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***Creating an Infrastructure  
to Support Asset Building  
across a Community***

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## Definitions

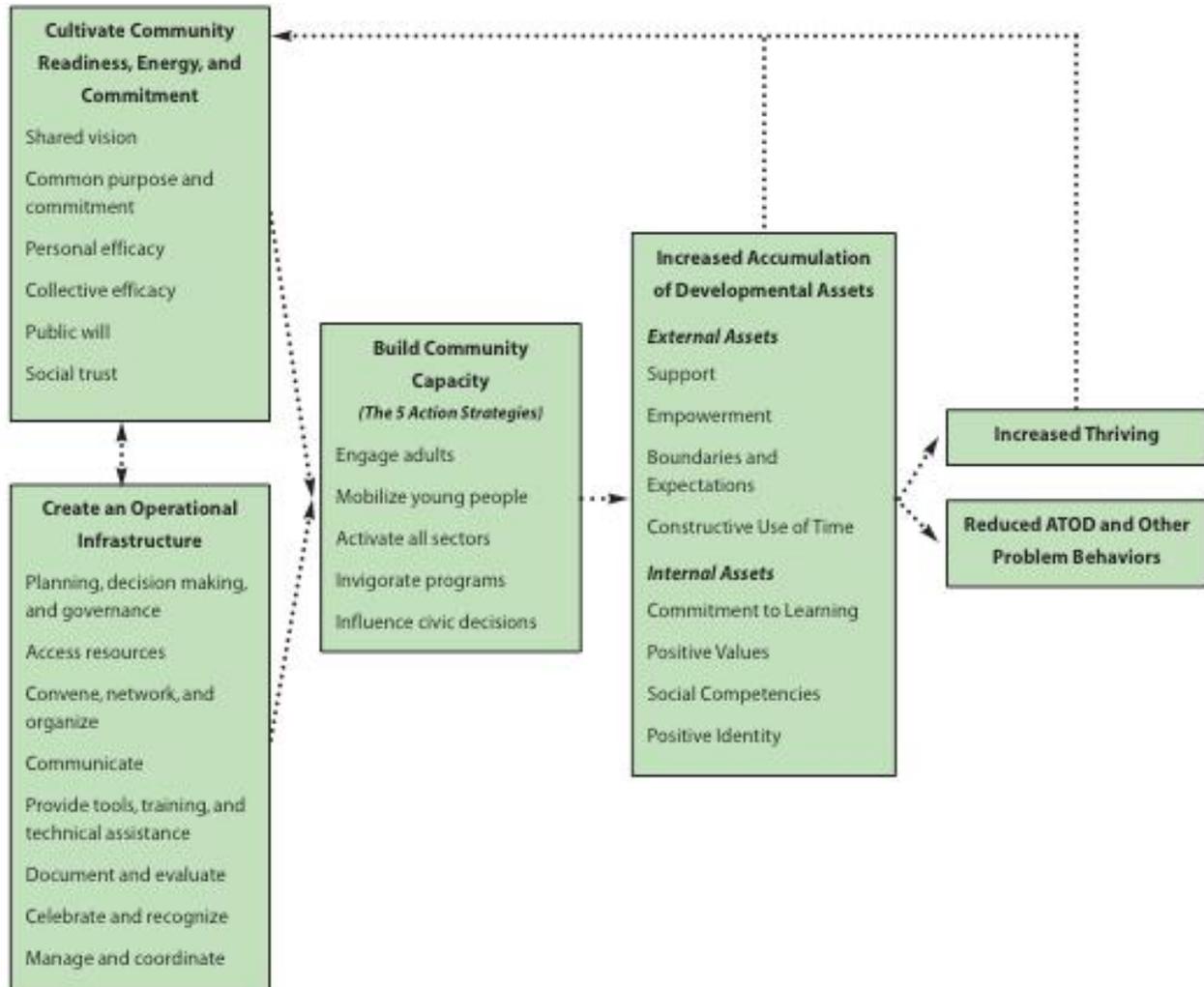
*Infrastructure:* The leadership, systems, and processes that stimulate, support, and build the capacity of individuals (youth and adults), organizations, networks, and systems to build developmental assets.

