

NURTURING THE GRASS ROOTS:

NEIGHBORHOOD VOLUNTEER ORGANIZATIONS & AMERICA'S CITIES

Foreword by Mario M. Cuomo
Governor of New York

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Citizens Committee for New York City, Inc.

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THE CITIZENS COMMITTEE

The Citizens Committee for New York City, Inc., is a non-profit, non-partisan organization founded by the late senator Jacob K. Javits in 1975, in direct response to a fiscal crisis that caused drastic cutbacks in municipal services and near bankruptcy for the city. As a catalyst for local self-help efforts, the Citizens Committee developed a wide range of pioneering programs, including incentive grants to encourage volunteer neighborhood improvement projects, self-help conferences, leadership training workshops, handy how-to guides and citywide outreach efforts designed to stimulate the formation of new block and neighborhood organizations.

Today the Citizens Committee works with more than 7,000 grassroots volunteer groups throughout New York City's five boroughs, the largest such network in the United States. It helps them work with city agencies, beautify their neighborhoods, fight local problems including drugs, poverty and pollution, develop leaders of all ages, and build new or stronger volunteer organizations to improve the quality of neighborhood life.

Funds for the research and publication of *Nurturing the Grass Roots—Neighborhood Volunteer Organizations and America's Cities* were provided in part by the Ford Foundation. For additional copies or for information about other Citizens Committee publications, write or call:

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FOREWORD

by Mario M. Cuomo, Governor of New York

The tendency of ordinary citizens to respond to immediate problems in their communities through collective self-help efforts has been part of the character of the American people from the earliest days of our nation's history. Alexis de Tocqueville noted it over 150 years ago, in *Democracy in America*, when he wrote:

[An American] trusts fearlessly in his own powers, which seem to him sufficient for everything. Suppose that an individual thinks of some enterprise, and that enterprise has a direct bearing on the welfare of society; it does not come into his head to appeal to public authority for its help. He publishes his plan, offers to carry it out, summons other individuals to aid his efforts, and personally struggles against all obstacles. No doubt he is often less successful than the state would have been in his place, but in the long run the sum of all private undertakings far surpasses anything the government might have done.

In spite of their long history, the self-help initiatives of community volunteers have not always been properly recognized. Few cities have tried even to count such organizations. Even fewer have sought to measure their accomplishments.

In recent years, two factors have increased the attention focused on neighborhood volunteer organizations.

The first is the growing general awareness of the importance of citizen initiatives in meeting the difficult needs of our complex urban world.

The second is the growing pressures on and responsibilities of our city governments, as they assume more duties formerly borne by federal administrators.

The Citizens Committee for New York City, Inc., established 14 years ago, is one of only a handful of organizations in this country which systematically help to start and sustain grassroots organizations such as block associations, tenant associations, and anti-crime coalitions.

The Committee assists over 7,000 neighborhood groups that sponsor projects such as job fairs that have put hundreds of local residents to work, food pantries that feed hundreds of families each week, and weekly recreation and community activities for thousands of neighborhood youngsters. The Committee's history in New York City—perhaps the most challenging testing ground in the nation—demonstrates how effective a private, non-profit organization can be in promoting volunteer neighborhood activities that improve the quality of urban life.

Nurturing the Grass Roots makes that experience available to us by answering the questions: What can neighborhood volunteer groups do for my city? How can my city encourage their development?

The answers are based both on field work and on a wealth of research, including a pioneering study of block associations and community development conducted by the Citizens Committee and funded by the Ford Foundation.

By sharing its practical knowledge and research results with all of us who care about the future of urban neighborhoods, the Citizens Committee is extending its service range to cities nationwide—and inviting them to reaffirm what Tocqueville said about the effectiveness of the personal struggles for the public good by private citizens across our nation.

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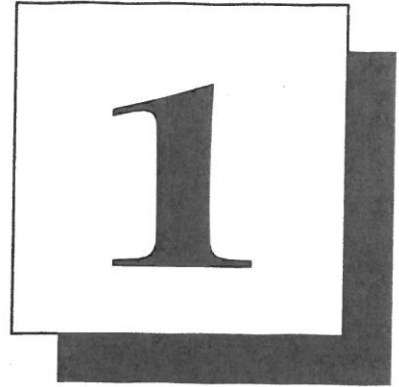
About the Author

Paul Florin is an Associate Professor in the Psychology Department at the University of Rhode Island and Director of the Community Services Team of that department. A clinical/community psychologist, he has been involved in citizen participation and community development as both researcher and practitioner for more than 12 years. He has written on citizen participation and organizational effectiveness in community development and developed training programs and materials to promote community development efforts. His current work revolves around the linkage of grassroots community groups to community-wide programming for health promotion, substance abuse prevention, youth development and crime prevention.

Acknowledgments

The final form of this book has benefited from the assistance of several people. David Chavis of Rutgers helped to frame the overall project and shape it into a manageable rather than an overwhelming undertaking. At the Citizens Committee, Michael Clark's careful reading, concise logic and green ink were significant in taming the wilds of the first draft; Judith Walker's diligent editing and literary penchant provided several structural and numerous phrasing suggestions that further domesticated an academic penchant; and without Joyce Braunhut's crackerjack efficiency on the word-processor the book might never have seen light.

What Are Grassroots Neighborhood Groups and What Do They Do?



Life in New York City can be lonely, but in one Brooklyn neighborhood a volunteer group called the Flatbush Family Network is there to encourage mutual support among 200 families. More than 50 families of many different cultures use the Network's Drop-In Center, open two days each week, where, as children play, parents take part in support groups and seminars, plan events and get to know each other. The Network not only meets a real need of Flatbush parents, but also builds intercultural understanding in a neighborhood known for ethnic diversity.

It took over three months, but six volunteer neighborhood groups in unemployment-ridden Southeast Queens thought it was worth it to hold a Jobs Fair in their community. To organize the event, group members obtained the partnership of elected officials, service agencies, job training centers and a local college. Then they tirelessly promoted it to sometimes skeptical neighbors at church gatherings, schools, civic meetings and by going door-to-door. Despite freezing winds and snow, some 40 employers with real jobs to fill and 400 job-seekers showed up. The result: within a week, more than 125 local residents had landed jobs.

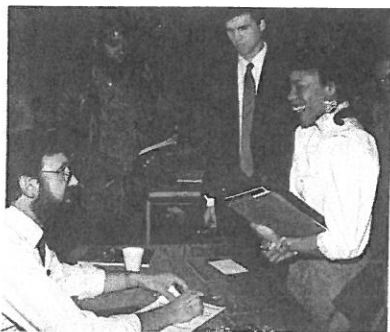
The West 92nd Street 200 Block Association, located on Manhattan's Upper West Side, took shape in the midst of turmoil stemming from a welfare hotel on the block. Promoting decent housing for the homeless as the solution, the association succeeded in placing the building under the control of a neighborhood organization that carried out renovation. Then they welcomed the new residents to the block by putting up flowerboxes and holding a neighborhood ceremony.

These are just three examples of a self-help vitality that is flourishing in New York City neighborhoods. On roughly a third of the city's residential blocks, there are organizations that bring together neighborhood residents as

"Traditionally, most people have restricted their thinking to services financed and delivered by the government, or financed and delivered by business. But in the coming years we are going to have to think about how we can make better use of volunteers, churches, non-profits, neighborhood groups and corporations to keep our communities together."

*John Tepper Marlin, Vice
President, National Civic
League, in Privatization of Local
Government Activities:
Lessons from Japan, 1982*

Adult volunteers learned their skills in Trinidad, Jamaica, Grenada and Haiti; they share them in Brooklyn's basements and local parks teaching children soccer and traditional dance and music of the islands. The Caribbean-American Sports and Cultural Youth Movement, made up of 17 volunteer leaders and over 300 kids, unites transplanted islanders in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, and eases their transition to life in the United States.



A volunteer-organized jobs fair brought 125 jobs to Southeast Queens. (Photo: Wendy Workman)

volunteers to improve the local quality of life. These groups are keeping streets clean, fighting drugs, tutoring children, organizing recreation programs, planting community gardens and far more. New York City's success in encouraging this volunteer-based form of community development can serve as a model for other American cities.

