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Housing a Homeless Shelter: A Case Study in Community Deliberation

Amie Thurber

Abstract: Among the core competencies of macro practitioners are the skills to design, implement and evaluate conflict resolution processes. Drawing upon theories of deliberative democracy, restorative justice and the Just Practice framework, this paper explores a process of deliberation which engaged 200 community members in the controversial siting of a homeless shelter. This case study is both descriptive and reflective: by offering an in-depth description of the process and a reflection on the guiding values, this paper provides critical insight into best practices in – and limitations of – using deliberation to resolve divisive community issues.

Keywords: deliberation, homeless shelter, community practice

Missoula, Montana – a college town of 66,700 residents – is rich with opportunity: within minutes one can access hundreds of miles of trail for hiking, biking and skiing, and one can enjoy ample cultural events, from book readings to pow-wows, to art exhibits. Yet, Missoula County is also disproportionately impacted by poverty. According to the 2010-2014 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, a greater proportion of Missoula residents live below the poverty level compared to the rest of the state, and median home values are nearly \$50,000 above the state average. The 2007 recession produced sharp job losses (Barkey, 2010), and given the high housing costs, the region saw stark increases in people accessing public assistance (Montana State University Extension Economics, 2011), and a 21 percent increase in homelessness between 2009 and 2011 alone (Montana Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). In May 2011, the Poverello Center (the only emergency shelter within 100 miles) announced plans to build a new facility. A controversy erupted over the proposed location, deeply dividing the community. Seeking mediation, the city contracted the Missoula chapter of the National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI), a non-profit that provides training and facilitation to reduce prejudice and resolve conflict. As NCBI's director, I led a team charged with designing, implementing and evaluating a city-wide process that would engage community members in deliberating the shelter's new location.

The ability to facilitate groups and communities through conflict is among the core competencies expected of macro practitioners (The Association of Community Organization and Social Administration, 2008), but there are few case studies detailing community practice responses to divisive issues. Relatedly, there is a body of scholarship exploring

the practice skills and strategies needed for effective group facilitation and community planning in general (Weil, 2013); few studies examine the application of these skills to resolving divisive issues. In an attempt to address these gaps, this case study is both descriptive and reflective. By offering an in-depth description of the process, and a reflection on the guiding values, I offer some key considerations for practitioners working to resolve community conflicts.

Approaches to Community Deliberation

Most group work approaches to conflict resolution are grounded in ideals of deliberative democracy. While it is beyond this paper's scope to present a full account of theories of deliberation (for an excellent synthesis, see Freeman, 2000), proponents generally agree that it is through respectful reason-sharing, questioning one another's conclusions, and critical reflection, that members of society make informed decisions (Abelson et al, 2003; Freeman, 2000; Guntmann & Thompson, 2004). These scholars contend that in a free society, reasonable people will have wide-ranging perspectives on various political, social and environmental issues, and that processes of deliberation allow people to understand these diverse perspectives before making decisions. As social epistemologist Jose Medina writes, "Democracy is not only about voting but also about talking... Without such discussion, voting would only give expression to private preferences and not to a public interest" (2013, p. 5). Deliberation does not guarantee that an outcome will be rational, moral or just, only that decisions reached through deliberation are more likely to be rational, moral or just than those reached in the absence of such engagement (Freeman, 2000).

Theories of deliberative democracy have a number of strengths when applied to settings of community

conflict. Deliberative processes may legitimize decision making; even when people object to the final outcome, they are more likely to accept decisions if their perspectives have been thoughtfully considered (Freeman, 2000; Guntmann & Thompson, 2004). Further, the deliberative process is consistent with democratic values. In seeking perspectives from those who will be impacted by the decision – as opposed to simply imposing a decision – a group, organization, and/or government demonstrates respect for its members. Further, when members thoughtfully consider one another's positions, they demonstrate respect for one another (Guntmann & Thompson, 2004).

These strengths notwithstanding, deliberative approaches have distinct vulnerabilities. First, advocates of deliberation presume that decision making is driven by rational thought. Some scholars argue that widespread ignorance and irrationality make deliberative processes infeasible, particularly when applied to emotionally charged issues (Somin, 2010). Second, deliberative approaches leave many important questions unanswered with regard to power and equity within groups (Abelson et al, 2003; Morrow, 2011). For example, how can inequalities in influence among participating members be addressed? Who decides the content of deliberation, how much discourse is sufficient, and how decisions will be made? How will members be held accountable for those decisions? The frameworks of restorative justice and just practice begin to address these vulnerabilities.

