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SERVING CONNECTED NEEDS IN APPALACHIA: HOMEGROWN HELP IN APPALACHIA
HAZARD PERRY COUNTY COMMUNITY MINISTRIES (HPCCM)

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> Natalie Hutcheson, Kentucky Housing Corporation

"What Do You Need?"

In summer of 1999 Annie Fox received a very odd phone call. Fox, the founder and former executive director of Harlan Countians for a Healthy Community in eastern Kentucky, was in the process of applying for a significant grant to provide access to health care for uninsured people from the Bureau of Primary Health Care. The phone call was from Gerry Roll, Executive Director of Hazard Perry County Community Ministries, who was competing for the same grant. Both of them knew that only one could get the money.

But Roll had a startling proposition for Fox: they should join forces and apply for the grant together. "I didn't have a clue who this woman was," says Fox. "And she didn't have a clue who I was." It was a high-risk venture for each of them, but Roll's reasoning was straightforward. In the economically depressed coal hills of eastern Kentucky, there were certainly more than enough problems to go around—joblessness, homelessness, poor health care, failing education systems, a lack of quality childcare, the list was endless. So why not try to work with as many potential collaborators as possible to deal with those problems? "I like that definition of collaboration," says Roll. "'Collaboration means working with the enemy.' Having the courage to come to the table with someone you don't trust. That's where you build true partnerships."

The willingness to reach out to unlikely partners is just one of the more brazen strategies employed by the ministries to get big and various jobs done in Perry County. Among the ministries' other winning tactics are: redefine problems to fit rural circumstances, breaking rules when it makes sense, and defusing potential opposition by appealing to their self-interest.

It's a sweepingly sophisticated approach to tackling the broad spectrum of social woes that any depressed rural region faces. That the Ministries has been so active across such a broad front of social ills and issues is also remarkable. The trademark of many social services organizations has traditionally been to deal with one problem or one issue. "Initially Community Ministries thought they were only going to run a food pantry," says Roll. "They were handing out food boxes and then found out they needed to deal with childcare, then they found out those children had other needs," including educational, health, and housing, among others. "Everything was connected to everything else," says Annie Fox.

As each new issue and need surfaced, the ministries reached out to new partners. "Our continuum of care system for the homeless now has over 30 partners," says Scott McReynolds, Executive Director of the Hazard Perry County Housing Development Alliance, which was spun off from the ministries in 1995. "When we go in for a grant with the Ministries, we'll talk about daycare, healthcare, job training. We don't go in as Lone Rangers."

Because of the Ministries' strong connections to other social services organizations in the county and state, it has developed a deserved reputation for never turning anyone in need away. "It's an organization that never says, 'That's not what I do, that's somebody else's problem,'" says Natalie Hutcheson, of the Kentucky Housing Corporation. Adds Annie Fox, "They never say, 'Well I'm sorry, the Department of Social Services and your problem is handled by such and such.' Click. Goodbye. It's, 'Okay, what do you need?'"

"Our People Have Been Lab Rats"

What's been most remarkable, though, is the homegrown nature of the ministries' success. "Eastern Kentucky has been a laboratory—our people have been lab rats since 1960, the beginning of the 'war on poverty,'" says Fox. "And there were a billion programs brought in by the federal government that were going to fix this problem. Well, they pulled in, they dropped their bucks, they did their programs and they pulled out. There was no sustainability. They came in because we were poor, dumb, and ignorant, and they were going to teach us better. And at the end of the funding cycle, they left."

Besides the lack of sustainability built into such a hit-and-run approach, there is the damage that it ultimately does to the very culture that such programs were designed to help rebuild. "If you tell somebody that they're a poor, dumb hick long enough," says Fox, "sooner or later they tend to believe it, and in a way we've created this code for a dependent population."

What the Ministries does, says Fox, is "grow civic capacity." "You need to start where you are and embrace who you are. You need to take that population and trust them, embrace them, educate them and give them ownership and it will grow and grow and when the funding levels change or the political leaders change, there is still this foundation that you've built, which is totally the opposite of what has typically been the Band-Aid approach to Appalachia."

