2004

Moving Beyond the Client Role: Helping Human Service Organizations Identify Program Participant's Assets

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Recommended Citation

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Human service agencies have traditionally provided services to a population considered "in need" of those services. Program participants are often seen solely as passive recipients of food, housing, health care, case management, etc. However, community developers, program evaluators, human service/development staff and administrators, as well as researchers are finding that involving program participants in the planning and administration of programs and research results in better programs, program utilization, and empowerment of program participants (Nichols 2002; Papineau and Kiely 1996).

John McKnight and John Kretzmann (1996) provide a tangible asset-mapping method for involving people in the planning and implementation of their own futures. We used this method in a new transitional housing program to map participant's assets for use by the agency in shaping programs and services. This method could be introduced by anyone involved with human service organizations (i.e., staff, volunteers, students, researchers/evaluators, program participants). If adopted by many different types of organizations, it could ultimately shape the way that services are provided and agencies are run in the United States.

Background: Asset-Based Community Mapping

Asset-based community development, as envisioned by McKnight and Kretzmann (1996), takes place at the neighborhood level. These researchers and community developers have gone into low-income neighborhoods considered "in trouble" and dangerous, helping the residents determine the assets and resources that exist for the neighborhood at three different levels. First, and most importantly, are those assets that exist in the neighborhood that are controlled by people who live in the neighborhood. These include the skills of individuals as well as businesses and programs run by residents. Second are the assets that exist in the neighborhood but are controlled by people outside of the neighborhood. Third are the assets and resources that exist outside of the neighborhood but are needed inside the community (e.g., outside funding sources, street repair, etc.). McKnight and Kretzmann encourage first determining and utilizing the assets that exist within neighborhoods before looking to outside sources for assistance.

Determining assets can be accomplished in two ways: interviewing neighborhood residents, and mapping the businesses and services that exist in the neighborhood. Residents are asked to indicate, on a long inventory of skills, which skills they possess. These skills can range from the ability to unclog sinks to talent as a basketball player. The completed inventories are then used to determine how people can best apply their skills to help themselves and their neighborhood. Residents might start their own business in the neighborhood (e.g., businesses currently lacking in the area) or utilize their abilities to provide services (e.g., recreational programs). For our project, we assumed that a similar strategy could be used in the context of a non-profit organization to encourage the utilization of program participants in planning and running the organization.

How to Do It: Conducting Asset Mapping in an Organization

Conducting asset mapping in a human service organization is a relatively simple task that does not take much time. It involves creating an instrument with a list of possible skills that program participants may have and that the organization can use, interviewing program participants to determine their skills and those they would like to learn, then compiling the results and designing new programs or matching participants based on skills and needs. If the inventory is designed by someone outside of the agency, the instrument construction process should include

organizational stakeholders to ensure that it is tailored to the agency's needs and participant's lives.

The asset inventory instrument contains a long list of possible skills, divided by particular topical areas with three boxes next to each item. The interviewer can mark if the participant has that skill, if they would be willing to teach that skill to others, or if they would like to learn that skill. The skill list should be unique to the particular needs of the organization and the potential skills of the program participants.

job. There was also a separate section that asked adults to list any needs or activities that their children would be interested in learning. The inventory was conducted during participant's individual case management time. Participants were told by agency staff that the inventories would be used to determine the needs and assets of each member of the organization, to design appropriate programming, and to inform other participants about program participant's skills.

Depending on the length of the inventory, administration of the instrument can take 20-60 minutes. If time permits, participants can also be

possible skills such as household management and repairs, knowledge of important resources in the community, planning children's parties, and computer programs.

The main goal is to find skills that participants have. Care must be taken to avoid humiliating people who can report having no skills or offending participants by listing skills at too elementary a level. Interviewers administering the inventories should be trained to be aware of these issues. Before the information is collected, agency administrators should discuss with interviewers (and program participants when possible) how to

Fig. 1. Example Section of an Asset Inventory			
IV. Childcare	YES	TEACH	LEARN
1. Taking children on field trips			
2. Caring for children – baby sitting			
3. Finding low cost childcare			
4. Establishing your own childcare center			
5. Arts and crafts for children			

Interviewers should stress that these skills may have been obtained in either personal or professional contexts. A short example section of an asset inventory is shown in Figure 1.*

For the transitional housing program, our instrument asked if participants had specific skills within each of the following main topic areas: office, parenting, advocacy/ knowledge of community resources, child care, personal safety, household repair, health, household management, landscaping, budgeting, meal preparation, language/music/arts, recreation, transportation, computer skills, and finding a

asked how the agency could incorporate their skills into the organization. Teenagers can be interviewed separately in organizations serving that age group. After all program participants have been inventoried, the inventory can be used in case management or intake to identify the skills and assets of new program participants as they become involved with the organization.

Issues to Consider

A wide range of formal and informal skills should be listed on the asset inventory. In the transitional housing program inventory, the research team made sure to ask about a wide range of

be sensitive to participant's range of skills and perceptions.

Asset inventories work best in organizations that have consistent contact with the same program participants over time, or as a way to identify potential skills that are likely held by most program participants. The results of such inventories will likely only be utilized in organizations where the empowerment and inclusion of program participants is fundamental to the mission.

Conclusion

Community resource mapping in organizations provides a method by which non-profit agencies can recognize and utilize the assets

of their program participants. Organizations know best both the needs of the organization as well as the range of potential skills of their participants. Therefore, inventories can, and should be, constructed by individual agencies. Further, the process of community resource mapping encourages program staff and participants to look at program participants as individuals with skills and resources of benefit to the organization and the community.

* For a complete copy of the full instrument that could be adapted for use in other organizations, contact Laura Nichols at Lnichols@scu.edu. An electronic copy of McKnight and Kretzmann's instrument is located at: http://www.northwestern.edu/ipr/publications/papers/mcc.pdf

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