Restorative Justice

While most commonly thought of as an alternative response to individual crimes, restorative justice approaches can also be applied to addressing community-level conflicts. Rather than focusing on assigning blame or delivering punishment, restorative justice seeks to repair harms and restore damaged relationships (White, 2003). Using a restorative justice approach to conflict resolution, a facilitator engages the parties most affected by the conflict, seeking to understand their distinct perspectives and garner their commitment to a reparative process. Through facilitated group sessions, participants share with and hear from one another, learning how each member experiences the conflict, and attending to the emotional impacts of

the situation. The process then shifts to identifying areas of agreement and possible reparative action (Beck et al., 2011). Reflecting on a restorative justice process in a neighborhood conflicted about high rates of youth vandalism, Abramson and Beck note that the conclusion of the facilitation “signified not so much the end of a conflict, but rather the beginning of a cohesive and child-friendly community” (2011, p. 160). In this way, restorative justice approaches work to transform relationships as much as conflicts.

Just Practice

The Just Practice framework (Finn & Jacobson, 2008) suggests five interlocking principles which can guide social work research and practice: meaning, context, power, history and possibility. Whereas in clinical work a practitioner relates these concepts to an individual client, in community practice, a facilitator must seek to understand, hold, and apply multiple interpretations of these concepts into a single transformative process. Applying the Just Practice framework to the shelter relocation raises critical directions for inquiry: What meaning do various stakeholders assign to the Poverello Center? What contexts, background experiences and conditions inform stakeholder viewpoints? How do distinct stakeholder groups access power, influence policy, or inform decision-making? How is the relocation process shaped by individual and organizational history? What possibilities for mutually beneficial partnerships may exist? Augmenting theories of deliberative democracy with restorative justice practices and Just Practice principles increases the potential for deliberation to be used in the context of divisive community conflict.

The following is a case study of a deliberative intervention into the controversial re-siting of the Poverello Center. Rather than an empirical evaluation from a third party observer, this is a reflexive accounting of the facilitation design and implementation from my experience as facilitator, drawn from participant observations, practice notes, process reflections with the facilitation team, evaluation data, and archival data related to the relocation (including print and social media). To increase the credibility, various participants in the process reviewed earlier drafts of this article and offered critical insights. While the practices described here may not be appropriate in all contexts, I have

sought to provide enough description for readers to discern the relevance of findings to other sites of community conflict (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Case Study: Housing a Homeless Shelter

Since the Poverello Center opened in 1981, it operated out of a century-old house, tucked between residential and business neighbors on the perimeter of Missoula's downtown. In January 2011, with temperatures outside dropping to seven degrees below zero, 111 people sought shelter at the Poverello. Every bed was taken, and many people spent the night on hallway floors (Fowler Pehan, 2011). After years of trying to meet the increasing demand within their current facility, the Poverello's Board accepted that the old building was woefully undersized, not wheelchair accessible, and – plagued by faulty plumbing and out-of-code wiring – simply unmaintainable. For three years the center had sought a location for a new facility, twice nearing closing only to have community backlash undermine the sale.

On May 29, 2011, the local newspaper reported that the Poverello Center had neared a deal on a new location (in Missoula's Westside neighborhood), which had the support from Missoula Mayor, the United Way, and many neighborhood individuals (Szpaller & Cederberg, 2011). This report was news to most Westside residents, especially parents whose children attend Lowell Elementary School, located three blocks from the proposed site. A controversy erupted. Within a week, members of the Lowell school PTA formed a Facebook group titled "Poverello not by Lowell School" (Facebook, 2011), and the local paper received a flurry of letters and anonymous online comments, overwhelmingly opposed to the move. Many respondents conflated homeless people with violent and sexual offenders. In response to the outcry, the Mayor asked the Poverello Center to delay their purchase in order to address community concerns.

