Community Organizing in Rural Areas: Yes, It's Different

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Community Organizing Primer

➢ Community organizing – What is it and why?

- ▪ Bringing people together to address shared community social, economic, and welfare concerns.

- ▪ Done in constructive way to identify positive change opportunities, improve quality of life, and respond to needs.

- ▪ We do this to strengthen communities, expand social, economic, and human capital.

- ▪ But how? Two generally accepted approaches –

Two General Approaches to Community Organizing: Alinsky & Eichler

➢ **Saul Alinsky** (*Conflict theory & model*): Community power focuses on people – underserved communities rarely have enough money to fight power, but usually have strength in people (called the "Have-Nots"). To gain power, Have-Nots must TAKE power from the "Haves."

▪ Aggression oriented. Focuses on people as agents of protest and creators of conflict.

Two General Approaches to Community Organizing: Alinsky & Eichler

➢ **Mike Eichler** (*Consensus theory & model*): Informed by Alinsky, but focuses on identifying consensus points between divergent groups. Seeks opportunities to strengthen relationships between differing groups' interests.

▪ Collaboration oriented. Focuses on each groups best interests and establishing trust, mutual agreements, compromise.

Alinsky's "Rules for Radicals" (1971)

Alinsky's community organizing style centered around the following "rules for radicals."

Rule 1: Power is not only what you have, but what your opponent thinks you have.

Rule 2: Never go outside the experience of your people.

Rule 3: Whenever possible, go outside the experience of your enemy.

Rule 4: Make the enemy live up to their own rules.

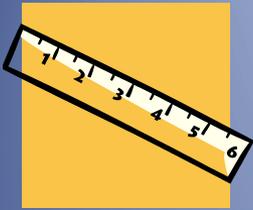**Rule 5**: Ridicule is your most potent weapon.

Rule 6: A good tactic is one your people enjoy.

Rule 7: A tactic that drags on becomes a drag.

Rule 8: Keep the pressure on.

Rule 9: The threat is usually more terrifying than the action itself.

Rule 10: The major premise for tactics is the development of operations that will maintain constant pressure on the opposition.

Eichler's Rules *(2007)*

Eichler's community organizing style centered around rules as well…

Rule 1: Block out your preferences. Allow community members to determine goals and objectives – not your preconceived notions.

Rule 2: Don't focus on causes. Focus on expected outcomes.

Rule 3: Get specific. Nothing gets done with only a general agreement. Specify goals, tasks, and expectations.

Rule 4: Progress through honesty. Consensus organizers must be truth brokers to be trusted.

Rule 5: Explore options. The organizer is an idea collector and all reasonable ideas deserve to be explored.

Rule 6: Get commitment. For commitment to be real and lasting, the goals must be focused and visible.

Rule 7: Take the piano off your back. The final strategies must be from the group and you must follow them. Your job is to lead the group where they ultimately decide to go.

Rule 8: EZ credit. Regularly pass out credit and let people know that their participation is crucial to the process and activities are appreciated.

Deconstructing the "Rules"

- Under Alinsky's model, the organizer focuses on identifying areas for change, then <u>leading & directing others</u> to pursue that change.
    - ❖ Activities center around organizer's ability to lead.

- Under Eichler's model, the organizer serves more as the facilitator and supports. Asks group what they want to accomplish and then <u>works with group</u> to help that occur.
    - ❖ Activities center around group members' ability to lead.

So which is the better RURAL approach?

While one should not overgeneralize, an argument can be made that the "culture of rural" is more aligned with Eichler's model –

- Consensus model focuses on positive and proactive rather than negative and reactive,
- Consensus model recognizes broad strengths across wider community resources,
- Consensus model seeks to avoid alienation and conflict,
- Consensus model honors close relationships that must be maintained over time among familiar groups of people dependent on each other.

How can community organizing activities be applied in rural areas?

Rural areas are struggling to maintain/achieve political, economic, social positions today.