The accomplishments of grassroots neighborhood organizations are not achieved by large public sector programs or salaried professionals, but by groups of residents who commit their time and energy locally to solve local problems. Grassroots groups bridge private and public domains with collective action that benefits the entire community. Deeply rooted in American history, grassroots neighborhood groups are a vital and growing phenomenon across the country.

Volunteer community organizations include block and neighborhood associations, tenants' associations, church volunteer groups, youth groups, gardening groups, merchants' associations, and many others. They may stand independently or be connected through federations or coalitions. Several characteristics define the distinct role played by volunteer neighborhood groups in our society. They are:

- ☐ **Geographically based:** Volunteer neighborhood groups emerge from specific places. "Mount Hope" or "96th Street between Columbus and Amsterdam" describe particular neighborhoods. Grassroots groups build upon people's commitment to their own turf and translate the abstract concept of community into concrete reality.
- ☐ **Volunteer-driven:** The primary resource of neighborhood volunteer groups is their "human capital": members. Monetary resources are modest at best, paid staff virtually nonexistent. Yet concerned residents organize, operate and maintain groups which produce significant common benefits.
- ☐ **Locally initiated:** Grassroots organizations are formed by local residents responding to local conditions. Neighbors come together because of mutual concern about their community and the conviction that, collectively, they can change things for the better. Because they are local in nature, neighborhood volunteer groups vary widely in their activities and priorities.
- ☐ **Empowering:** Self-help action helps overcome the feeling of powerlessness that local problems generate in many urban neighborhoods. Community groups assume that every neighborhood, no matter what its problems, contains latent strengths and a network of people ready to help themselves and others. Group action builds confidence, combats passivity and develops a sense of community that reduces alienation.
- ☐ **Human-scale:** As "people-sized" organizations, neighborhood groups are antidotes to the highly bureaucratic structures encountered daily in our cities. In community groups, decisions are made face-to-face and operations are informal. Their structure and activities are determined by direct, usually broad, participation. These doorstep democracies mediate between the private individual and the society beyond the neighborhood.
- ☐ **Problem-solving:** Volunteer neighborhood groups usually come into being because there is a problem to solve. Whether accomplished through self-help efforts, collaboration with a larger organization or political advocacy, getting things done is the bottom line. The group problem-solving of volunteer neighborhood organizations generates more ideas, resources and accomplishments than any individual could.
- ☐ **Multi-purpose and flexible:** Volunteer neighborhood groups are dedicated to exerting some control over the full range of conditions affecting the quality of community life: physical, social, economic, political and psychological. Some focus on one major issue, but the most viable ones balance a variety of activities that address several goals simultaneously.

Flexible because of their small size and informal nature, volunteer neighborhood groups can tackle new problems as they arise and adjust their strategies as necessary.

At their best, volunteer neighborhood organizations transform isolated individuals into public citizens. They provide a human-scale sense of place, purpose and process which is rare and precious in today's mass society. Grassroots volunteer activity, weaving together private and public concerns, is a significant form of civic action which generates both tangible and intangible common goods. It represents a step beyond one's own back yard—a step in the direction of neighboring and community.



*A community garden on Manhattan's Lower East Side: a source of beauty, food and neighborhood unity.
(Photo: Sara Tabell)*

Improving Neighborhoods— The Impact of Grassroots Energy

2

While cities and communities are subject to large-scale social forces such as demographic trends, industrial flight and general economic swings, neighborhood organizations can have an immediate impact. By bringing about small changes here, they may buffer or resist some of the negative effects of larger external forces. In an era marked by distrust of the capacity of government to solve urban ills, it is small wonder that the number of volunteer neighborhood groups is growing and the range of activities they are undertaking is expanding.

What meaningful benefits do these organizations produce for urban neighborhoods?

Physical Improvements

The majority of neighborhood volunteer organizations have practical goals focused on concrete problems. Typically, general dissatisfaction with aspects of the physical environment such as housing conditions, vacant buildings, litter and cluttered empty lots leads to a growing consensus among residents that something needs to be done. Deterioration in the physical environment is the most common impetus for the formation of volunteer neighborhood groups.

Neighborhood groups improve their surroundings in many different ways. Among the most common are:

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ clearing empty lots | ☐ removing graffiti |
| ☐ cleaning streets | ☐ painting murals |
| ☐ planting trees | ☐ repairing and improving homes |
| ☐ cultivating community gardens | |

More ambitious building projects renovate abandoned buildings to serve as housing or community centers.

Many municipal governments have entered "co-production" relationships where the city and a volunteer neighborhood group assume joint responsibility for a service, each contributing specific resources. A neighborhood group,



An area's physical decline often spurs the formation of a new neighborhood group.

for example, may contribute the labor to maintain and improve a local park while the city provides tools, materials and trucks for hauling away trash.

The National Association of Neighborhoods has been conducting a neighborhood-based Service Delivery Project to foster co-production relationships.¹ The project trains neighborhood leaders to provide such services as maintenance for public spaces. Groups are encouraged to begin with labor-intensive projects that demand few skills and little capital investment. From projects like park maintenance and litter control, neighborhood groups can gain the experience they need to move to service-contracting with other city departments or private sector institutions.

Activities that improve physical conditions are popular because they yield concrete, visible results. A vacant lot transformed into a playground full of children or new paint jobs on the houses on a street are marks of the commitment and achievement of neighborhood residents.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

- In a study of 153 neighborhood groups in Chicago, the highest number were formed to address the physical condition of the neighborhood.

(Lavrakas et al., *Factors Related to Citizen Involvement in Personal, Household and Neighborhood Anti-Crime Measures*, 1980)²

- Case studies have documented numerous physical impacts of volunteer neighborhood groups in activities such as neighborhood clean-ups, tree plantings, community gardens, mini-park construction and other beautification projects.

(Boyte, *The Backyard Revolution: Understanding the New Citizens Movement*, 1980; Hallman, *Neighborhoods: Their Place in Urban Life*, 1984; Citizens Committee for New York City, *New York Self Help Handbook*, 1977, 1978, and *Youthbook*, 1980)

- Particularly strong impacts of volunteer neighborhood groups on neighborhood housing stock have been found. Projects range from collective efforts at repair, maintenance and improvement of existing housing stock to ambitious building projects that renovate abandoned housing.

(Cassidy, *Livable Cities: A Grass-Roots Guide to Rebuilding Urban America*, 1980; Harris, "The Citizens Coalition in Milwaukee," *Social Policy*, 1984; U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development, *Neighborhoods: A Self-Help Sampler*, 1979; Williams, *Neighborhood Organizations: Seeds of a New Urban Life*, 1985; Schoenberg and Rosenbaum, *Neighborhoods that Work: Sources for Viability in the Inner City*, 1980; Clay, *Neighborhood Renewal*, 1979)

- A report from the National Civic League found that co-production relationships between volunteer neighborhood groups and cities can provide basic maintenance functions for some kinds of public spaces more cheaply than public delivery. The Adopt-a-Park program in Rochester, N.Y., where neighborhood groups maintain small local parks, has saved the city 25 to 50 percent of the cost of public delivery.

(Cardwell, *The Privatization Report*, 1987)

- In Nashville, Tennessee, an experimental study compared the physical environment of blocks with block associations to that of blocks without associations, using observers who were unaware whether or not an association existed. The upkeep and appearance of both public and private spaces were rated significantly higher on blocks with block associations.

(Wandersman et al., paper submitted for publication, 1988)

Brownsville, Brooklyn: The lot was 100 square feet of junk dumped by a local carting company. A handful of teenagers, children and adults—volunteers from a coalition of 15 block associations—waded into the rubbish one afternoon with shovels, wheelbarrows and a vision. They sweated until a huge open community garden stood on the lot. A picnic area now invites local residents to enjoy the garden, and classes from the local school visit and play. The garden's centerpiece, a huge mural, depicts an overflowing cornucopia.



El Sol Brillante/The Shining Sun—symbol of a community and its cultural identity.

