Developing A Community Embracing Its Diversity
"Establishing A Culture of Harmony in the Presence of Dissonance."

This paper exhibits a process for creating sustainable harmony in communities populated by a variety of cultural, social, ethnic and racial subsets. Many community neighborhoods consist of diverse populations. Some areas experience slow population change with long-standing residences while others see rapid turnover with homes being converted into rental properties. As population concentrations change, new cultural influences enter neighborhoods and often affect the nature and intrinsic balance of that neighborhood. This can lead to numerous differences in world view; exclusion; barriers to harmony; and worse. As these changes and difficulties enter the picture, how does a community find the harmony it needs? This paper discusses the nature of community, factors resulting in a lack of harmony, and restorative principles which help merge diverse populations into a consensus-building community, resulting in a positive quality of life for all. Finally, it presents a restorative justice method for communities to use in "Establishing A Culture of Harmony in the Presence of Dissonance," and redirecting "neighbors not being neighborly," through a Community Peacemaking process. Current implementation of these programs are exhibited.

The method to be used is a policy model called, "Creating Harmony Uplifting Residential Neighborhoods." It is a ground-up neighborhood and resident driven community approach; formulated around twelve years of independent and collaborative work alongside community organizations and institutions, concerned citizens, municipal bureaus, the city police department and the city school district in Rochester New York.

This is a new more inclusive concept for municipal consensus-building and planning, which expands the opportunity and accessibility for input from a wider representation of the population within focused areas of a municipality. It allows for a greater voice to be heard from every part of that area's population, especially those who traditionally have been diminished, neglected, ignored, and subsequently under served. This concept reflects a key issue in municipal planning. That is, traditional municipal planning is often too much a top down process, allowing only the loudest, more powerful voices to be the persuaders and creators of that planning. More voices, more representation, and more concerns heard from across an area's cultural spectrum enables a connectedness which brings greater peace and harmony to that area. When voices are left out of the planning conversation, frustration, aggravation and other disturbing activities are the potential outcomes. Many use the term Community as an area within a specific geographic boundary. Community is better defined by the distinct cultural groups within that geographic boundary. This means an identifiable community can be as distinct as the culture of a small neighborhood. Raising the volume on needs and concerns of all community layers - those of a different origin and ethnicity, cultural and social background, race, religion, language, age, status, class, persuasion, or any characteristic which makes them separate - allows a true reading of the plans that should be created to serve all within that community.

THE GOALS.

- Create a community of cooperation, accepting and embracing its diverse backgrounds, cultures, ethnicity, lifestyles and world views.
- Create a universal community mindset with a greater flexibility and functionality in planning and achieving goals among all its distinct cultures.
- Create a forum for equal input, participation and action.
- Create successful tools to de-escalate unacceptable social behavior, resolve aggravated differences, and deal with neighbors not being neighborly, thereby reducing calls and need for police services.

Consider municipalities like many in the northeast US which have high concentrations of working class poverty, low performing schools, high teen pregnancy rates, workforce reductions or job source collapse, decreasing population, home ownership turning to absentee landlord rental property, and significant criminal activity. In many municipalities there is a great disparity between residential areas, classes, wealth, education and access to services. These factors converge to form one vast panorama of considerable difficulty. There are many service organizations and nonprofit institutions which can and do work on these problems. The difficulty in the array of services is often many programs have been decided to satisfy the requirements of funding sources. The people actually being served usually have no voice, power or access to this funding to assist them in developing programs they deem necessary. There is no coordination between the efforts of each provider. This condition can be described as satellites with no ground control or just, no one connecting the dots.

Regarding crime levels, the police can put more officers on the streets with less tolerance for even the lowest level of antisocial behavior and adverse activity. This can result in situations where anything that looks or hints of criminal activity is approached with possible arrest. Residents in the crime affected areas may believe they are being unfairly targeted with unbalanced attention and restrictions. Complaints of abuse of power or undue force may occur. Other residents in these areas may believe the police are not doing enough. The police will say, "we cannot do it alone." That is a good starting point for a change in policy. If the full community can be involved in the development of programs and services which affect their quality of life issues, that community becomes more effective as part of the system which alters its quality of life. Missing from the equation are initiatives which alter the social fabric and provide alternative opportunities to change the fundamental conditions which bring on criminal activity. No voice, no action! So, how does a group of like minded citizens, members of a specific community, develop their voice such that they have the ability to make the changes they believe are most effective for their neighborhoods?

APPROACH.

Developing a unified, louder voice for a particular community is the essence of the model. The goals are designed to first develop a Community Embracing Its Diverse Population; second, build that into an empowered Spirit of Community which can seek actions to address their needs; third, create tools to help this community Restore Its Harmony and deal with Neighbors Not Being Neighborly - without police services.