In late June, the city contracted NCBI to design, facilitate, and evaluate a public deliberation regarding re-siting the shelter. Given the urgency of the Poverello Center's need for a new building, the city gave NCBI but three months to complete our process. In that time-frame, we were asked to engage a large number of people who hold diverse,

divergent, and emotionally charged points of view, and to provide opportunities for their meaningful participation in informing the Poverello's re-siting. In designing our process, we aspired to: 1) challenge the classism that marginalizes and silences the homeless as well as low-income neighbors, 2) correct misinformation about homelessness, 3) equalize power among participants, and 4) meaningfully inform the Poverello Center's decision-making (recognizing that the final decision rested with the Poverello Board of Directors).

NCBI launched a four-phase process. First, we completed an assessment through individual interviews and focus groups. Second, we facilitated an open community meeting that focused on creating opportunities for participants to share with and learn from one another. Third, we led a work group process where a small group of representatives from various stakeholder groups vetted specific sites. Finally, we facilitated a final open community meeting where the public deliberated site alternatives before the Poverello Center made its final decision.

Phase 1: Assessment

Prior to bringing conflicting parties together in a public forum, I engaged a small planning team from the city and the Poverello Center to generate a list of stakeholder groups, including those who had voiced concerns about the new location. I invited all of these stakeholders to participate in a confidential one-on-one interview or a focus group. In total, I met with fifty-two community members in the assessment phase, including Poverello clients, residential neighbors, business neighbors, city representatives, and organizational partners. Listening transformed my understanding of the controversy. I sat with a group of current residents of the shelter, who shared their anxiety about being relocated further from the bus line and needed social services, as well as their pain, as parents and grandparents, at being labeled as a threat to children. I met with business owners, who described their discomfort – and that of their patrons – when they have to step around homeless people sleeping in their doorways or negotiate human feces on the sidewalks downtown. I listened to neighbors opposed to the relocation, including one Westside neighbor who haltingly described walking his kids out the front door on their way to school, only to find a homeless man who had died in the night in their yard, and his

fear that occurrences like this might become more frequent. Taking in these stories helped me understand the nuanced feelings and experiences motivating stakeholders' positions.

In many cases, the act of being listened to also transformed the speakers' understanding of the controversy. One conversation with a Westside neighbor began by him stating his vehement opposition to the relocation. He had brought in a multi-page list of all the registered sex offenders currently living in his neighborhood, and contended that moving the shelter closer would only increase these numbers. Over the course of the hour, he visibly softened: his speech slowed, his shoulders relaxed, and he began to distinguish between aspects of the relocation he did not support, and aspects he did not fully understand – such as the shelter's policy on serving sex offenders. One person at a time, the act of listening began to create relationships between me and the diverse parties engaged in the controversy. As they felt listened to, valued, and supported by me as the facilitator, they increased their willingness to enter into a community process with others they did not yet believe would listen to, value, or support them. The assessment phase generated critical buy-in for the next step, bringing people together.

Phase 2: Teaching-Learning

On a warm summer evening in August, more than 200 people attended a 3-hour open community meeting. The Poverello Center's new Executive Director addressed the packed room, providing a brief overview of the center's history and mission, and presenting the need for a new facility. This was the first time the center had made its case for a new shelter to the community at large, and it was critical to correct some misinformation about their services and clients. The bulk of the meeting, however, was reserved to elicit diverse perspectives about the Poverello relocation.

At this stage of the process, the goal was not to generate solutions but to increase understanding among community members through peer teaching and learning (Finn & Jacobson, 2008). My co-facilitator and I directed participants to self-select into a number of stakeholder groups, including: Poverello residents, staff, and volunteers; neighbors

who welcome having the Poverello Center as a neighbor; neighbors who object to having the Poverello Center as a neighbor; businesses who welcome having the Poverello Center as a neighbor; and businesses who object to having the Poverello Center as a neighbor. Each group generated answers to three questions and then reported back to the whole. These questions were: Why do you care about finding an appropriate facility for the Poverello Center? What are 1 to 2 key concerns to be addressed at any new facility? What do others not understand about your position?

The teaching-learning process revealed significant areas of consensus. All seven groups expressed an ethic of responsibility to shelter the homeless and ensure the dignity of those in need. Safety also emerged as a key theme: while not all believed that Poverello clients posed an increased risk to business and residential neighbors, all concurred that community members' fears concerning safety must be addressed. Several groups expressed concern that the stigma surrounding homelessness led to mistreatment of Poverello clients (NCBI Missoula, 2011).