Affordable housing for more than 1,000 families is threatened by luxury high-rise development plans on one block on New York's Upper East Side. Several years ago, the East 79th Street Block Association sparked a community-wide fight to preserve threatened buildings by having them declared historical landmarks, preventing their demolition and the up-scale conversion that would follow. To date, their efforts have been successful. The block association has taken action in other ways, as well. One thousand signatures on petitions circulated by the association saved the area's Sunday bus service after the city proposed its termination. With the help of elected officials, the association also had traffic police posted at a problem intersection to reduce accidents and congestion.



*The East 79th Street Block Association's concerns include preserving a landmark housing project and meeting local transportation needs.
(Photo: Wendy Workman)*

Neighborhood Stabilization

Closely linked to a neighborhood's physical environment is its overall economic stability. For merchants as well as residents, the appearance of a neighborhood affects their satisfaction with the area, their confidence in its future and their plans to remain or leave. The contributions of neighborhood volunteer organizations to the physical environment also have a demonstrable impact on neighborhood stability.

When physical conditions decline, so does satisfaction. But the effects on neighborhood confidence are even more dangerous. Physical deterioration fans fears about the health and vitality of a neighborhood. This leads to anxiety that financial investments in local property are at risk, resulting in decreased investment and promoting a downward spiral of confidence.³ A destabilized neighborhood, caught in such a downward spiral, loses those residents who can afford to move elsewhere. Since those who leave often move to the suburbs, this also results in a loss to the municipal tax base. Physical improvements resulting from the activities of volunteer neighborhood groups thus have a stabilizing effect on urban neighborhoods by increasing satisfaction and promoting confidence and investment in the community.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

- ❑ **Studies have found that physical conditions account for 30-40 percent of residents' overall satisfaction with their neighborhood.**

(Ahlbrandt and Cunningham, *A New Public Policy for Neighborhood Preservation*, 1979; Zehner, in Wohlwill and Carson, *Environment and the Social Sciences: Perspectives and Applications*, 1972)

- ❑ **Those less satisfied are more likely to move. In one study, 50 percent of residents who planned to move within two years rated the neighborhood as a poor or fair place to live, as compared with 24 percent of those who did not plan to move.**

(Ahlbrandt and Cunningham)

- ❑ **The Citizens Committee for New York City's Block Booster study gathered information from more than 1,000 residents of 47 blocks in three different multi-neighborhood communities in that city. Members of block associations across all three communities were more satisfied with their block, planned to live on the block longer and were more likely to invest in home improvements than residents who were not block association members.**

(Chavis et al.)

- ❑ **In the same study, members were also more optimistic than non-members, feeling that conditions had and would continue to improve on their block in the future.**

(Chavis et al.)

- ❑ **In Nashville, Tennessee, residents of blocks with new block associations perceived block problems as declining over time, while overall residential satisfaction increased. Similar nearby blocks without block associations showed no such pattern.**

(Wandersman et al.)

- ❑ **In the same study, residents of blocks with block associations were more likely to invest in home improvements than residents of blocks without block associations.**

(Wandersman et al.)

THE BLOCK BOOSTER PROJECT

The Citizens Committee for New York City's Block Booster study, funded by the Ford Foundation, was the most comprehensive scientific investigation of small volunteer neighborhood groups ever undertaken. More than 1,000 residents on 47 blocks from three culturally and economically diverse neighborhoods in New York City participated in the study. Information was gathered through telephone surveys, questionnaires, interviews, environmental observations and archival records.

The two-and-a-half-year study (1984-1987) was undertaken to clarify the relationship between volunteer block associations and overall community development and crime. Block Booster documented the impacts of block associations, identified the ingredients of successful block associations and developed and field-tested a technical assistance approach to help such groups remain vital and maximize their capacity.

The Block Booster study assessed the impacts of block associations by comparing blocks with block associations to similar blocks without associations and comparing members in block associations with nonmembers from the same blocks. Block associations were analyzed for characteristics that distinguished viable groups from those that eventually declined into inactivity. Block associations were chosen at random to receive workshops based on the Block Booster-developed capacity-building process. These groups were later compared to groups that received no such assistance in order to test the effectiveness of the Block Booster approach.

The research team conducting the Block Booster project included David Chavis, Rutgers University; Paul Florin, University of Rhode Island; Richard Rich, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University; and Abraham Wandersman, University of South Carolina.

Specific findings of the Block Booster study are described in Chapters 3 and 4 of this book.

"Part of the reason I got involved in organizing the block association was for safety, tenants' rights and so on. But when you get right down to it, what it really was that I was craving more real, human contact with my neighbors. For years and years, I let myself get accustomed to the no-eye-contact, live-in-your-own-world ways we'd come to regard each other. I decided that even at my age, it was worth struggling out of that to do something better, something more like community."

A seventy-three-year-old woman, quoted by Daniel Yankelovich in New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down, 1981

Creating a Sense of Community

Volunteer neighborhood groups sponsor many social and recreational activities. They hold block parties that bring neighbors into the streets, sponsor art projects, music events and holiday decorating and involve youth in recreation programs. These activities complement task-oriented meetings and activities to bring people together with their neighbors in new ways.

Volunteer neighborhood groups change the social relations within an area, reducing isolation and increasing socializing among residents. Faces become names and names become neighbors. This process fosters a sense of identification with an area, a sense of community. As an individual resident of New York City, John Smith may feel lost and depersonalized. But with his neighbors in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, and members of his community group, John Smith can find his place in the big city.

Neighborhood organizations encourage "neighboring" by individual residents helping other neighbors in a variety of ways that add up to an important informal support system. Frequently serving as sources of information and referral to needed services, both community groups and individual neighbors also provide help in time of both minor and major crisis. This can be particularly important for residents with few other supportive ties. In this way, the sense of community promoted by volunteer neighborhood groups may actually influence health since people with inadequate social support are more vulnerable to a variety of mental and physical disorders when under stress.



Grassroots groups increase neighborliness and community pride.

In one Manhattan neighborhood, a block association and a church have worked together since 1981 to run a food pantry for local people in need. In recent years food emergencies have shot up; the pantry now distributes up to 100 grocery bags of food, each sufficient for a family of four, each week. Menu planning, food purchase, bag packing and distribution are all handled entirely by neighborhood volunteers.



*Neighborhood residents reclaim abandoned housing stock.
(Photo: Robert Gurbo)*

WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

- ☐ **Help from neighbors is important in general. One study found that 56 percent of people were helped by a neighbor during a life crisis such as personal injury, serious illness, crime victimization or the death of a close family member during the previous year.**
(Warren, *Helping Networks: How People Cope with Problems In the Urban Community*, 1981)
- ☐ **Eighty percent of low-income residents in Detroit, Michigan, when faced with a crisis, turned to individuals or institutions within their neighborhoods for help, not to professional service agencies.**
(Warren)
- ☐ **Socializing with neighbors and engaging in mutual assistance with them has been found to increase over time as a result of joining a volunteer neighborhood group.**
(Unger and Wandersman, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 1983)
- ☐ **Studies have found members of volunteer neighborhood groups do more neighboring than non-members.**
(Wandersman et al.; Hunter, *Symbolic Communities*, 1974)
- ☐ **In the Block Booster study, the neighboring of participants in block associations was significantly higher than that of non-participants.**
(Chavis et al.)
- ☐ **An in-depth analysis of two neighborhoods, similar in socioeconomic characteristics, related the dramatically higher incidence of child abuse and neglect in one to "social impoverishment" and the lack of reciprocal exchanges among neighbors.**
(Garbarino and Sherman, *Child Development*, 1980)
- ☐ **A multitude of studies have documented the relationship of social support to physical and emotional health.**
(Cohen and Syme, *Social Support and Health*, 1986)
- ☐ **One nine-year study of 6,928 adults in a California county found people who lacked social and community ties were more likely to die earlier.**
(Berkman and Syme, *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 1979)

Tackling Social Problems

Volunteer neighborhood groups are problem-solving organizations. This may mean that the group tackles major social problems on the local level. Volunteer neighborhood groups often strengthen, facilitate or substitute for social services needed by local residents.

The most frequent approach is self-help, where groups organize and deliver their own services, often provided entirely by volunteers. Volunteer neighborhood groups have:

- ☐ organized day-care and babysitting cooperatives,
- ☐ established employment services for teens,
- ☐ started food-buying clubs for working-class families and food pantries for the hungry, and
- ☐ provided temporary shelter for the homeless.

