The Electronic Hallway

Research Center for Leadership in Action NYUWagner

Case Teaching Resources FROM THE EVANS SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Box 353055 · University of Washington · Seattle WA 98195-3055 www.hallway.org

PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS AND CREATING LASTING SOLUTIONS THROUGH HOUSING DEVELOPMENT, SERVICE PROVISION AND ADVOCACY: STAYING THE COURSE FOR THE RIGHT CAUSE
COLORADO COALITION FOR THE HOMELESS (CCH)

"You don't leave your mission. You focus on trying to find any way to achieve your outcome, which is the mission to provide services and housing to the homeless."
Tony Hernandez, Fannie May Partnership Offices

When Opportunity Knocks

When the Department of Defense announced a wave of base closings in 1990, the Lowry Air Force base in Denver, Colorado was solidly on the list. While losing a military facility is considered by some communities to be a significant blow to the economy, local interest groups in the Denver metro region understood that Lowry's 1,866 acres presented an extraordinary opportunity. The vast area could be redeveloped for parks and recreation areas, educational facilities, office and meeting space, as well as housing, for both market-rate and low-income buyers. In particular, Lowry's closing offered the opportunity to create housing for formerly homeless families and individuals, something desperately needed in the Denver metropolitan region, as surging housing prices, high unemployment rates and other variables conspired to create a worsening homeless crisis.

In the wake of the announcement of Lowry's shutdown, the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless (CCH) convened a meeting of homeless service agencies to develop a strategy for using some of the reclaimed land for housing, as well as for office space for other homeless services. The coalition recognized the base closing was a special opportunity, not just because it represented new land and housing, but also because under the 1987 McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, surplus federal property is to be made available for

This leadership story was written in 2005 by Melinda Fine, Ed.D., Principal of Fine Consulting and Jonathan Walters. Melinda Fine is researcher for Leadership for a Changing World Research and Documentation Component at the Research Center for Leadership in Action, housed at New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. Jonathan Walters is a writer and journalist An additional co-researcher for this leadership story was Leadership for a Changing World award recipient John Parvensky of Colorado Coalition for the Homeless. The leadership story is intended solely as a vehicle for classroom discussion, and is not intended to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of the situation described.

This teaching resource is made available on the Electronic Hallway thanks to a partnership with the Research Center for Leadership in Action at New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service (www.wagner.nyu.edu/leadership) and funding from the Ford Foundation's Leadership for a Changing World Research and Documentation Component (www.leadershipforchange.org).

addressing the specific needs of the homeless. Though the Act includes military installations in its definition of "surplus property," no homeless advocacy group had ever before taken advantage of de-commissioned military property prior to Lowry's closing.

That is how the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless and a consortium of homeless service providers initially won the right to develop 200 units of transitional housing for homeless families on the base. Covering just two percent of Lowry's 1,866 acres, the units were only a small portion of the 867 family housing units that already existed at Lowry, and they represented just seven percent of the 2,600 units that were projected for future development on the sprawling site.

Despite the small number of units planned, CCH's proposal still faced significant opposition from neighborhood residents and the City of Denver. After a protracted struggle, CCH and its allies agreed to reduce the number of homeless units on the base to 86 in exchange for $8 million from the city, the state, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and the Lowry Redevelopment Authority, that the coalition would use to develop replacement housing in other parts of the metro area. Though the compromise was hard fought, it ended up actually increasing the overall number of units available to homeless families in the Denver area. Besides the nearly 90 units going in at Lowry, the funding pool allowed the creation of another 250 off-base units. Equally important, by dispersing homeless housing throughout the city rather than concentrating it on the base, the compromise actually furthered CCH's strategy of diffusing formerly homeless individuals throughout the region as a way to help speed their re-integration into the community and into society.

It was a significant win for homeless advocates, but a win that proved to be short-lived. The Lowry Redevelopment Authority (LRA) – the agency entrusted to oversee base redevelopment – subsequently reneged on its agreement to provide title for the reduced number of on-base units. With the project in doubt, CCH had to go back to fighting to regain the ground it thought it had won under the earlier agreement. Through a yearlong, high-visibility campaign of public education, and a lawsuit against the LRA, the Coalition reached a second settlement, this one even better than the first. Under the second agreement, the Coalition was given the right to convert 92 of the existing town-homes on the base to transitional and affordable housing, along with the right to develop 120 additional new apartments on a nine-acre parcel on the base. CCH was also awarded a $3.6 million cash settlement from LRA to help cover construction and renovation of the existing units.

All told, the multi-year Lowry campaign ended up creating nearly 500 housing units for more than 1,000 formerly homeless families and individuals. It energized and mobilized a network of support services to meet residents' health, mental health, and employment needs. Meanwhile, it leveraged more than $50 million in housing and service funds.