Stakeholder reports also revealed important distinctions between groups, particularly related to the divergent and at times conflicting meanings assigned to the Poverello Center. For clients, volunteers, staff and board members, the Poverello Center represented a critical safe-haven to those in need. As one resident said, "the Pov is a safe place to lay my head, to get a healthy meal, to clean up." For others, however, the Center signified a place of risk and danger. For residents of the Westside neighborhood (home of the proposed shelter location), concerns about safety had heightened when, within weeks, a known child sex offender was found "lurking" around Lowell school and another man, living one block from the school, was arrested for a series of sexual assaults (Florio, 2011). Fear sparked by these incidents steered their opposition to the Poverello, whose services are available (though not targeted to) level 1 and 2 sex offenders. For some of the Poverello's current business neighbors, the center had become synonymous with public drunkenness and aggressive panhandling downtown. For them, if the Poverello serves homeless people downtown, and homeless people are a problem downtown, then the Poverello should leave downtown.

This initial public deliberation was revealing on several accounts. First, creating a space for open deliberation allowed people who had not engaged in the media controversy to participate in the conversation. While there has been an organized group of downtown businesses and Westside neighbors advocating against having the Poverello as a neighbor, until this meeting there was no organized presence of those who welcomed the Poverello Center. Much to our surprise, nearly half of those in attendance communicated strong support for the Poverello at any location. In fact, the businesses who would welcome the Poverello stakeholder group outnumbered those business members in opposition 2:1. Many business leaders spoke to a sense of heightened responsibility to take visible action to assist their community members in need. The Poverello Center staff and clients in attendance later shared how meaningful it was, in this time of heightened public scrutiny, to see so many in the room express support.

Second, the deliberative process allowed people to reevaluate their positions. Though many people had expressed opposition to having the Poverello as a neighbor before the meeting, they were resistant to the label of opposing once in the meeting. Hearing the polarizing language that had been used in public discourse reflected back to them, some participants found themselves moving toward center. At one point a woman wandered away from the “neighbors who object to having the Pov as a neighbor” stakeholder group, looking a bit lost. When I approached her, she reflected, “I came here because I thought I didn’t want the Pov as a neighbor...now I think it’s just that I have some concerns I’d like to see addressed.”

Despite some extreme differences in perspective, the sharing in this first community meeting was strikingly nuanced and respectful, particularly in contrast to the divisive tone that had permeated letters to the editor and social media until this point. There was a palpable shift in the room as people were able to more deeply hear one another: several participants publicly thanked those whom they disagreed with for helping them understand other perspectives on the move, others asked questions for more information rather than rushing to express disagreement, and when the meeting ended, many people lingered, talking with those around them.

This shift in tone was also reflected in overwhelmingly positive participant evaluations¹ (NCBI, 2011). For many, this meeting represented a first step toward collective action. As one participant shared, “I am so proud of the community working together to try and come up with a positive solution for the Pov” (NCBI Missoula, 2011). The room was buzzing with a sense of possibility that night.

Phase 3: Work Group

To continue moving toward collective action, NCBI established a work group charged with vetting possible locations based on the concerns expressed in the initial community meeting. The twelve-member work group was diverse by design: The City of Missoula appointed three members (including a police officer, a member of the planning staff, and a member of the mayor’s staff); neighborhood associations appointed three members (including a member of the Westside neighborhood); the Poverello Center appointed three members (including a resident, a staff member, and a board member); and the business community also appointed three members. About half of these people entered the work group process with pre-formed opinions about where the new shelter should be sited – some strongly opposed to the move, and others strongly in favor – yet all agreed to apply the community-identified criteria to the vetting process, and to use a model of modified consensus.

As a non-voting member of the group, I had limited impact on the content the group produced, though as the crafter of the agenda and recognized facilitator I had a great deal of influence on the process. Throughout my work, I drew upon basic practices of accompaniment, including nonintrusive collaboration; modeling mutual trust and equality; and a focus on process, particularly in mediating discussion as needed (Whitmore & Wilson, 1997).

