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Building Community: A Tool Kit for Youth and Adults in Charting Assets and Creating Change

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Building Community: A Tool Kit for Youth and Adults in Charting Assets and Creating Change

Abstract

Extension workers around the country are discovering a new way to help communities become more of what they want to be, and link them to extension resources, through the use of *Building Community: A Tool Kit for Youth and Adults In Charting Assets and Creating Change*. Developed by the Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development with Extension partners, the tool kit focuses on the gifts that a community brings to their desire for change--gifts of the past, place, people, and relationships--and has proven itself to be a powerful tool for sustainable community development.

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People need each other. They need each other for comfort, love, safety, and companionship. They need each other to link together ideas and skills to create positive change. They need each other to grow.

Extension workers know this; they are always looking for ways to link communities with Extension resources and discovering new ways to help communities become more of what they want to be.

Developed Collaboratively, Demonstrated Effectiveness

The Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development and National 4-H Council recognized these needs and produced *Building Community: A Tool Kit for Youth and Adults in Charting Assets and Creating Change*.

The Tool Kit was developed in partnership with 14 communities throughout the United States, with the help of Extension workers in many of those communities.

The toolkit's effectiveness has been demonstrated by consistent outcomes wherever it is implemented. Communities create shared visions, develop new awareness of community resources, and translate their new collective knowledge into strategic action.

When communities implement the tool kit, youth participation and leadership increase, as does collaboration among community-based organizations and groups.

A Focus on Community Gifts, Especially Youth Adult Partnerships

The Building Community Tool Kit emphasizes the principles of youth-adult partnerships, mapping community assets, and engaging in intentional reflection and learning. It takes users through a series of activities designed and successfully tested to guide and instruct community change agents as they work to create their visions.

Its focus is not on problems, but on the gifts that a community brings to their desire for change-- gifts of the past, place, people, and relationships.

Sustainable Change

The tool kit has proven itself to be a powerful tool for sustainable community change because of its focus on gifts, reflection, and the engagement of participants from diverse sectors of a community.

Too often in communities people work hard only to meet the needs of their isolated "pocket," often defined by age, race, ethnicity, class, neighborhood, or religious affiliation.

This sometimes leaves broader community change efforts unrecognized and ultimately unsustainable. The Innovation Center's research and experience suggests that this often happens because the planning and implementation processes are missing the input and participation of the various sectors of the community.

Creating an inclusive community process requires skills and, in many cases, a paradigm shift. The Tool Kit creates concrete opportunities and approaches to develop and apply these skills.

Communities Using the Tool Kit

Having applied the strategies in the Building Community Tool Kit, communities are implementing priority projects, finding new funding, and creating sustainable, effective change.

Broadus, Montana

In the town of Broadus in eastern Montana, community members used the Tool Kit to create a vision for after-school opportunities for youth and children. They identified their resources, developed a plan, and successfully created a collaborative after-school program in which high school students staff programs for younger children.

Oxford County, Maine

In Oxford County, Maine, young people and adults had begun talking to each other about respect. Working with the Tool Kit helped them expand the scope of their work, making it more inclusive of the entire community.

Now, the Respect Team hosts round table discussions, promotes inclusion and diversity in local media, and successfully promotes networks of community groups working for change.

These and other communities are changing because younger and older people are working together, as partners, to discover their communities' strengths and reflect on the lessons learned.

"An Excellent Resource"

The Tool Kit has caught the attention of Extension workers and other community and youth development organizations throughout the world. Over 500 copies of the Tool Kit have been distributed in less than a year, mainly to Extension audiences.

Currently, it is being used in almost every U.S. state and five other countries. Everywhere the Innovation Center presents the Building Community approach, it has garnered a high level of interest (including at conferences such as the Search Institute, National Service-Learning Conference, National Conference on Community Service, and Volunteerism and CYFAR).

A team of reviewers from Iowa State University reviewed the Tool Kit along with dozens of community leadership training models. They gave it an extremely favorable review and deemed it an excellent resource for teaching ways to build community capacity, empower excluded people, incorporate class and cultural differences, and develop vision.

The Building Community Tool Kit is unique, basing its guidance on principles of youth-adult partnership, a focus on gifts, and on learning and reflection. It offers a shift from a traditional leader/organizer approach to one that creates the conditions needed for many community members to engage in the work. The result is an effective tool for sustainable change, both in the communities and the changers themselves.

For more information, contact the Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development at 301-961-2837 or info@innovationcenter.org.

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