"You give people knowledge," adds Father Michael Chowning, O.F.M., pastor of the Mother of Good Counsel Catholic Community. "You give people the information they need to be able to take the next step. So often they're not in the situation they're in because they're lazy, it's just that they don't know what to do."

"Someone can come to us who is homeless and desperate," says Wendy Morris, a ministries' board member. "And we can give them not only a place to stay, but a place they can begin to build some self-confidence and some skills around budgeting and money, and they can get job training and then help with transitional housing. It's a real across-the-board offering of services that can build people, and it's what builds community."

Donuts 24/7

But getting a community to believe that it can solve its own problems is made even more complicated when leaders in the community don't even recognize that they have a problem, says Roll. For example, when the Ministries proposed a homeless shelter for Hazard, "everybody said, 'We don't have homeless people,'" says Roll. "And if you open a homeless shelter, people will just come in droves and they'll be people we don't want."

What Perry County didn't have was homelessness in the traditional sense, that is, people sleeping in parks or under bridges. What they had, rather, were people in substandard housing, or in short-term need of temporary shelter, or just looking a place to get a cup of coffee or make a phone call. "So we had to back up," says Roll, "and then get everyone at the table who was objecting to this and ask, 'What is it that you need?' And what the mayor needed was someplace to send people when they came in and said, 'My house burned down. What are you going to do for me?' And what people downtown wanted was some place where people could hang out besides in front of the bank or the bar. And what churches wanted was some place for people to go who came begging at the churches every day."

"Everybody had a need," says Roll. "So we said, 'O.K., let's build a place where the mayor can send people when their house burns down, and that has coffee and donuts 24-hours a day, seven days a week so people can go drink coffee and eat donuts. We'll have a phone for people who don't, and a washer and dryer and a shower, and we'll have a place where people can get a hot meal and we'll call it 'The Crisis Aid Center.'"

Twelve months later, the city had its $200,000 center, built with money from the state, the city, the community, and the churches, with 20 beds, coffee and donuts, showers,

laundry facilities, a phone, three hot meals a day and family support services. Not only was the center a ground-level success, but it represented yet another turn of creativity for the Ministries, for in order to apply for the funding to build the center, the organization had to create its own nonprofit housing arm, an arm which it subsequently spun off. "It's a very daring model," says McReynolds, "to create something and spin it off instead of trying to control it." The fact that the housing development alliance has since been responsible for multiple housing projects in the area, "was a bonus to the Crisis Aid Center," says McReynolds.

Redefining Problems and Solutions

The effort to build the crisis center raised other key issues and stumbling blocks for the Ministries, issues and stumbling blocks that were symbolic of the broader challenge of trying to fashion solutions to rural issues in a world where so much of the policy is developed with an urban or suburban spin.

For one thing, federal rules dictated that men, women, and families were not allowed to share the same shelter. Upon being told of the rule, Roll says she told state and federal officials: "That's the rule? There's 5,000 people in my community. We'll be lucky to support one homeless shelter. How are we going to support three?"

Furthermore, getting a fair share of federal allocation for homeless services in that part of the country was itself tricky, because of the way the federal government defined "homeless." Because there's a high level of land ownership in the region, many people who live in "places unfit for human habitation" aren't considered homeless, says Roll. Yet many people are living in their cars, or in woodsheds or in three-sided buildings with no running water or electricity. "The government calls them 'homeowners,'" says Roll. "But if you took the 'home' and plopped it down Wizard of Oz-style in New York City, the family would sure be considered homeless."

Toward that end, the ministries has developed a three-page definition of homeless that it is currently working to push into the consciousness of the entire homeless community and policy makers, a definition that focuses on the reality of "home."

Breaking Old Molds

That is just the sort of broad, common-sense, and fresh thinking that the Ministries has brought to a variety of issues in order to shake support—and money—loose for a good cause.

For example, for years the Ministries argued that childcare was an economic development issue, and that those organizations working on economic development issues should work with the ministries on developing programs aimed at supporting childcare.

The Ministries was able to put a strong foundation under that argument when it was rebuffed by its regional hospital after the Ministries proposed setting up a daycare center for hospital staff and others in the community on an adjacent parcel. The hospital administrator wanted no part of the plan, arguing that his employees would be spending all their time down at the center visiting their kids.