The work group met over three sessions. The first evening we toured the current Poverello Center. This was critical, as nearly half the members had never been there before, and were shocked at the cramped

¹ Seventy-four participants completed a written evaluation. On a Likert scale of 1-5, with “1” being poor and “5” being excellent, 93% rated the meeting a “5” or “4.”

quarters and crumbling infrastructure. We then refined a rubric that would allow members to score possible locations using criteria that had emerged from the assessment and first community meeting.

During the second session work group members piled into a small, hot van, and visited five potential sites. At the first stop, I turned to Dave, who was currently living at the Poverello and asked, “You’ve lived at the Pov for almost a year. What is most important for you as a resident?” He quickly answered, “Access to personal hygiene. Food. A safe place to sleep that has a roof over it. Access to medical assistance. It’s a simple fact...I am too old to sleep outside.” Members began deliberating informally, sharing their distinct perspectives. The patrol officer talked about the relative accessibility for emergency vehicles. Neighborhood representatives pointed out the impacts of foot traffic to and from each site, and the business folks reflected on which types of businesses might be more or less affected having the center as a neighbor. As they listened, members also began seeking information from one another. The business representative, who was less familiar with the bus lines, asked the Poverello resident about the accessibility of each site, for example. Between the second and third meeting, each member independently scored each site. During the final work group meeting members reviewed one another’s scores, discussed and challenged one another’s decisions, and in many cases, changed their scores based on new information. In the end, the work group unanimously agreed that three sites sufficiently met the criteria to be recommended for further consideration, and that the two remaining sites did not. Interestingly, the sites that remained included were the most controversial locations: one downtown and two in the Westside neighborhood. Spirits were high the night of the work group’s final session together. In our closing round of appreciations, members spoke with pride of their collective ability to overcome initial divides and work together, and shared a deep respect for one another’s contributions. They had built a sense of solidarity; though they still did not all agree on which site they thought was the best for the Poverello, they had reached consensus about which sites had the potential to work. Though they took their work seriously, they left the room with handshakes and high-fives, ready to bring their

recommendations back to the community.

Phase 4: Final Community Deliberation

The work group’s final task was to present its findings to the community in a second public meeting on September 9. While the meeting started and ended as a large group, to maximize opportunities for participation for the more than 100 people in attendance, NCBI facilitators divided attendees into three smaller groups. Each of these cycled through facilitated conversations about each potential site. For each site, a team of four work group members summarized the strengths and challenges they had identified about the location, and participants had the opportunity to ask clarifying questions and add additional strengths and challenges.

The stated goals of this meeting were twofold: 1) to update the community on the process, research, and findings regarding potential sites for a new facility, and 2) to gather additional community input to inform the Poverello Center’s site selection. By these measures, the evening was effective. Given their positive experience during the work group process, a number of members also had an unspoken goal that the community would experience a similar sense of coming-together, and later expressed disappointment that this did not take place. Now that particular sites were up for discussion, many community members came to the meeting as advocates. Some conversations were less respectful than in the first meeting. At one point, a man stood up in the back of the room and shouted that he didn’t want to live by a bunch of sex offenders. My throat tightened as he began to speak, and, from my stance at the front of the room, my heart sunk as three Poverello residents – seemingly distraught by the accusation – slipped out a side door. While I intervened and called on people to remember that there were Poverello residents in the room, and that everyone was here because they wanted a safe place to live, those three residents did not return. The persistent misinformation about people experiencing homelessness was deeply troubling to many work group members, myself included. As we gathered together at the close of the meeting, several questioned whether our work group efforts had mattered, and I wished I could have done more to prevent the continued barrage on the character of homeless people.

Interestingly, while the tone of the second meeting was

more adversarial than the first, the meeting evaluations were again overwhelmingly positive (NCBI, 2011). This affirms the critical importance of creating spaces where people feel heard. In the end, 83 percent of attendees recommended using this process for other divisive issues.

From Deliberation to Decision-Making

Two months after the second community meeting, The Poverello Center announced its intention to build a new facility at the Westside location which had sparked the May controversy. While disappointed in the decision, Greg Martin, a leader in the Westside neighborhood, said that the neighborhood council would, "... do whatever we can to welcome them to our neighborhood..." (Szpaller, 2011). The PTA Facebook group that initially mobilized opposition to the Poverello relocation changed its name from "Poverello not by Lowell School" to "Northside-Westside Community Forum" (Facebook, 2011). The neighborhood association, fractured before the Poverello process began, solidified through it, and established a work group charged with maintaining open dialogue with the Poverello Center. They drafted a communication plan which was adopted by the Poverello Center to improve engagement with the neighborhood.