Another strategy used by neighborhood organizations is lobbying for the creation or improvement of a municipal service. Volunteer neighborhood groups also have been active in influencing and participating in various arrangements made by cities seeking to decentralize service delivery at the neighborhood level.⁴

Volunteer neighborhood groups have also entered co-production arrangements with city governments in areas as diverse as health care, housing rehabilitation and job counseling.⁵

WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

- ❑ Collections of case studies have been compiled that represent the range of social problem-solving undertaken by neighborhood groups and provide examples of specific programs that can be adopted or adapted by other groups.

(McBride, *A Nation of Neighborhoods*, 1977; Berkowitz, *Community Dreams*, 1984)

- ❑ Neighborhood organizations have provided day-care, established baby-sitting cooperatives, and designed summer employment programs for youth and services for the elderly such as escort services and home visitor programs.

(Boyte; Hallman; Woodson, In Meyer, *Meeting Human Needs: Toward a New Public Philosophy*, 1982)

- ❑ A detailed case study in Baltimore, Maryland, showed that parent education services provided through a neighborhood organization reached hundreds of families who had been unresponsive to human service agency sponsorship of identical programs.

(Naparstek, Biegel, Splro, *Neighborhood Networks for Humane Mental Health Care*, 1982)

- ❑ Youth crime and delinquency is one example of a specific social problem around which innovative programs by volunteer neighborhood groups have documented success where large-scale programs have failed.

(Woodson, *A Summons to Life: Mediating Structures and the Prevention of Youth Crime*, 1981)

- ❑ A comprehensive review of 215 case studies of decentralization of services found that service delivery improved in 72 percent of the cases. Improvements were greatest in those decentralization programs where residents had most control over a service delivered to their neighborhood.

(Yin and Yates, *Street-Level Governments: Assessing Decentralization and Urban Services*, 1974)

- ❑ In a Citizens Committee for New York City survey of 1,000 leaders of volunteer neighborhood groups, 42 percent believed groups like theirs could take action to fight poverty. In low-income neighborhoods the percentage rose to 58 percent.

(Citizens Committee for New York City, *1988 State of the Neighborhoods Report*)

- ❑ In the same study, 58 percent of the neighborhood leaders believed housing for the homeless would be accepted in their neighborhood if the community could decide its type, size and location.

Nurturing Individuals

Some of the most important contributions of volunteer neighborhood groups can only be seen over time: the gradual changes in the skills, attitudes, beliefs and values of participants. Participation in volunteer neighborhood groups develops people as well as communities in very important ways. Participation in grassroots groups can change the way people look at things. More favorable attitudes and attachments to the area grow. Neighbors are viewed in a more positive light and the sense of civic duty is heightened.

Participation decreases feelings of alienation and powerlessness. Working on concrete local problems provides an opportunity for small but rewarding victories. Community groups allow individuals to exert some control over external conditions, a significant benefit in a complex modern society.

A few years ago, concerned citizens derailed a City plan to install parking meters on a residential block in Brooklyn, disrupting the block's non-commercial quality of life. Since leading that group, Rosemarie O'Keefe went on to form a block association, then the Alliance of Bay Ridge Block Associations which unites over 20 groups and 5,000 Bay Ridge residents. O'Keefe had never been active in a community project before the parking meters. She is now a voice in local issues including crime, prisons, sanitation and housing for the elderly.



Volunteer neighborhood groups often introduce children and teenagers to community involvement.
(Photo: Stacey Blatt)

"The danger that faces democratic governments is the passivity of the populace: the tendency for individuals to abandon their personal responsibility for social actions. Because the voluntary sector provides the opportunity for personal involvement, it becomes the cement that binds our society together."

Vernon Jordan, in an acceptance speech on receiving the United Way's de Tocqueville Award, April, 1977

Participation in neighborhood organizations often builds personal competence and self-confidence as well. The National Commission on Neighborhoods identified as a crucial contribution of neighborhood community development programs "the growth and development of literally thousands of new neighborhood leaders, accepting new responsibilities in their neighborhoods and for their neighborhood's improvement."⁶

WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

- ☐ **An in-depth case study of fifteen emerging citizen leaders in grassroots organizations found a common series of stages leading to increased commitment and competence.**

(Kleffer, *Prevention In Human Services*, 1984)

- ☐ **Studies have found participants in neighborhood groups feel personally and politically more competent and optimistic than non-participants.**

(Florin and Wandersman, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 1984; Zimmerman and Rappaport, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 1988)

- ☐ **In the Block Booster study, members of block associations felt personally more confident of their ability to influence block conditions than nonmembers and were more likely to believe that residents could solve block problems by working together.**

(Chavis et al.)

NOTES

¹ Stephen Glaude, "Service Delivery Enterprises: Services for People and Profit," *Citizen Participation*, 1985.

² Full source information on research cited in the text is provided at the end of this book in *References for Further Reading*.

³ Rolf Goetz and K. Colton, *Understanding Neighborhood Change: The Role of Confidence in Urban Revitalization*, 1979.

⁴ J. Mudd, *Neighborhood Services: Making Big Cities Work*, 1984.

⁵ M. Kotler, "Partnerships in Community Service," *Journal of Community Action*, 1982; H. Spiegel, "Co-production in the Context of Neighborhood Development," *Journal of Voluntary Action Research*, 1987.

⁶ National Commission on Neighborhoods, *Neighborhoods: People Building Neighborhoods*, 1979.

Fighting Crime and Drugs

3

Crime and drugs are the threats that breed the most fear in America's neighborhoods today. In the Citizens Committee for New York City's *1988 State of the Neighborhoods Report*, drugs were seen as the top community problem by a large majority of leaders across the city. Seventy-eight percent reported drug problems in their own neighborhood. Crime not related to drugs ranked second among neighborhood problems. Such a picture of fear and concern is reflected throughout many urban areas of the country.

Fighting drugs and crime at the street level, where people live and work, is part of the mission of many volunteer neighborhood groups. In fact, crime is second only to deterioration in the physical environment as a spur for the formation of new neighborhood groups.

Fear and the Social Fabric

Crime and the fear of crime, including drug-related crimes, can be viewed as both symptoms of a more general decline in communities and causes of that decline.

The disruption of a community is reflected in both physical decline and a weakening of the social fabric of neighborly behavior. Residents sense that no one is tending to the area, that no one cares about public behavior and that things are somehow beginning to get out of control.

Initially, the fear of crime is often greater than the actual risk of victimization. But this fear itself has pernicious effects. Those who are able to do so leave the community. Those who can't lead an isolated existence behind locked doors, prisoners of their fear of the streets outside. The combination of exodus, fear and isolation can erode a community even further, attracting more crime to the weakened area in a worsening cycle, until even going to work or to the corner store becomes a threatening experience.

A growing view of crime prevention is that the criminal justice system (including the police) reacts to crime but cannot prevent it. In order to control crime, citizens must play an active role in making their neighborhoods more

"Six months ago, the Knox-Gates area was the biggest drug super-market in the community. Today, drug traffic has slowed to a crawl. Neighborhood patrols, evictions of pushers, strong tenant organization, positive youth programs, some key arrests and good preventative police work have all combined to create an environment hostile to drug dealing in Knox-Gates. The key ingredient, though, is community activism."

*From the newsletter of the
Mosholu-Woodlawn South
Community Coalition, 1987*

"A major problem with single purpose crime prevention programs...is the attrition rate. Multipurpose organizations are needed. Crime is not a sustaining factor for an organization."

*James Stewart, Director,
National Institute of Justice, in a
personal conversation with
principal investigators of
the Block Booster project,
March, 1987.*

secure.¹ Citizens often need a structure, such as a block watch program or a neighborhood organization, to focus such efforts. Volunteer neighborhood organizations combat crime and drugs both directly and indirectly. Physical deterioration in the neighborhood not only contributes to feelings of insecurity and fear of crime but also actually attracts crime.² Therefore, activities that halt deterioration and improve the environment (see Chapter 2) are one way in which volunteer neighborhood groups indirectly attack crime and fear. By improving physical conditions, they give the area a cared-for look which warns would-be criminals that it is not an easy mark.