The Ministries again stepped back and decided on a new tack. Staff gathered up reports and data on the benefits to businesses of having employees with solid, secure daycare for their kids. "[We] went back and instead of talking about daycare, we started talking about physician recruitment, employee retention, how this fits into [the hospital's] benefits plan. What this could do for staff morale," says Edna Turner, who runs the Ministries' day care programs. "We talked about all those issues and they gave us three acres of land for the daycare center."

Besides benefiting the hospital, the daycare center has been another remarkable example of the power of the synergy that comes when the activism is home-grown. The daycare center was quickly adopted by the local community college as a training ground for its own students interested in careers in early childhood development. Not only that, but the daycare center provided a place for working adults who were returning to college to leave their kids while attending classes. "And the Ministries also helps those returning students to navigate the system," says Linda Blair, a Ministries board member who also teaches at the community college.

It's the sort of synergy that the Ministries has been able to use to make a basic, nuts-and-bolts case for broadening funding for childcare: that it is an economic development issue. The ability to make that case has had significant spillover effects, note Ministries activists. Both housing and economic development money has been flowing to projects that include a daycare component. For example, says Roll, the regional housing development collaborative, The Federation of Appalachian Housing Enterprises, now has access to money to create daycare in FAHE housing projects. "Now all of a sudden, you're not just creating housing, but you're creating a daycare center that can take care of six or 12 children, and that family has a stable income and people around them have affordable childcare so that they can go to work. But 10 years ago, nobody in the housing industry or at the chamber or the economic development board would have talked to us about housing and economic development in the same conversation as childcare."

"The More You Give, The More You Get"

Ultimately what has made the Community Ministries so successful, though, is a fundamentally different attitude toward the community and toward potential partners.

Any ideas that the organization comes up with that seem to work are distributed for the asking. "We'll give away anything," says Roll. "Any idea, any copy of a successful grant application, any funding opportunity. The more you give, the more you get. Whatever you need to have, we'll share." Adds Wendy Morris, "It's not an empire. It's not about how to get more money in our pocket."

That level of generosity has allowed the Ministries to help generate, perpetuate, tap into, and energize a comprehensive network of services that can always help people looking for that first step toward help. But it's the Ministries' commitment to never saying no to someone in need that has really been the hallmark of its success.

"There was a woman who had come down from the District of Columbia to survey the homeless," says Natalie Hutcheson. "And we went to visit a man who lived way back in one of the hollows in a building with only three sides. And he came out to see who we were and talk to us. While we were getting our survey filled out, Gerry was telling him about Community Ministries and that if he would let somebody know, if he could walk somewhere and make a phone call, they would come out and offer some services or they would get services to him. Here I was thinking of filling out the survey, but Gerry was thinking about the whole picture. 'Here's a piece of my community that needs to be fixed and what can we do?' And the man just started crying because he just didn't imagine that there were people in the community that wanted to do something for him and that it wasn't, 'We have this to offer and this to offer.' It was, 'You call me and tell me what you need and then we will find out how to solve that problem.'"

It is just a small example of why the Ministries has developed a regional reputation for service, commitment, and follow-through. "People know that when they call the ministries they're going to get their question answered right there," says Morris, "that they're going to get their problem solved right there."

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As the leadership research and development hub for the field of public service, the Research Center for Leadership in Action fosters leadership that transforms society.

Founded in 2003 at New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, a top-ranked school for public service, the Center's unique approach integrates research with practice, bridges individual pursuits and collective endeavors, and connects local efforts with global trends. RCLA scholars use innovative social science methodologies to address ambitious questions that advance big ideas in leadership.

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Leadership for a Changing World (LCW) is a signature program of the Ford Foundation designed to recognize, strengthen and support social change leaders and to highlight the importance of community leadership in improving people's lives.

The LCW Research and Documentation Component is housed at the Research Center for Leadership in Action at NYU's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. LCW uses three parallel lines of inquiry ethnography, cooperative inquiry and narrative inquiry – to explore questions related to the work of leadership. RCLA is committed to developing participatory approaches to research and uses dialogue with LCW participants as a core of the research process. While the award portion of the program has concluded, RCLA continues to partner with nonprofit organizations to develop together new understandings of how social change leadership emerges and is sustained.

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