In analyzing the Coalition's success in the Lowry case—and in the scores of other battles in which the Coalition has ultimately prevailed—there are clear lessons related to staying the course and diffusing the opposition when it comes to such potentially divisive issues

as situating homeless housing and services. In the Lowry case, the Coalition was able to identify and leverage new organizing opportunities, even as it worked out mutually beneficial agreements among a wide range of players and constituencies. By remaining at once both steadfast and flexible in the face of potentially divisive—even crippling—conflict, the Coalition hewed to its fundamental principles and goals in winning a major victory for the homeless and homeless advocates in the Denver metro region.

Building a National Model

The Colorado Coalition for the Homeless was founded in 1985, and has since become a national model of how housing and homeless support services can be integrated to maximum effect, even in the face of the opposition that the placement of such housing and services frequently engender. The organization provides transitional housing for men, women, and families, permanent single room occupancy units for individuals, and mixed-housing options for low- and middle-income individuals and families. The Coalition's direct services include a health care clinic, case management and psychiatric services for the chronically mentally ill, employment assistance, substance-abuse treatment, and a childcare center.

Underpinning the network of support services are sophisticated and energetic alliances and advocates who can be quickly mobilized whenever they are needed. While direct service organizations typically refrain from advocacy – they are often afraid to “bite the hand that feeds them” – CCH balances advocacy and services in order to meet the immediate needs of the homeless and foster more systemic solutions to the problem of homelessness, by working to influence the public policies and programs that impact the population now and in the future. Indeed, the coalition’s mission is to create lasting solutions to homelessness.

Headed by John Parvensky, a lawyer and former anti-war and civil rights activist, the Coalition has grown from a staff of three, with an annual budget of $60,000 to a staff of 240 with a budget of more than $17 million. And as the Lowry campaign illustrates, the coalition has grown into a force to be reckoned with. The political, strategic and legal acumen of CCH staff and coalition partners have enabled it to cultivate and leverage extraordinary financial and political resources throughout the state.

The Coalition's work takes place against a backdrop of a worsening homeless crisis. According to the Urban Institute, a Washington, D.C. based public think-tank, there were 1.4 million homeless children and 2 million homeless adults in 1996, the last time anyone has tried to compile an accurate count. There has since been a measurable surge in homeless families - reasons given range from low wages, to a still-troubled national economy, to the ever-escalating cost of housing, to the lack of health and mental health care. Yet even as homelessness rises, public interest in the issue has declined. Considered a popular cause in the mid-80s, the public seems to have grown increasingly tired of the problem, often blaming homeless people themselves for their plight. But when eight homeless men were murdered in Downtown Denver in the late 1990s, CCH seized that

tragedy to move the public dialogue from those crimes toward issues that more fundamentally addressed how homelessness is seen—or not seen—in the city.
The Coalition keeps the focus on homelessness and continually emphasizes the need for public action in multiple ways. On the one hand, the organization works at the national, state, and local legislative and political levels with the belief that eradicating homelessness is a matter of implementing major policy changes. On the other hand, the coalition understands that alleviating homelessness also requires direct service to those in need. CCH builds broad-based collaboratives within Denver and across the state, appealing “to the common good, first and foremost,” says Parvenksy, and then “to self-interest, if the common good [argument] fails.”

In trying to come up with solutions that benefit multiple interests, CCH typically creates ad hoc partnerships that include those directly affected by homelessness – religious institutions, human service providers, and the homeless themselves, as well as those interested in the city’s quality of life, such as government officials, civic institutions, businesses, and downtown residents. But the group's coalition building also involves a wide range of providers who all have some stake in solving homelessness. For example, the organization has formed a financial collaboration with 30 smaller social service organizations, passing on federal funding to these agencies to provide transitional housing for homeless families in rural Colorado. At the same time, the coalition's statewide network includes more than 240 organizations, all of which CCH can turn to for both political and service/logistical support. Finally, CCH fosters self-sufficiency among the homeless in various ways, such as job and skills training that includes involving formerly homeless residents in the management of their own housing, while also engaging them in advocacy efforts.

The collaborative strategy has clearly paid off for CCH. In the last decade alone, the Coalition has helped develop nearly 1,000 housing units for homeless and low-income families and individuals, providing financial assistance to 1,000 more families and individuals to find and afford permanent housing. The Coalition also created the first multi-county initiative in the U.S. to assist homeless families, successfully lobbying to get the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration to target funding for services to the homeless, and leading efforts to develop “tenant-based rental assistance programs for homeless families.” The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development has since incorporated such strategies into its own recommended delivery models.

Mission Clarity, Strategic Tenacity and a Bit of "Attitude"

The Colorado Coalition for the Homeless’ mission is to “work collaboratively toward the prevention of homelessness and the creation of lasting solutions for homeless and at-risk families, children and individuals throughout Colorado.” Those involved in the Coalition's work—both internally and externally to the organization—agree that that clarity of mission is one of the CCH's great strengths. It provides a steady, regular drumbeat that guides all of the organization's decisions, and motivates those working in and with the coalition.