The social fabric that weaves residents together into a public whole can deteriorate as well. When the social fabric is strong, many activities suggest that residents are looking out for each other. These may be as simple as visiting, socializing or uniting with others to help a sick or needy neighbor. They may also include watching a neighbor's home or walking an elderly resident to the store at night.

A strong social fabric also develops norms for acceptable behavior and exerts those norms through what is known as informal social control. When incivilities—for example, public drunkenness, excessive noise, or the actions of rowdy, vandalizing youth—are disapproved of and confronted by residents, informal social control is being enforced. When the social fabric and informal social control weaken, however, incivilities remain unchecked; the sense that things are out of control increases and with it, fear. Thus, when volunteer neighborhood groups increase neighboring, they are both strengthening the strands of the social fabric in their community and indirectly helping to reduce crime and fear.

Volunteer neighborhood organizations attack crime and drug problems directly, too. Among the best-known strategies are informal block or neighborhood watches, tenant patrols in apartment buildings and escort services for the elderly. Groups may also promote individual security measures such as putting identification on property, carrying whistles, or conducting security checks of homes or apartments. Neighborhood crime prevention programs are growing in numbers and results. More than 19 million Americans participate in neighborhood crime watch programs and about 38 percent of families participate where they are available. Neighborhood crime prevention is cheap: seventy-one percent of programs in a nationwide sample had no formal budget. Neighborhood crime prevention is also effective: programs from around the country report success in lowering crime rates or totals. Studies have found that crime rates have dropped by 10 to 25 percent, while individual projects have reported even more dramatic results. Operation Safe Street in St. Louis, for example, reported a 20 percent reduction in overall crime in targeted neighborhoods, with rape dropping 32 percent and robbery 31 percent.³

However, single-purpose anti-crime programs are extremely difficult to sustain.⁴ A better bet for the long run appears to be multi-purpose volunteer neighborhood groups, which can indirectly reduce crime and fear through general operations while sustaining targeted, direct anti-crime activities in a way single-purpose organizations cannot. This is not to suggest that volunteer neighborhood groups are a panacea for crime problems. Neighborhood residents are limited in their ability to "solve" major social problems associated with many types of crime (e.g., poverty and unemployment, family instability). But the combined effects of strengthening the neighborhood's social fabric, improving physical conditions, increasing confidence, encouraging neighborhood stability and promoting targeted anti-crime efforts work together to develop safer, less fearful communities.

Block Associations and Crime

The Citizens Committee's Block Booster study took an in-depth look at the impact of block associations on crime and fear of crime. While the study did



*A Bronx block association worked with police to clean up what residents called a "drug supermarket."
(Photo: Ruby Washington/
The New York Times)*

not find a direct connection between the existence of a block association and overall crime rates, it did find that active block associations substantially reduced fear of crime among residents:

- ❑ Eighty-four percent of residents of organized blocks said that having a block association made them feel safer.
- ❑ Sixty-nine percent of residents of blocks without associations said that having an association would make them feel safer.
- ❑ Fifty-four percent of residents of blocks without block associations had high fear of crime levels, compared to only 17 percent on blocks with block associations.

This reduction in the fear of crime can be traced to the active building of community, in both the physical and the social sense, by the associations.

NEIGHBORHOOD ANTI-DRUG EFFORTS

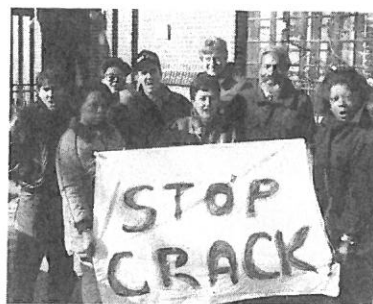
Another recent initiative at the Citizens Committee for New York City shows how volunteer neighborhood groups can directly attack at least one very tough form of crime—drug dealing. The Citizens Committee's Neighborhood Anti-Crime Center, established in 1987, grew from model anti-drug projects in four target communities to serve a citywide network of over 200 block and neighborhood associations engaged in similar efforts. The Neighborhood Anti-Crime Center provides a way to link previously isolated groups struggling with drug dealing and other crime, helping them share successful tactics and supporting their efforts with information, literature and training.

The Citizens Committee's neighborhood anti-drug efforts employ a three-pronged strategy of (1) community mobilization, closely coordinated with (2) law enforcement and (3) representatives of key drug abuse treatment and prevention agencies. This approach has shown solid, long-term results: increased arrests and convictions, evictions of known drug-dealers where appropriate, new youth programs, added drug treatment and police resources, and improved communication and coordination between the parties vital to success at the local level. Most significantly, this approach helps to break the cycle of fear, hopelessness and apathy which often grips communities which have been most severely ravaged by drug trafficking. As people begin to take back their neighborhoods, renewing their sense of ownership over the process and giving impetus to the creation of new programs, the momentum continues to be felt well after the initial training is completed.

As part of this effort, the Citizens Committee has built a working relationship with the New York Police Department. Since 1985, the Committee has been involved in training officers in the Community Patrol Officer Program, which stresses active cooperation between police and community residents for the purpose of controlling crime. Officers, assigned to regular residential beats, work with neighborhood groups or initiate them where none exist. The well-received program currently operates in all of the city's residential precincts. The Citizens Committee has assisted community organizations and Community Patrol Officers in each borough in developing long-term joint anti-drug campaigns based on the three-pronged approach described above.

Neighborhood anti-drug campaigns are difficult and inherently risky, requiring careful planning and organizing. Their marked successes in several New York City communities can be credited, in large measure, to the highly visible nature of this form of crime and the growing sophistication of the Citizens Committee, community groups and City agencies in fighting drug traffic. For more information about how this strategy works, contact the Citizens Committee's Neighborhood Anti-Crime Center.

When an elevated train rumbles through the Jerome Avenue-Mosholu Parkway area of the Bronx, conductors look carefully at the well-lit roofs of buildings as they pass. The conductors are partners in an anti-crime effort sponsored by area merchants and the local police department. In 1985, the Mosholu-Jerome Merchants Association combined funds with police to install lights on the roofs of stores located along the El. The addition makes it easier to prevent and detect crime on the rooftops. When conductors see signs of trouble, they notify police. By paying special attention to these roofs, they play a part in fighting crime in the Bronx.



A Brooklyn community confronts the crack epidemic with a long-range plan that includes organizing residents, working with police and obtaining preventive services. (Photo: Wendy Workman)

"If one is going to reduce fear...it is only going to be when citizens are involved in taking over their neighborhoods again and defining what good behavior is and working with fellow citizens to maintain that good behavior."

George L. Kelling, Northeastern University, in "What Makes a Neighborhood Safe?," a presentation at Brown University, March, 1987

Block Booster also found that blocks with block associations looked different and showed significantly fewer physical incivilities such as litter, graffiti or evidence of vandalism than blocks without block associations. Fewer signs of physical disorder were related to lower rates of officially reported crime. Blocks with block associations also "felt" different. Their residents described more neighboring, a greater sense of community and more commitment to the block. Because of the increased neighboring that went on, they more easily recognized each other and thus could more easily identify strangers. They reported that neighbors could be counted on to "watch after" each other and felt that, collectively, the residents were in control, could tackle the block problems and would intervene to exert informal social control.

This sense of connection, security and competence was significantly lower on blocks without block associations. It increased in strength the more active the block association was, leading to a stronger social fabric, less fear, greater collective anti-crime behavior and increased likelihood that crimes would be reported to police.

Block Booster found that members of block associations were much more likely to cooperate in a variety of collective anti-crime actions such as informal surveillance or block watches. This is important because previous research found that individual crime prevention efforts (increasing security, staying at home or restricting activities) are associated with feelings of helplessness, while collective anti-crime actions are related to feelings of control.⁵ Individual anti-crime actions appear to be an isolating experience, born of fear, while collective actions are an empowering experience that reduces fear.

All these effects of block associations do not accrue automatically, however, to every resident on blocks with associations. Block associations are not a spectator sport. Non-members do not reap the full benefits of the association's contribution to social cohesion and are less likely than members to take collective steps against crime. Thus, finding ways to build the capacity of volunteer neighborhood groups like block associations to increase and retain members is a key task for those seeking to encourage crime control through community development.