According to Eran Fowler Pehan, Poverello's Executive Director, the community engagement process exceeded the organization's expectations in both cost and gain. The process required a considerable investment of time, and there was also a significant toll of those participating in discourse that was infused with stereotypes and stigma. She reflects, "Feeling helpless as we listened to the misperceptions – again, and again, and again – was a large cost (emotionally and spiritually) for the clients who participated in this process, our staff, board members and volunteers" (personal correspondence, 12/2/12). At the same time, she said she believes the community engagement yielded significant rewards. As she concludes:

This process brought to realization something we had been professing, but I don't think we really understood: that the Poverello Center fully belongs to this community. We are of course free to make decisions about our future and our services, but without support and buy-in from the

community, there is no way for us to successfully see this vision play out (personal correspondence, 12/2/12).

Implications for Practice: Reflecting on Process and Principles

This community-based process provided an opportunity to identify the best practices in – and limitations of – deliberative democracy. Augmenting deliberation with practices from restorative justice helped to maximize the relationship-building aspects of the process, and attend to the emotionality surrounding the re-siting of the shelter. Drawing upon the principles of Just Practice increased the facilitation team's awareness of and attention to how history, context, meaning, power and possibility shaped the controversy. While succeeding in achieving many of our process goals, we were challenged to fully realize some of our core principles. In conclusion, I reflect on key lessons learned along the way.

Develop an Internal and External Team

Designing, implementing and evaluating a process of this scale would not have been possible without a strong internal team. NCBI used 16 facilitators at the first community meeting, (two up-front leaders and 14 experienced small group leaders and/or scribes) – every one of whom was essential to the functioning of the meeting. In addition, the project was externally guided by a multidisciplinary team including the city, the Poverello Center, and United Way, each of whom was uniquely positioned to advise the project, provide a key source of feedback to me as the lead facilitator, as well as support to the Poverello Center board and staff, who spent months under intense public scrutiny throughout the process.

Create Multiple Avenues for Community Engagement

To maximize participation, we provided multiple avenues for community members to engage in the deliberative process, both within and between public meetings. During the meetings, we facilitated structured large and small group discussions within which people could share, roaming volunteers armed with clipboards to record individual comments and concerns, and flip-charts posted around the room where attendees could write remaining questions,

comments, and recommendations. In addition, the city launched an interactive online forum for the relocation process where people could post additional feedback. The multiple modes of engagement allowed broad participation and transparency, and increased the credibility of the process as a whole.

Structure Opportunities for Intergroup Dialogue

This process offered a constructive alternative to predominant modes of political engagement, where people talk at one another rather than with one another. Mike Barton, former director of the Office of Planning and Grants, explained, “It’s much easier to defeat something than to create something.” Barton saw the Poverello engagement process “reinvent civil discourse...by teaching people how to talk to each other in a constructive way” (personal correspondence, 12/7/12). Unlike at city council meetings, where public comment is one-directional, and designed to advance a particular outcome, the Poverello relocation meetings offered structured opportunities for dialogue and learning from one another. While it is true, as Barton reflected, that “the most extreme people stayed extreme,” the opportunity for intergroup dialogue produced shifts in understanding among hundreds of other people who engaged throughout the process.

Just Because You Want to Equalize Power Doesn’t Mean You Can

Facilitators worked to equalize power among participants through a variety of moderation techniques – such as asking that no one speak twice until everyone has had the chance to speak once – and structural design. For example, ensuring that neighborhoods and businesses were equally represented on the work group. Still, power imbalances transcended the community process. The City of Missoula and many of the downtown businesses were both funders of the Poverello Center, and thus wielded a particular kind of power. Some neighbors, in contrast, found power in the emotive capacity of language, and shaped much of the public discourse using the narrative frame of the homeless-as-sexual-predators. Those with the least power were people experiencing homelessness. Although Poverello clients participated at all stages of the process, their needs received the least amount

of attention and appeared to be of the least concern in the public forums. In retrospect, we should have created more formal opportunities for their voices to be heard, perhaps by incorporating a panel in one of the community meetings, or displaying a photo-voice exhibit from residents in the meeting hall.