The approach peels back layers of a neighborhood's demographic, in order to :
  • Identify distinct groups with specific ethnic, social, class, and other characteristics;
  • Assist each in creating an environment of cooperation;
  • Bring all into an inclusive process for consensus building, planning and action;
  • Create a universal community mindset which can develop more inclusive planning;
  • Identify underlying problems which keep neighborhood residents from
      developing or maintaining paths to harmony and peace;
  • Create tools to redirect unacceptable social behavior and aggravated differences;
  • Result in an enlarged community of understanding which can address and
      act upon the concerns of all its subparts, achieving a wider range of goals.

ESTABLISHING A CULTURE OF HARMONY IN THE PRESENCE OF DISSONANCE.

How can Restorative Justice work to restore harmony in the presence of community dissonance?   By Using Restorative Justice principles and techniques it is possible to preempt and defuse behaviors and activities that lead to criminal acts. The concept is simple: move the Restorative Justice process to the front of the problem. It is a preemptive role rather than a reactive role. Community Peacemaking Restorative Justice has its place in finding solutions to redirecting the turmoil, the dissonance, that resounds in many neighborhoods across many communities.   It starts with the Restorative Justice principle: healing the harm caused needs all parties to find a satisfying resolution. Preempting dissonance also needs all parties to agree to the shared principles of that community. Criminal Restorative Justice brings into the circle the offending party and the victimized party. Community Peacemaking Restorative Justice brings into the circle the parties who are at odds with each other. It may also be used to bring in one party whose unacceptable behavior is at odds with the community in general, and is spiraling downwards toward criminal activity. Both situations present parties going beyond the shared values and norms of the community. In the one case, the two parties are neither victim nor offender, they are both. In the other case, the one party may be perceived as the offender, call it wrongdoing party, and the victimized party actually becomes the community. The reader is sure to recall situations from their own experience which resemble either or both of these scenarios. In either case, the Community Peacemaking Conferencing model becomes a Restorative Justice elder circle. It brings into the circle the concerned primary parties, secondary parties, and community stake holders. The circle is facilitated by a neutral party who takes on the

elder role.   As in criminal Restorative Justice, the involved parties must together find a satisfying resolution to the disruptive activity.   They must find in themselves the ability to make right the harm they have caused.   The stake holders, the community, must find not only a satisfying conclusion to the harm caused, but a means to return the disruptive parties "back into" the community with honor.

There is a difference in how a Community Peacemaking Restorative Justice circle conference is structured versus a criminal justice one.   The criminal justice conference is usually established by an adjunct facilitation service to the court system.   It operates with affirmation of both the courts and the prosecutorial jurisdiction.   The process is initiated either just before an arrest or appearance ticket (some call this a warning) by the police, or by the prosecution, or by the sitting justice.   The case is taken out of the system and the Restorative Justice process begins. Whichever direction the entry into criminal Restorative Justice has taken, it often begins with some form of police service.

Police services may be the initiator of a Community Peacemaking Restorative Justice conference, as well.   A patrol or neighborhood policing officer may identify a situation which needs defusing or course altering.   This initiation may also come from a municipal authority assigned to the zone in which the community is located.   It may come from a neighborhood association, or business association, faith group, or the neighborhood school.   There are plenty of eyes and ears in neighborhoods that know what is happening and who is involved. Community Peacemaking Conferencing can be initiated on an ad hoc basis.   That is, a trained person or group can form a conferencing circle for one particular situation.   They may enlist the support of the municipal leaders responsible in the area.   They may rely on the police service to bring into the circle the disruptive party/parties.   The conference circle then must include a wide variety of affected participants.   Supporters for each party of the situation are encouraged.   Members of the affected community should also be included.   These may be those directly affected, or those knowledgeable of the parties and the situation, like clergy, school administrators, local service organizations, etc.   Conferences should be held in a neutral place, at a time convenient to all parties concerned.   Pre-conferencing is important.   The facts are important.   They are the seeds for growing a solid, fair and agreeable resolution.

As in criminal Restorative Justice, a resolution is sought.   In this case, the resolution is not a contract that resolves a crime, needing approval of the court.   This resolution is a neighborly agreement that allows each party to understand what is expected of the other.   After the elements of the resolution are accomplished, or during the achieving of the elements, all parties will hopefully be at peace with one another - a return to honor.   There is one factor that may enter into this type of conference.   That involves the police.   If the problem was approaching a criminal state, the disruptive party/parties must be made to realize that if the resolution is not accomplished as agreed, further action may be taken by the police.   This caveat means that someone is monitoring the progress of, or lack of, accountability.   As in criminal Restorative Justice, consequences

are the "strong arm" of understanding that this is not a fluffy technique to get out of a troubled situation.