NOTES

¹ L.A. Curtis (ed.), *American Violence and Public Policy*, 1985; D. Rosenbaum, *Community Crime Prevention*, 1986; James Q. Wilson, *Thinking About Crime*, 1983.

² D.A. Lewis and M.G. Maxfield, "Fear in the Neighborhoods: An Investigation of the Impact of Crime," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 1980; K. H. Craik and D. Appleyard, "Streets of San Francisco," *Journal of Social Issues*, 1980.

³ National Crime Prevention Council, *Crime and Crime Prevention Statistics*, 1987.

⁴ P.J. Lavrakas, "Citizen Self-Help and Neighborhood Crime Prevention Policy," in L.A. Curtis (ed.), *American Violence and Public Policy*, 1985; D.P. Rosenbaum, D.A. Lewis and J.A. Grant, *The Impact of Community Crime Prevention in Chicago: Can Neighborhood Organizations Make a Difference?*, 1985.

⁵ L. Kidder and E. Cohen, "Public Views of Crime and Crime Prevention," in I.H. Frieze, D. Bar-Tal, and J.S. Carrol (eds.), *New Approaches to Social Problems*, 1979.

Grassroots Power— Vital But Vulnerable



4

Grassroots power is vital and it is flourishing. Examples of successful grassroots neighborhood groups can be found in all regions of our country, among all income, racial and ethnic groups. In 1979, the National Commission on Neighborhoods identified more than 8,000 neighborhood organizations in the United States and the Federal Office of Neighborhoods, Voluntary Associations and Consumer Affairs found nearly 15,000 citizens groups concerned with rural and urban problems. The Community Information Exchange, an information and referral service for community groups, maintains a list of 4,500 neighborhood associations and the National Association of Neighborhoods has a mailing list of over 15,000.

The small and informal nature of most volunteer neighborhood groups makes obtaining accurate counts difficult. But the Citizens Committee for New York City has identified over 7,000 block, tenant, youth and other neighborhood volunteer associations in New York City alone. These high numbers would most certainly not exist in other cities, but no city is without such groups.

Grassroots power has been growing during the past two decades, given impetus by several large-scale trends in our society. One of them is what has been called a "rooted distrust of bigness."¹ The alienating qualities of big business and big government have resulted in mounting cries to empower people and strengthen mediating structures, such as the family, church, volunteer associations and neighborhood groups.² Americans, particularly those in urban areas, increasingly demand more participation, responsiveness and decentralization in order to reduce the growing complexity and bigness of major institutions to a scale that individuals can understand and control.

Simultaneously, the longing for human community and commitment has been on the rise.³ Pollster Daniel Yankelovich, in *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down*, reports that in 1973, approximately 32 percent of Americans felt an intense need to compensate for the impersonal and threatening aspects of modern life by seeking a community.

"Knowing how to keep organizations active is extremely important. People won't be willing to invest their own time again if it doesn't work."

*James Stewart, Director,
National Institute of Justice, in
a personal conversation with
principal investigators of the
Block Booster project, March,
1987.*

Several years ago, two successful businesswomen who were moved by the devastation being wrought by the AIDS epidemic gave up their jobs to start God's Love—We Deliver. Operating out of an apartment, the fledgling group soon recruited 50 volunteers and numerous restaurants into a daily "meals on wheels" program bringing free meals to homebound AIDS patients throughout Manhattan. A timely Citizens Committee grant underwrote crucial food storage equipment. Today, God's Love—We Deliver is an incorporated, privately funded organization with its own space, staff and vans; its volunteers number over 150. Its vision of neighborly care for sufferers now eases the lot of more than 120 AIDS victims each day.



Small grants like the Citizens Committee's Building Blocks Awards can make the difference between survival and decline to volunteer groups like Brooklyn's Prospect Coalition for a Better Block. (Photo: Wendy Workman)

By the 1980s that number had increased to 47 percent, or almost half of the population. Volunteerism increased by 14 million Americans from 1974 to 1980 and the approximately 8.4 billion hours of volunteer time contributed in 1980 was worth an estimated \$64.5 billion dollars.⁴

Where grassroots neighborhood groups exist, they receive a ready response from residents. A comprehensive survey of 5,896 households in 78 Pittsburgh neighborhoods found 17 percent belonged to at least one neighborhood organization.⁵ This number represents only a portion of the potential available: a 1980 Gallup Poll showed a striking 69 percent of the urban population willing to devote an average of nine hours per month to neighborhood activities, including "the performance of some neighborhood social services." Participation increases as the size of the group's turf decreases. The Citizens Committee's Block Booster study found that participation in block associations averaged 62 percent of the residents, three to five times the rate in larger neighborhood organizations. Clearly, people are ready to seize opportunities for the kind of connection and sense of control provided by grassroots neighborhood groups.

Sustaining the Momentum—The Critical Task

But grassroots power is vulnerable because neighborhood groups rely on volunteers who are free to withdraw at any time. Several studies have noted that the formation of such groups may be relatively easy in contrast to maintaining them after the initial enthusiasm has faded.⁶ In the Citizens Committee's Block Booster study, for example, the 32 blocks with block associations selected for study in November, 1984, had dwindled to 20 by the study's end in May, 1986. Losing such numbers reduces the number of residents receiving the benefits of such associations. It also lowers people's expectations for collective action even in active groups, since members may doubt the willingness of fellow residents to participate over time.

Maintenance issues are therefore crucial if the potential of volunteer neighborhood groups as part of a comprehensive community development strategy is to be tapped. Building their capacity for sustained viability is the most direct way to increase the numbers of citizens benefitting from such groups. In the search for key ingredients and an efficient way to provide assistance, the Block Booster study developed a simple approach based on a combination of theory, previous research and consultation with 30 successful block association leaders and community organizers who were not part of the study.

The Block Booster technical assistance process sought to build capacity by increasing the competence and resources of the association through these simple steps:

1. A short survey of members assessed the strong and weak points of each association.
2. A "Block Booster Profile," graphically representing strengths and weaknesses, was developed for each association.
3. The individualized profile was given to block association leaders in a workshop, along with a workbook containing concrete suggestions.
4. In the same workshop, leaders completed an action plan which charted next steps, the resources needed and sources of needed assistance.

Block association leaders who attended the Block Booster workshop rated it highly and said they were quite likely to use the materials and ideas developed there. The real test, however, came ten months later when block associations which had received the workshop were compared with those which had not. Forty-four percent of the block associations that had not participated in the Block Booster workshop had become inactive ten months later, while only 22 percent of the group that did participate had become inactive. *Block Booster reduced the rate of decline by 50 percent.*

KEYS TO SURVIVAL

Through surveys and in-depth interviews, a wide variety of information on the New York City block associations participating in the Block Booster project was gathered during the spring of 1985. Fifteen months later, some of these block associations had ceased functioning while others thrived. How did the surviving block associations differ from those which declined?

RESOURCES

Resources and external support available were no different. Rather, surviving associations mobilized, organized and used their resources better. Surviving associations were more likely to:

- Make contact and receive assistance from City departments, support organizations or agencies.
- Request members to use their personal contacts in external organizations to help the block association.
- Network with nearby similar organizations facing the same issues and concerns.

MOBILIZATION

Surviving associations:

- Mobilized more residents to become members and put more members into active roles.
- Recruited new members by personal contact rather than general announcements or word-of-mouth.
- Provided more participation choices because they worked on a greater number of different assignments.
- Used a wider variety of means to communicate with members (flyers, newsletters, community newspapers, bulletin boards, etc.).
- Recruited new leaders and cultivated them through positions of increasing responsibility.

STRUCTURE

Surviving associations were more structured and task oriented. They:

- Had more officers and committees.
- Were more likely to have written bylaws that specified roles, responsibilities and operating procedures.
- Were more likely to use written agendas and minutes to help conduct meetings in an orderly, predictable manner.

