



North American Association of Christians in Social Work (NACSW)
PO Box 121; Botsford, CT 06404 *** Phone/Fax (tollfree): 888.426.4712
Email: info@nacsww.org *** Website: <http://www.nacsww.org>

“A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work”

**BLOCKS OF EXCELLENCE:
A SUSTAINABLE METHODOLOGY FOR HEALTHY
NEIGHBORHOODS, HEALTHY FAMILIES, AND HEALTHY
CHILDREN**

**Kristie K. Abruzzo
Andrietta Gaston**

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BLOCKS OF EXCELLENCE is a model for specific action in response to our Christian call to “Love your Neighbor” and current research that recommends we help to re-build our connectedness with one another and strengthen the assets of our citizens.

The Research

The amount of research available for our consumption is vast and this is a short paper. The research quoted here is small sample what is available:

- In the report *Hardwired to Connect* (Institute for American Values, 2003; www.americanvalues.org), The Commission on Children at Risk details the scientific data that suggests we are biologically wired for strong, meaningful connections to other people, and when deprived of these connections, or “authoritative communities” our biology changes negatively causing emotional, mental and physical disease.
- The Search Institute (www.search-institute.org) has produced a framework of developmental assets that identifies forty positive relationships, opportunities and personal qualities needed to help young people grow up healthy. This organization provides data and research that encourages us to focus our efforts on building and supporting the assets of our citizens.
- In a Common Focus interview with John McKnight, author and Director of Community Studies for Northwestern University, McKnight states “Progressive leaders see that the future of our towns and cities depends upon returning to the

American tradition that the center of community power is in the hands of citizens and their associations.” (http://www.commonfocus.org/ideas/intv_mcknight.shtml)

- In his book *Beyond Charity* (Baker Books, 1993) John Perkins tells us that “. . . our cities are not crying for charity, which can be done at arm’s length, but for people with love that reconciles, and involvement that changes strangers into friends.”
- In Robert Putnam’s book *Bowling Alone* (Simon and Schuster, 2000), he states in his closing chapter “*Let us act to ensure that by 2010 Americans will spend less time traveling and more time connecting with our neighbors than we do today, that we will live in more integrated and pedestrian friendly areas, and that the design of our communities and the availability of public space will encourage more casual socializing with friends and neighbors.* One deceptively simple objective might be this: that more of us know more of our neighbors by their first name than we do today.”

Our Awareness

As Christian social servants, many of us have read this research and find the summaries and recommendations convincing and compelling. Once we are convinced of the validity of the arguments and combine it with our Christian calling, we recognize our own personal passion for finding viable solutions and are faced with the potentially overwhelming challenge of determining how to put our passion into effective action.

The Options

We have access to a variety of “action” models that can be implemented within churches or Christian organizations. Once we are convinced of what “should be”, there are a variety of paths to get there. If we agree, for example, that our citizens would benefit from “a good sense of community” what can a Christian organization do to help create it? What do we mean by community? Today, there is a great deal of pressure for ongoing collaboration among social service organizations and an emphasis on outcomes. How do we know if we have created a good sense of community? Many times the time and effort it takes for organizations to collaborate, and pre-determine the outcomes means that, once again, the actual effort we are able to pour into strengthening the connectedness and inter-relational assets of our real citizens goes to the proverbial bottom of the pile.

One Option

Blocks of Excellence is a successful model that was designed specifically for simplicity of concept, ease of implementation, and meaningful impact on the connections of real people. It doesn’t require collaboration among different organizations because it functions within a specific geographical area. It doesn’t require a vast amount of resources. It does require an understanding and respect for indigenous leadership and an unwavering belief that God has placed His people everywhere and their leadership can be inspired to connect neighbors to one another for positive change on a street or block. We have listened to the suggestions that a sense of belonging proceeds believing.

BLOCKS OF EXCELLENCE

A sustainable methodology for healthy neighborhoods, healthy families, and healthy children

The Vision

This is a neighborhood of residents who love God and love their Neighbor. They recognize and embrace their ability to work together to create a “great place to live”. They understand both the individual and collective benefits to the residents in terms of their health and well-being, especially the children. Such neighborhoods are safe, caring, spiritual, welcoming, and nurturing. They provide a healthy sense of belonging and share a clear understanding of the characteristics they strive to achieve among themselves and to the greater community.