There is a higher level of Community Peacemaking Conferencing establishment. This level is the development of permanent committees in various neighborhoods. This falls under a public-policy implementation. Such committees will have the specific underpinning and support of the municipality in which the neighborhood is a part. In this case, the municipality supports the committees with either a liaison or a dedicated staff to service functions, such as coordination of convening the committees, appointments for pre-conferencing, identification and invitation of secondary parties and stake holders, and the clerical services necessary for resolution recording and accountability monitoring. It also should supply a level of funding for professional Restorative Justice facilitators. A permanent presence may also involve training of Restorative Justice facilitators in groups within neighborhoods. This advances the Restorative Justice concept and understanding of the principles. Added to this should be peacemaking circle training. Here, norms and shared values can be revisited and revered.

AN EXHIBIT.

This method can be easily applied to neighborhood initiatives and structures. Such a structure exists in the City of Rochester New York. The city is divided into four quadrants. These quadrants are partitioned into ten city sectors. When the structure was established years ago, each sector was given the funding and assistance in forming a Sector Steering Committee. The steering committees consisted of volunteer residents charged with representing all aspects of their sector, and creating plans which aided the quality of life and development of that sector. Many committees made significant efforts to incorporate a large swath of neighborhood stake holders in its membership. The downfall of the program began when support from city hall personnel and funds dwindled.   The committees became smaller, less inclusive and more gentrified. At the same time, some of the ten sectors saw a changing tide of residency. Previous long time home owners were replaced by renters from numerous cultural backgrounds with absent landlords. As the formerly static nature of neighborhoods faded, the sector committees lost sight of their neighborhoods' reformulated natures and their futures.

To bring more input for neighborhood planning, the city made the effort to expand and replace membership in the committees. Each was challenged to become more inclusive and develop sector plans that represented the needs of all residents. At the same time, city hall made deep cuts in its personnel due to its significant budget deficits. The sector committees had the challenge but not the support to achieve the task. Experience with such groups had shown that even when they desired to enlarge their view, they did not. Members who were leaving brought in others like themselves. Reaching out for new members became "who do I know, rather than who should I know." Seeking those unknown participants was either too time consuming, or too

uncomfortable, that is, "they're not like me." The result was more of the same - no advancement and no representation of all community parts. To alter that end result, the city used the R.I.C.H. - Restorative Initiatives in Community Harmony model.

Their project was called, "Rochester In Community Harmony."
It focused on twelve particular actions:
1. Obtain acceptance from the sector committees to assist current members.
2. Guide them in identification of distinct ethnic, social, class, and other groups.
3. Assist them in finding key individuals in those groups, as representatives.
4. Identify appropriate service providers and funders in order to train and assist these representatives in developing organization and communication skills which enable them to become more effective and influential.
5. Bring each into a process for understanding how to identify the essential needs of their distinct group as it relates to the greater community plan.
6. Bring these representatives into a more inclusive sector process.
7. Assist the process to achieve greater consensus and a more equal strategic plan.
8. Identify appropriate service providers and funders to achieve this plan.
9. Utilize appropriate service providers to develop a restorative justice approach to deal with neighbor disagreements and altercations without police service.
10. Assist them in creating a restorative justice conferencing forum and process, serviced and maintained by trained residents of each specific community.
11. Promote the effort to groups, institutions, city hall, and the community at large.
12. Monitor progress and the efficacy of service providers, and alter as necessary.

OUTCOMES.
Short Term.
  • Development of key individual forums within each sector.
  • Development of more inclusive sector committees. .
Long Term.
  • Effective service providers designated to each task of this concept.
  • Achievement of inclusive sector plans that are directed and effective,
  • Development of agreed upon sector norms and codes of acceptable behavior.
  • Development of resident driven community restorative justice committees to handle residents' minor disruptive and unacceptable behavior issues - with support, but not with services, from municipal and police departments.
Full Term.
  • Community awareness of this program's core premise.
  • Greater sense of big picture thinking, cooperation and collaboration among service providers and funders.

The city's RiCH project began January 2009.
In the first quarter 2009, sector committees divided into subset committees - Education, Public Safety, Youth, Land Use, Economics, and Quality of Life.

Previously, some of these committees existed in a virtual sense with one or two members who found their passion in that specific category. These initial members were assisted in finding additional members from outside their sphere of influence. More importantly, they were shown the how and the why of cross-connecting their areas of responsibility with other subset committees. In addition, having contracted a strong and influential project coordinator along with several teams of facilitation trainers, both the subset committee leader and the members learned restorative justice conferencing techniques which allowed each member to communicate on a more even plain . This resulted in expansion of goals, and expanded action plans in order to accomplish their goals. At the same time, sector committee leadership communicated this project to the organizations that filled out the sector's groups of associations and forums. This garnered increased interest in the neighborhood planning process and brought into it other participants.

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