MEMBER PARTICIPATION

Surviving associations had highly democratic, participatory planning and decision-making. They:

- Used consensus and formalized voting procedures more often.
- Decentralized the workload more widely, delegating responsibilities more often to a greater proportion of members.
- Took care of both business and pleasure, providing social time both at meetings and at special events planned for that purpose.

Members of surviving associations:

- Felt more empowered and believed members had a great deal of influence on the association's policies and actions.
- Were more satisfied with their opportunities to develop new skills through the association.

A sharp rise in the number of infants needing foster care in New York City has led to heart-rending newspaper accounts of babies languishing in hospital wards. Members of the volunteer Neighborhood Action Coalition in Manhattan's Washington Heights responded to the crisis. Their infant visitation project at a local hospital gives loving attention to babies twice a week. The Citizens Committee helped underwrite the project with a small grant for transportation costs.

The Block Booster technical assistance process demonstrated that systematic support and assistance to a volunteer neighborhood group can make the difference between ongoing activity and going out of business. For the key elements of viable block associations as identified in Block Booster see page 17 (*Keys to Survival*).

Concerns about the longevity of volunteer neighborhood groups are realistic. But it is unrealistic to expect grassroots volunteer groups to address all of their maintenance issues on their own over many years. As they nurture and sustain their communities, they themselves must be nurtured and sustained. Support such as training, written information, providing hands-on assistance and bringing such groups into contact with one another increase the likelihood that grassroots volunteer groups will survive. The success of Block Booster in decreasing the rate of decline is evidence that support can indeed be codified and efficiently delivered. To do so on a consistent basis calls for the establishment of a program or organization capable of working simultaneously with many volunteer groups while tailoring services to the needs of any individual group.

NOTES

¹ Nathan Glazer, "Toward a Self-Service Society?," *Public Interest*, 70, 1983.

² P.L. Berger and R.J. Neuhaus, *To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy*, 1977.

³ R.N. Bellah, R. Madsen, W.M. Sullivan, A. Swidler and S.M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, 1985.

⁴ Independent Sector, "Dollar Value of Volunteer Time," *Voluntary Action Leadership*, 1982.

⁵ R.S. Ahlbrandt, Jr., *Neighborhoods, People and Community*. New York: Plenum, 1984.

⁶ F.D. Miller, G. Malia and S. Tsemberis, "Community Activism and the Maintenance of Urban Neighborhoods," 1979; J.E. Prestby and A. Wandersman, "An Empirical Exploration of a Framework of Organizational Viability: Maintaining Block Organizations," *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 1985; D. Yates, *Neighborhood Democracy*, 1973.

Nurturing the Grass Roots: The Example of the Citizens Committee for New York City

5

In most urban areas, support and assistance for volunteer neighborhood groups is quite limited. Groups struggle with their own difficulties or, if lucky or resourceful, reach out to similar organizations. When support is provided, it is usually of two types: (1) individualized hands-on consultation and assistance that are labor-intensive and costly; or (2) periodic training on generic issues that fails to speak to the unique needs of different groups. Those seeking to support volunteer neighborhood groups thus often vacillate between the inefficient and the ineffectual.

The results of the Block Booster study and the history of the Citizens Committee for New York City suggest that these difficulties can be overcome by a citywide organization whose mission is the organization, support and maintenance of neighborhood volunteer groups. By employing a wide range of strategies, such an organization can start and strengthen large numbers of neighborhood groups, yet retain enough flexibility to individualize services to meet particular needs.

One of the most advanced models in the nation for developing and delivering assistance to grassroots volunteer groups is represented by the Citizens Committee for New York City, which for fourteen years has served as a catalyst for thousands of volunteer neighborhood groups.

The non-profit Citizens Committee was founded in 1975 by the late Senator Jacob Javits to help offset the impact of a major fiscal crisis in the city that necessitated massive layoffs of vital city service workers. With the mandate of mobilizing volunteer self-help and civic activity throughout the city's five boroughs and hundreds of neighborhoods, the Citizens Committee focused its energies on creating hundreds of new volunteer block and neighborhood associations and strengthening existing ones.

Today the Citizens Committee operates a variety of programs and activities that offer free self-help literature, telephone information and referrals, training, technical assistance and small cash grants to more than 7,000 grassroots volunteer groups. This level of support is particularly impressive when



Cash awards provide both seed money and vital recognition for volunteer efforts. Here, Dress Up Your Neighborhood Contest winners celebrate at City Hall.
(Photo: Wendy Workman)

"Awards programs, such as those instituted by the Citizens Committee for New York City, have expanded public appreciation and awareness of local self-help efforts and could be replicated in other metropolitan areas."

*New World Foundation,
Initiatives for Community
Self-Help: Efforts to Increase
Recognition and Support, 1980*



*The Citizens Committee's One City Awards support volunteer anti-poverty efforts such as this "sister block" partnership between two economically disparate New York neighborhoods.
(Photo: Wendy Workman)*

contrasted with the estimated number of only 3,000 such groups in the city when the Citizens Committee began. The Citizens Committee's wide array of services are organized into several functional categories that strengthen and complement one another.

Information, Referrals and Publications

- ☐ The Citizens Committee is listed in the opening Community Services pages of the New York City telephone directory as a key information source for all New York City residents.
- ☐ Each year, the Citizens Committee responds to thousands of telephone requests for information related to starting and maintaining volunteer neighborhood groups.
- ☐ Those requesting information receive either written information, referral to Citizens Committee training and technical assistance services, or direction to another appropriate source of information, such as a City department or agency.
- ☐ A wide variety of how-to guides are distributed free of charge. These describe in easy-to-follow steps how citizens can mount a variety of programs ranging from beautification activities to anti-drug and anti-poverty projects. Another set of publications help volunteer groups to maintain and enhance their organizational capacity.
- ☐ *Citizens Report*, a free newsletter, is distributed to more than 20,000 individuals and neighborhood groups in the five boroughs, keeping them up-to-date on Citizens Committee services, citywide resources and neighborhood-related issues.
- ☐ Specific publications are issued occasionally, such as *Youthbook*, an extensive survey of model youth projects in New York City, and the *1988 State of the Neighborhoods Report*, which surveyed 1,000 grassroots leaders in New York City and documented their priorities and opinions and the problems facing their neighborhoods.

Training and Technical Assistance

- ☐ The Citizens Committee provides both an ongoing series of neighborhood leadership training workshops and hands-on technical assistance to volunteer neighborhood groups.
- ☐ Each spring, the Citizens Committee provides training and information to more than 600 neighborhood leaders at its New York City Block and Neighborhood Conference, the largest forum for grassroots leaders in the city. The most recent had 45 different workshops dealing with leadership and organizational development, resource acquisition, coalition-building, and specific issues such as housing, crime, employment and poverty.
- ☐ The Citizens Committee actively nurtures coalitions and federations of volunteer neighborhood groups. The Citizens Committee's Neighborhood Anti-Crime Center, for example, provides support to the Neighborhood Crime Prevention Network, a citywide coalition of more than 200 volunteer neighborhood groups engaged in fighting crime and drug traffic.
- ☐ The Citizens Committee also trains those who seek to work with volunteer neighborhood groups. Through the Police and Community Training Program (PACT), the Citizens Committee has provided regular training to more than 500 Community Patrol Officers in the New York Police Department, helping them work with neighborhood leaders to develop local strategies against drugs and crime.
- ☐ The Citizens Committee's Project One City provides in-depth technical assistance to coalitions of neighborhood groups undertaking large-scale local anti-poverty projects such as jobs fairs.

Incentives and Recognition

The Citizens Committee catalyzes and sustains the initiative of volunteer neighborhood groups with a series of small grants and awards:

- ❑ The Neighborhood Self-Help Awards Program (SNAP) distributes grants of \$100 to \$1,500 to block and neighborhood associations for projects in specific categories such as crime prevention, helping senior citizens, subway safety, feeding the homeless or fighting drug traffic.
- ❑ The Building Blocks Awards distribute up to \$300 per group in recognition of the achievements of block and neighborhood associations and for communication with members through such means as newsletters and publicity.
- ❑ The Neighborhood Environmental Action Awards provide up to \$5,000 each to community groups in low-income areas for tackling local environmental problems.
- ❑ The One City Awards of up to \$1,000 support neighborhood anti-poverty efforts.
- ❑ The Mollie Parnis Dress Up Your Neighborhood Contest and Dress Up Your School Program award up to \$350 for community and school beautification projects.
- ❑ Each year, the Citizens Committee also presents seven "New Yorker for New York" awards at a gala dinner in February, focusing citywide attention on civic leaders and outstanding volunteer neighborhood groups for their contributions to the vitality of New York and its neighborhoods.