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## Rationale and Purpose

Building developmental assets is the work of the community—its young people, adults, organizations, and institutions. Thus, a community's asset-building infrastructure should be designed not to *do* the community's asset building or to control what the community does, but to inspire, equip, and unleash the people, places, and systems of the community to engage in asset-building action. In other words, the infrastructure has two purposes, as illustrated below:

1. Cultivate community readiness, energy, and commitment
2. Build community capacity to build developmental assets



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## Guiding Principles

- *The centrality of the spirit of community*—The spirit of community—the energy, enthusiasm, pride, and commitment—is much more important to sustaining asset-building efforts than funding or structure. Nurturing that spirit in residents and leaders is essential to effective community building. The box in the diagram on the previous page labeled “Cultivate community readiness, energy, and commitment” speaks to this priority.
- *Innovative stakeholders*—Our experience in communities suggests that the best initiators of asset-building efforts in a community or county are “innovative stakeholders”—people who not only have a personal and/or professional stake in young people’s lives, but who also are likely to adopt and promote new ideas.
- *Coalition of the willing*—It is important to start by forming a “coalition of the willing” so that all the initial energy is not consumed with trying to engage individuals with different agendas. Among other things, this means that people who are initially engaged need to have a commitment to young people’s healthy development (asset building) and a positive, movement-oriented approach to community building. Once it has stabilized and created some momentum, an initiative will then be ready to build connections with people who do not initially “catch the vision.” Put another way, a key question is, “Who can work together?”
- *Formal systems (top down) and informal networks (bottom up)*—A delicate balance is needed to both engage the formal systems of a community (sectors, institutions, positional leaders) and the grassroots “champions” (youth and adult) who bring energy, creativity, passion, and nontraditional networks into the movement, but who may not be comfortable with or have patience for the formalized processes and structures that typically guide formal organizational models and collaboratives.
- *Inclusive and welcoming*—The initiative’s structure needs to be such that it invites and is welcoming of diverse people (age, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic, education, professional status, immigrant status). The next working paper will focus specifically on this issue.
- *Plan and do at the same time*—Planning is stepping with the left foot. Doing is stepping with the right foot. Hopping wears people out. Walking can evolve into skipping and eventually running. Integrate your planning and doing so that both planners and doers feel comfortable as part of your effort.
- *Unleashing, not controlling or directing*—As individuals and organizations begin shaping their own approaches and priorities for asset building within the community, it’s important that the structure not be designed to control, manage, or direct their efforts. Rather, its role is to build their capacity and give them permission to become actively engaged in asset building within their own sphere of influence.
- *“Bricks” and “mortar”*—Community building happens best in the informal space between traditional structured programmatic efforts. It is like the mortar between the bricks. Unfortunately, organizations are rarely designed to support community building. Community

builders are challenged to find ways to support their efforts “between the bricks” while working with the bricks to provide necessary formal structure.

- *Common message, divergent actions*—A careful balancing act is to create enough alignment of message, purpose, and strategy for “economies of scale” and for reaching a “tipping point” in the community while also allowing for “even encouraging” individual and organizational innovation, creativity, and self-guided action. This issue will play out within each level of asset building: organizational/network, community, county.
- *An emergent, flexible process*—Community building happens in the social environment of people. This is an unpredictable environment. We need to be prepared to let new people come to the table, assume that other people will leave, and be open to meetings with emergent agendas. We stay on track not by sticking to specific agendas and action plans, but by continually grounding ourselves in a shared vision, common values, and agreed-upon operating principles.