Culture and space of rural implies that geography and life-ways don't always fit will with ability to organize people – but there are strong traditions and elements associated with rural: American Legion/VFW, NFO, Farm Bureau, Kiwanis, Grange, NARMH, NACBHDD, NACO, NAMI, PTA, etc.

These can be focal points of strength, leadership & resources within a community.

Why organize in rural places?

While some rural needs are changing, many remain same.

- **Severe & persistent illness.** Individuals, families, and communities often struggle with S/P MI due to lack of services. Organizing services can better support broad range of needs.
- **Children.** Greater need for child psych & social services, schools often in need of greater resources.
- **Aging pop.** Rural demographics show increase in older pop. Increase in need for services.
- **Veterans.** Large # of rural combat Veterans due to Reserve and NG deployments. Lack access to services.
- **Diversity.** Rural becoming more ethnically diverse. Need for services to meet pop needs. Specifically – Indigenous communities, Latino/Latina, overseas immigration.
- **Geocentric locations.** Areas of US identified as marginalized areas (Appalachia, deep south). Needs abound.

Perhaps most importantly, rural areas always include a variety of populations, economic conditions, social services. No one strategy applies.

Why community organizing?

- **Too often, state & federal policy responses are myopic and narrowly focused. Often responses crafted by entities not embedded in or understanding of rural areas.**

- **Consensus organizing techniques encourage focus on what the COMMUNITY believes more relevant.**

- **Focusing on broader community needs will include specific concerns and encourage holistic responses. Focusing only on specific concerns limits responses.**

Applying consensus organizing strategies brings relevant groups together around central issues.

Behavioral Health Example: Where community organizing may assist

- **Behavioral Health Advocacy**
  - **Olmstead decision (1999). Olmstead vs. L.C. US Supreme Court decision that held that under Americans with Disabilities Act, those with mental disabilities have same rights in community as those with physical disabilities. Lead to deinstitutionalization and furthered community-level services.**

  - **Given known rural issues (transportation, distances, lack of providers, lack of services) Olmstead decision important for rural residents.**

  - **Community organizing can serve advocacy practice of addressing rural residents falling under Olmstead decision.**

  - **Other Examples? Think of some relevant to your area.**

Socio-Economic Examples: Where community organizing may assist

- **Rural socio-economic growth/development**
  - **Assist in developing rural-focused strategies aimed at enhancing economic growth and jobs creation.**
    - **Tax-free economic zones.**
    - **Jobs training programs.**
    - **Road and transportation improvements.**
    - **Home purchase assistance programs.**
    - **Community development.**
    - **Focus on rural resources (human capital, natural resources).**

# Cultural Examples: Where community organizing may assist

- **Diversity & socio-ethno-cultural responses**
  - Respond to diversity issues through community collaboration, inclusion, buy-in, participation.
  - Respond to discrimination, isolation, racism, ageism.
  - Respond to variety of issues associated with in-migration (schools, language barriers, housing, employment).

Education Examples: Where community organizing may assist

- **Education**
  - Schools are central to a community. Community organizing approaches can be focused on identifying needs areas.
  - Develop responses at local, state, and federal levels.
  - Unite resources, populations, groups to identify needs areas and pursue positive change.
  - Train and prepare students for current and future employment opportunities.
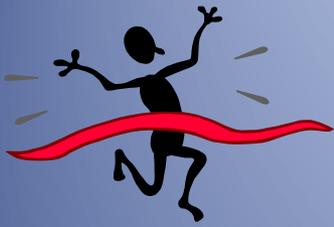
Conclusion

- This presentation focused on providing insight to two main approaches to community organizing, and identifies which may be more effective in rural areas.

- Community organizing is different compared to more urban places in that cultures, socio-economics, and life-ways differ, and responses must recognize these differences.

- Community organizing is an additional approach to assisting residents to achieve goals, which for us include improving behavioral health, increasing access to needed services.

- Also effective in providing for broader needs.

Recommended Readings

THANK YOU

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