The Citizens Committee for New York City has learned that no single type of support and assistance is sufficient by itself. Rather, the above components must be integrated into a coordinated approach that creates a citywide climate of support and encouragement for volunteer neighborhood organizations. The Committee believes that this climate is essential for nurturing the vital roots of urban neighborhoods and the people who live in them.

One volunteer youth group for which the Citizens Committee's small grants and technical assistance has paid off is the Community Board 2 Youth Leadership Council, a group of teenagers in Woodside, Queens. For the past five years, the Council has devoted months of hard work to planning and implementing a summer Youth Arts Festival. Featuring dance, gymnastics, music and acrobatics performed by local youth, the free day-long event is attended by over 4,000 community members and has become one of the community's most notable and visible annual events. The Youth Leadership Council has become a magnet for area teenagers eager to develop their organizing skills as well as their artistic talents.



In precinct-level training throughout the city, the Citizens Committee helps police officers work with community residents to solve local crime problems.

Nurturing the Grass Roots in Your City

6

"A particularly effective aspect of its work on behalf of local self-help groups is the [Citizens Committee for New York City's] effective relationship with the media. Its efforts have brought news coverage and exposure to many local groups around the city....Available evidence suggests that the Committee's programs have focused broad, favorable public attention/awareness on community self-help endeavors."

New World Foundation

Developing an effective means of organizing and supporting neighborhood volunteer groups makes sense for any city. The Citizens Committee for New York City has shown that an independent organization can serve as a catalyst, expanding the number of block and neighborhood organizations in a city and helping to insure their viability and effectiveness through training, written materials, small cash grants and technical assistance designed and delivered to meet their specific needs.

Currently, only a handful of American cities have organizations like the Citizens Committee, dedicated to the development and support of volunteer community organizations. However, as cities find it increasingly necessary to maximize their resources, and as the success of volunteer-based community development gains wider recognition, interest in "nurturing the grass roots" is springing up across the country.

How is work like that of the Citizens Committee created and sustained? The Citizens Committee's experience suggests useful clues to the essential ingredients for success.

The steps which follow are directed to civic leaders who wish to encourage the phenomenon of volunteer community development in their own cities. Primarily, these steps describe the formation of a new organization based on the Citizens Committee's own history. But no one model is likely to prove ideal in all urban areas. Further, many existing agencies or organizations will wish to develop a capacity for encouraging neighborhood groups as part of their own operations. Most of what follows is valid for these readers as well.

1. Bring together key players.

Your effort to mobilize and support grassroots neighborhood groups will ultimately be successful only if you enjoy substantial and widespread support from local civic leaders. Since your functions will necessarily involve helping your grassroots constituents work with municipal government, you will need the respect and attention (and maybe funding) of city officials.

Since you will want to appeal to the private sector for financial support, you will also want your new organization or program to be known to, and valued by, leaders in the corporate and foundation philanthropic communities.

The involvement of major nonprofit organizations in the city is also important if these groups are to become supporters of the new organization's mission rather than perceiving it as threatening their "turf."

In any city, there will also exist prominent individuals whose contributions to the welfare of the city and its neighborhoods are well-known. Involving these individuals at the outset is an ideal way to assure their endorsement and possible financial support.

The media can play a vital role in launching a new initiative. Involving them in your effort from the start and regularly furnishing them with news about the goals and accomplishments—not only of your new organization or program itself but of the many neighborhood groups with which you work—can reap bonanzas in fundraising and public support. Media relations will be an important ongoing part of your work. The task of involving a broad cross-section of civic leadership will be easier if you remember that a citywide initiative to mobilize grassroots self-help activities has real benefits to offer each of the major sectors of the city.

- ☐ Government will gain from strengthened neighborhoods. Further, the new organization or program will itself become an asset to local government by serving as a resource for citizen participation and providing access to city services.
- ☐ Your initiative will appeal to the city's corporate sector, particularly banks and realtors, because of its potential for neighborhood improvement. Retail and commercial establishments will be encouraged by the contributions that neighborhood volunteer groups can make to reducing crime and fear and to building a greater sense of community. All types of business leaders will be attracted to the idea of involving their companies in an organization that enjoys broad public support and has few, if any, negatives.
- ☐ The media are interested in anything that seriously affects the life or the future of the city. They are also abidingly interested in the "little guy"—the concerns and achievements of ordinary citizens and neighborhoods that make up the city (and buy their papers or tune in to their shows). A major citywide effort to help residents improve city neighborhoods ought to attract the media's attention. Your organization can see that it does.

2. Form a permanent structure.

There are several ways to set up an effective organizational structure. One is to make the organization an office within City government, with the advantages of official recognition, possible financing, and ease of cooperating with other City agencies. Disadvantages include the vulnerability of governmental bodies to changing political priorities and administrations and the distance this may create from some neighborhood groups who distrust local government.

Other organizational structures might include:

- ☐ A for-profit corporation;
- ☐ A branch or program of an existing nonprofit organization such as a community development agency or a university; or
- ☐ Unincorporated status as a coalition of existing organizations.

The choice of the Citizens Committee for New York City was to create an independent, private nonprofit organization. Independent nonprofit status has the advantage of maximizing the autonomy of the new organization and insuring that its mission remains focused on nurturing grassroots groups. With careful planning and the involvement of key civic players, a private non-

"The first thing to understand is that public peace...of cities is not kept primarily by the police...It is kept primarily by an intricate, almost unconscious network of voluntary controls and standards among the people...and enforced by the people."

Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of American Cities*, 1961



Neighborhood volunteers work to improve a local park.

profit organization can become a visible embodiment of a city's commitment to its neighborhoods. A board of directors representative of the same key sectors involved in starting the organization will insure a broad base of political and financial support.

3. Build a local funding base.

Although starting and maintaining an initiative to encourage volunteer community development in your city will take time and money, it should not be beyond the financial reach of any city or metropolitan area with a population base of 50,000 or more. The scale of the organization can be planned to fit the city, and diverse sources of local funds are available. Fundraising strategies should include corporate contributions, individual donations, foundation grants, government grants and contracts, and special events.

4. Develop materials and services for grassroots volunteer groups.

Over its 14-year history, the Citizens Committee for New York City has created:

- ☐ Manuals for organizing new block and neighborhood organizations
- ☐ Specific "how-to" tip sheets and booklets on organizing a wide range of projects (such as block parties, jobs fairs, neighborhood clean-ups and anti-drug campaigns)
- ☐ An annual citywide conference for block and neighborhood volunteers
- ☐ A variety of small cash awards and incentive grants programs
- ☐ Numerous specialized campaigns, publications and training series

All are designed to help neighborhood volunteer groups get organized and stay in business utilizing available resources.

The Citizens Committee's National Consultation Service

No list of tips or organizational do's and don't's can answer all the questions any city's civic leaders will have about establishing a local initiative to nurture grassroots self-help organizations. The Citizens Committee for New York City offers a national consultation and technical assistance service for urban areas throughout the nation. This service includes initial site consultations to identify the potential for, and to begin developing, a local organization or program. The Citizens Committee can help local civic leaders explore potential board and staff recruitment issues, identify existing grassroots constituents and clarify organizing objectives. The Citizens Committee will also outline preliminary strategies for fundraising, including specific local funding sources and model proposals for support. Finally, the Citizens Committee will demonstrate the process of nurturing grassroots organizations through carefully designed programs of training, technical and financial assistance and publications. These initial services can be supplemented by more intensive follow-up guidance and training.

All of these consultation services are available on a sliding-scale fee basis. Additional information for civic leaders interested in exploring how their cities might benefit from the Citizens Committee's help is available from Michael Clark, Executive Director, Citizens Committee for New York City, 3 West 29th Street, New York, New York 10001 (212-684-6767).

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