The Mission

Connecting with one another to weave the fabric of the neighborhood together for love of God and love of Neighbor. In this effort we find strength, prosperity, and a sense of belonging.

The Goals

- Resident leaders actively networking and promoting their “great place to live” vision in specific, defined residential blocks or streets.
- Blocks of residents linking together and extending out to entire neighborhoods and beyond.
- The Christian Church experiencing growth in the neighborhood

The Objectives

- Identify a specific neighborhood and its street boundaries
- Identify at least five neighborhood residents who live on different streets within the defined neighborhood
- Secure their commitment to become a Block Leader and partner with XYZ organization or ABC church
- Meet together once a month for 6-8 months; provide specific training and support of their leadership role on their defined block or street
- Support their vision for their block with resources **when** it is requested

Why Neighborhood?

It is what the vast majority of us have. Most of us live around other people in a variety of settings from homes to apartments. The place we call home is where several of our basic human needs are met. Meaningful connections to other people are more powerful when they exist in the same “place” where we meet our needs for safety, shelter, food, etc. A block or street is small enough to be grasped, yet can spread easily to encompass a large geographic area of thousands of people. In addition, there exists a common goal among citizens who live in close proximity; the common goal of a “great place to live.”

What about Neighborhood Associations?

Neighborhood Associations grew out of the recognition that residents of large neighborhoods would benefit from an organization devoted solely to their needs and their concerns. Many of these organizations fill a critical need in a variety of neighborhoods and residents have come to depend on them. Unfortunately, many of these organizations are short staffed, yet they are responsible for almost every aspect of neighborhood issues from Neighborhood Watch to social gatherings. The large geographic area they are expected to cover can make it impossible for them to get to know more than a few vocal and visible residents. The rest of the residents, armed with the knowledge that the Neighborhood Association has the position of authority and responsibility, become content to leave it there, even if it’s not meeting their needs or the needs of their particular block. The Blocks of Excellence model can work along side any Neighborhood Association and, together, become part of the overall effort.

It seems small, what is the bigger picture?

Any successful effort to connect people to one another for positive change and a healthy lifestyle must begin small. Meaningful relationships do not form among individuals who are together in large groups. However, in a residential setting, small groups of immediate neighbors that make a recognizable positive change have the ability to impact the rest of the neighborhood. Other organizations and institutions that may be present in the neighborhood will also benefit. For example, many residential neighborhoods include a neighborhood school. School administrators strive for more parental and adult involvement. These administrators have a better chance of reaching this goal when the neighbors have bonded together and begin to look for opportunities to create positive change beyond their block or street.

What about “Bridging?”

Robert Putnam and Lewis Feldstein bring us this term in their book *Better Together* (Simon and Schuster, 2003). “For this reason analysts find it helpful to distinguish between “bonding social capital” (ties that link individuals or groups with much in common) and “bridging social capital” (ties that link individuals or groups across a greater social distance).”

Typically, people who live around each other have things in common. They may be of similar economic status, race, education level, etc. At first glance it would appear that that this model supports their connectedness, but doesn’t do anything to “bridge” the gap between people who are very different from one another. We recognize that crossing the gap is more difficult to achieve. If an individual or family is faced with the challenge of

reaching across an economic or racial divide, they are more likely to take the risk if they have a few friends along with them. When strong blocks or streets exist with indigenous leadership at work, there is a “mechanism of approach” to a call from city leaders to come together as citizens across various barriers. For example, if the leader of an African American low-income street wants to respond to a challenge presented by the mayor, it becomes “doable” if he can contact the leader of an affluent white block and suggest a joint gathering. It is less intimidating for both groups and it places each leader on equal footing.

In conclusion

Bible study, research, and theory can create awareness. Awareness can spurn prayerful action. Action can be effective and produce the desired results. The opposite is also true. Research and theory can be ignored or forgotten. Awareness and our Christian calling can paralyze. Action can be ineffective and create a sense of hopelessness. The path is not straight, nor is it always well defined. We must take what we learn at each step of our learning, create healthy connections where we live, and lead others to do the same.