Correcting Misinformation Requires Negotiating Facts and Feelings

One of the key challenges in this process was the degree to which misinformation and fear about homelessness drove the discourse. Although the Chief of Police presented crime data demonstrating that the Poverello Center clients do not pose an increased risk to the community, and many people had the opportunity to hear directly from Poverello staff, clients and volunteers throughout the process, in the end, there were still many faulty assumptions about poverty. As Pehan reflected, “There seemed to be such powerful divides that factual knowledge could not address.” Truth is not requisite to meaning, and untangling facts and feelings takes time. For many, the three-months allocated to this community process was simply an insufficient time period for such an untangling to occur.

Respect the Role of the Activist

One of the most difficult moments of the deliberative process occurred the day after the final public meeting, when the newspaper ran a letter to the editor written by one of the neighborhood work group representatives under the headline, “Process to choose site for homeless shelter insufficient” (Missoulia, 2011). Fellow work group members expressed shock and dismay that this member, who had only the day before seemed to profess pride in the group’s process, would now publicly question the credibility of the process and delegitimize the work groups’ efforts. The letter had to have been written before the second community meeting, primed to appear in the paper the following morning. For some work group members, this act betrayed the very heart of deliberation, in which, as Guntmann and Thompson (2004) write, “participants are willing to enter into a dialogue in which the reasons given, and the reasons responded to, have the capacity to change minds” (p. 20). I too felt shocked by his action. However, I came to see this work group member as torn between his role as an activist and his role as a deliberator, and to value both.

Political theorist Iris Marion Young suggests that the activist is correct to be suspicious of “deliberative processes within institutions that make it nearly impossible for the structurally disadvantaged to propose solutions to social problems...” (2001, p. 684). As this work group member saw it, the low-income residents of the Westside neighborhood were structurally disadvantaged relative to the city and business owners, and the city – in allowing only three months for the process – made it impossible to identify any new site alternatives. There is truth to this assertion; the process did not produce any previously unexamined potential sites for the Poverello, as none became available within the time-frame allowed.

As facilitator, I struggled to navigate this work group member’s tension as he tried to participate while at the same time critiquing the process. He called me frequently over the course of our work together, frustrated about the time constraints on the work group, and yet showed up each meeting and participated fully and thoughtfully with the other members. After his letter to the editor ran in the newspaper, I also witnessed the painful rupture in relationship between this member and his former work group colleagues. On the phone that morning, one member said of the editorial-writer, “he’s dead to me now.” Though I understood, and to a degree shared, this member’s sense of betrayal, I was also deeply concerned at what felt like an extreme backlash to his action. While it is difficult – and perhaps impossible – to simultaneously and authentically inhabit roles of activist and deliberator, that does not diminish the need for either (Young, 2001). Facilitators will do well to consider activist critiques related to power imbalances and constrained alternatives; local activists may be more attuned to these manifestations of power than outside facilitators.

Community members rightfully expect meaningful engagement in decisions that affect their families and neighborhoods. It is critical for macro-practitioners to be able to provide processes that bring people together around issues that so often divide communities. While there is no cookie-cutter model for community deliberation, this case study can help inform best practices and guiding principles for future efforts.

Case study post-script

Two years after the deliberation process, the Poverello Center broke ground at their new site, and in December 2014, opened its new 21,000 square foot facility. That winter was the first time in years that the Poverello had enough beds for all who sought shelter on the coldest nights, and the first time, it had sufficient space to provide classrooms for GED test preparation and resume building, on-site medical treatment, and semi-private rooms for clients with special needs (Kidston, 2014). Before the Poverello could begin building a new foundation upon which to provide expanded services to people experiencing homelessness, the Westside neighborhood and the Poverello Center built a foundation as neighbors, and the community deliberation process served as a critical component of that foundation-building. The long-term sustainability of this relationship requires ongoing effort from the agency and the neighborhood. The Poverello Center must continue to listen to and address neighbor concerns, and area residents must continue to address biases towards homeless people so that they can, in fact, be good neighbors to those in need.

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