It is also a message to the larger community of potential collaborators—political and otherwise—that the organization is tightly focused, which has helped it win wide-scale credibility statewide and nationally. “This organization is seen as not doing things for personal gain,” says CCH staffer Jack Real. “It’s not like someone out there is trying to get re-elected every four years, where you play a lot of political games. It’s a very straightforward process. We do this because it’s a good thing to do, and it’s effective to help people out in this way. And it’s a little hard to be against us too much if you’re really looking at what needs to be done.” CCH Director of Family Services Theo Barychewsky adds, “It doesn’t make a great deal of difference if a person in power says we’re not right, because we already know we are right and so you just need to keep plugging along until you win.”

Mission clarity also helps the Coalition to motivate staff. “It’s an obligation of those of us working here to go out there and fight the fight when we see the need to do so,” says the Coalition's Vice President of Program, Louise Boris. Boris says it was that sense of battling for the right thing that under-girded her testimony against a new state regulation that would have allowed nursing facilities to discharge people to the streets if they were no longer eligible for Medicaid. When Boris spoke before the state’s Medical Services Board, she says “I felt entirely comfortable saying, ‘I’m sorry, but our job at the Coalition is to advocate for people who are homeless, and that’s what I’m here to do. And you can explain to me all the rationale for this, but it is not okay to make people homeless.’” When Boris returned to CCH still a bit worked up after her testy exchange with the Medical Services Board, she got strong backing for her take-no-prisoners stance. “What you get when you come back here is not, ‘Who did you anger?’ or ‘What are the repercussions?’” she explained, “but an ‘Atta girl, good job! That’s what we expect you to do and want you to do.’”

That sort of clarity and tenacity were key to the Lowry campaign, say Coalition staff and allies. From the start, the Coalition knew—and made it clear to others—that its mission was to provide housing and services for the homeless. Compromising on the number of on-base units for the homeless was simply not an option for CCH unless an alternative deal could be reached that would match or surpass the on-base proposal. In explaining the Coalition's eventual decision to accept a reduction in the number of on-base units, a community ally involved in the Lowry struggle says, “We were being asked to reduce basically to be ‘good neighbors.’ And we basically said we couldn’t afford to do that on behalf of the folks that we represent. But you know, if we had our choice to begin with, we wouldn’t have said, ‘Let’s build 200 units of housing for homeless families in this one location,’ because the need was in fact throughout the Metro area. So, with that broader focus of wanting to serve the broader area, when we were reaching an impasse here, we had the idea of saying [that] if we had resources [to] replace those units throughout the Metro area, we’d be willing to cut back from 200 to 86. And that’s what helped to facilitate that dialogue and ultimately led to the creation of resources that allowed us to build other housing in other parts of the community.”

In the Lowry struggle, CCH’s clarity of mission also helped it to be strategically tenacious, an organizing stance that is crucial to mobilizing and sustaining commitment

throughout long struggles. “I never at any point felt that it was even possible to give up on it,” says Jack Real. “It simply wasn’t an option. It was, ‘How are we going to get it done?’ not ‘Geez, let’s just give up on this and roll over with it.” Adds Louise Boris, “We don’t go away. It doesn’t matter that we just had a negative interaction with the city around something. If we need to go back next month for their sign off on something or to ask them to do something else with us, we’re there. Sometimes you almost think you’re going to walk in and see them saying, ‘Oh my god, here they come again.’ But they know we’ll be back. I think that’s a big piece of it.”

In fact, over the course of the ten-year Lowry campaign, all but one of the other organizations that had fought alongside CCH gave up the right to remain on the base. “There were many points along the way we could have basically just said, ‘Give us the money. We’ll go and do it somewhere else where we don’t have as many hurdles to overcome,'" says a Coalition staffer. "But historically, when you look at where public housing is built, it gets built in places that no one else wants to develop. And that creates its own set of problems. We thought we owed it to the folks we were serving to have housing in what’s now a pretty upscale, vibrant community.” By tenaciously refusing to trade off Lowry for housing and services that might be pocketed in a less desirable location, and by instead insisting that resources support housing alternatives throughout the Metro area, CCH succeeded both in “achieving [its] broader integration goal” and “keeping Lowry an un-gated community.”

In the end, it was a years-long struggle, but an incredibly successful one. “Through persistence we were able to persuade the Air Force that of all the wide variety of projects that were competing for funding, they ought to look at this one first," says David Klimut, the Coalition's Director of Housing Development, "[because], we have people who are going to be homeless longer if you don’t work with us.’ We were successfully able to persuade the decision makers that perhaps the needs of the folks we were serving were a higher priority than having a golf course be completed. So here the mission not only drove us, but we were able to use that mission in order to persuade folks that they really ought to do the right thing as well.”

Strength Through Adaptability; and Don't Make it Personal

While mission clarity and strategic tenacity are important, they alone are not sufficient for ensuring success, say Coalition staffers and activists. Clarity and tenacity work because they complement another key organizational trait: the ability to adapt when necessary. Again and again in the Lowry campaign and in other hard won struggles, the Coalition has demonstrated a remarkable talent for turning road blocks into new advantages – or as John Parvensky puts it, being “strategically opportunistic” by “taking a potential problem and turning it into a solution.” “As long as there’s a need out there and a role for us to do it, we’ll try to figure out how to get it done,” says Parvensky. Or as another member of CCH’s staff puts it, “The whole issue is, don’t be satisfied if one part of the city is saying you can’t have it; find another way to see how you can get it.”

CCH's versatility derives in part from its orientation toward conflict. Charles Sauro of Catholic Charities observes that the organization is "not afraid to use conflict as a partner to solve a problem." Indeed, the Coalition approaches conflict head on, but not antagonistically. "It's that idea of not backing off, but not getting in your face," notes another community leader.

"Part of what gets us to work so successfully with people that we do have disputes with is that we tend not to personalize it," adds Klimut. "We tend to be very solution-oriented, very persuasion-oriented. That really goes a long way toward keeping people receptive to our way of looking at the resolution." Again, the Lowry struggle offers the perfect example, says Klimut. To defuse neighborhood opposition to its proposal, coalition staff attended neighborhood meetings, engaged in dialogue and brought in information to dispel neighbor's fears and prejudices. As a former staff member explains, "The strategy was to be patient, help educate, show that you were listening actively, and just keep bringing those folks along until they were comfortable."

CCH's deliberately direct, but non-confrontational approach is widely recognized by its opponents as well as supporters. "It's a test of skills, the ability to be politically savvy, not confrontational," says a community ally. "I've always had this picture in my head as far as John Parvensky and the Coalition, when it seemed like the other side was digging in their heels. Rather than going up against that, they just sort of mirror and say, 'Okay, we're going to get mellow here and wait until something loosens up. But we're not going to give up. We'll press our issue through no matter what the cost is. And I think that's resulted many times in, 'Okay, well, they're not going to go away. We just better deal with them.' And that has proven to be effective."

Again, the campaign at the Lowry Air Force Base is just one of many successful initiatives in which the Coalition has engaged throughout metro Denver and across the state over the past several years. But it is one of the best examples of how mission clarity, tenacity and the ability to turn confrontation to its strategic advantage add up to success. It's not something that all nonprofit organizations seem to understand, say Coalition activists. Some drift from their mission. Others make long-term tradeoffs for short-term gain. Many try to avoid conflict altogether for fear of alienating important people in high places. But as the Coalition has demonstrated time and again, it is staying true to mission, not compromising on long-term goals, and turning conflict into progress that have allowed it to continue to thrive despite the significant uphill struggle of representing a constituency that the public would just as soon forget.

About the Research Center for Leadership in Action

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.

Public service leaders rely on RCLA to create customized leadership development and capacity-building programs that facilitate critical reflection, peer-to-peer learning and transformation at the individual, organizational and systems levels.

RCLA collaborates with the spectrum of public service organizations, from government agencies to nonprofits and community-based groups across the country and around the world. Partners include more than 700 social change organizations, universities and leadership centers in the United States and abroad, local and state government leaders, and major foundations and corporations including the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, AVINA Foundation, and Accenture. Learn more at http://www.wagner.nyu.edu/leadership.

About the Leadership for a Changing World Program

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.

Learn more about Leadership for a Changing World at http://www.leadershipforchange.org, and learn more about the RCLA Social Change Leadership Network at http://wagner.nyu.edu/leadership/our_work/social_change_network.php.

About the Electronic Hallway

The Electronic Hallway at the University of Washington Evans School of Public Affairs is an unparalleled online resource for quality teaching cases and other curriculum materials. University-level faculty and instructors throughout the United States and in many foreign countries use Electronic Hallway materials to create a dynamic and interactive learning environment in courses related to public administration and a variety of policy topics. Learn more at http://www.hallway.org.

About the Evans School of Public Affairs at the University of Washington

The Evans School of Public Affairs is the preeminent school of public policy and management in the Northwest, ranked 14th nationally among schools of public affairs by US News & World Report. Our approach draws on the school's many dynamic partnerships with public, nonprofit, and private organizations and our graduates go on to challenging positions as public officials, agency directors, policy analysts and advocates, researchers, and nonprofit leaders and managers.

The Evans School's degree programs include the Master of Public Administration (MPA), Executive MPA, and Ph.D. in Public Policy and Management. Learn more at http://evans.washington.edu.