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## **Core Functions of the Infrastructure**

- É *Planning, decision-making, and governance* that guide both the maintenance issues of the infrastructure and the missional priorities of cultivating community capacity for asset building.
- É *Access resources* (financial, personnel, skills, etc.) needed to support the core functions and capacity-building efforts in the community.
- É *Convene, network, and organize* committed leaders who have the passion to spread the word and help make the vision a reality. Create opportunities for these champions to learn from, support, and inspire each other.
- É *Communicate* broadly to the community to inspire and support engagement by distributing information, making presentations, and tapping the media to raise awareness about asset building and local efforts.
- É *Provide tools, training, and technical assistance* that increase capacity of individuals and organizations to engage in, deepen, and sustain their asset-building efforts.
- É *Initiate and/or coordinate formal documentation, assessment, and evaluation.*
- É *Celebrate and recognize* asset-building efforts and progress in the community.
- É *Manage and coordinate* schedules, budgets, and other administrative tasks, as needed.

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## **Leadership Qualities**

*Attitudes and commitments to seek or cultivate among leaders:*

- Comfort with ambiguity, permeable boundaries, and a constant rebalancing as the movement unfolds across the county.
- General stance of empowerment, trust of each other, the process, and the community
- Blend personal commitments and professional action

*Competencies and character traits to build into the leadership groups (recognizing that no one person brings everything). The leadership group is most effective when it has . . .*

- A mix of strategic and operational thinkers
- People of different ages, backgrounds, and professional backgrounds
- A balance of people who bring passion and analytical skills; head and heart

*Connections, credibility, and influence in the community. This would include . . .*

- Positional leaders in the community (heads of major organizations or systems, political or appointed public figures, etc.)
- Young people, who bring authentic youth perspectives and engagement. (A separate paper will be prepared on engaging young people as change agents, partners, and asset builders.)
- Individuals with credibility, trust, and relationships that touch all aspects of community life, including groups that typically do not feel welcomed or included. These individuals may be formal or informal leaders.

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## **Nature of the Infrastructure**

Different communities take different approaches to the infrastructure, based on formality of relationships, centralization, etc. Arthur Himmelman (*Communities Working Together for Change*, 1991) helpfully articulates a framework for different models of working together, all of which may be appropriate to consider. Indeed, the initiative may morph from one to the other, depending on dynamics in the community, funding, etc. They are:

- Networking      People share information for mutual benefit
- Coordination      People share information and alter activities for a common purpose
- Cooperation      People share information, alter activities, and share resources
- Collaboration      All of the above, plus enhancing the capacity of all partners with articulated roles, responsibilities, and accountability.

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## Organizational Models

- No single model has emerged in the asset-building movement as being most effective in supporting and sustaining a community or county initiative. Each community's structure grows out of the realities of the community, the existing resources and networks, political realities in the community/county, the personalities of initiators, and the interests of funders and other partners.
- Some of the approaches communities have taken include the following:
  - *A technical assistance center within the county that supports numerous smaller initiatives*—The initiative in Orlando, Florida, sought to spark asset building throughout the county, but organizers believed that the impetus for community building needed to emerge at the grassroots level. So the central organization within the county essentially became a technical assistance provider and facilitator to local groups that wanted to develop local asset-building efforts.
  - *A new asset-building coalition*—Many communities form an asset-building coalition or integrate asset building into the mission of an existing coalition. Boise, Idaho, created a strategic plan and a formal structure to support asset building. Five founding agencies (the city, the YMCA, United Way, the major medical center, and the school district) each provided staffing and operating support for a three-year period.
  - *Linking existing efforts*—When Sharon Rodine began exploring how to promote asset building in Oklahoma City, it was clear that the community didn't want another single-issue coalition. So they created what Rodine calls a "barnacle coalition" and began infusing asset building into "anything that floated by that was focused on youth."
  - *A "bubble-up" approach*—Jerry Mogul of the Mayor's Office on Community Partnerships in Boston explains: "I've been very reluctant to formalize some kind of citywide coalition. . . . Then you start dealing with organizations, rules, who's in, who's out, and roles." Instead, he encourages organizations and sectors that take action. "It's just starting to bubble up, and we'll see where it goes."
- Addressing several key questions can inform the approach taken:
  - How does an asset-building initiative fit with what is already happening in the county/community? How well aligned (or not) are they with the principles and vision of an asset-building community?
  - Are there already organizations or collaborations in place that see themselves doing the same kind of community-building work? If so, could asset building be woven into that work, or would a new initiative create resistance from other systems that may feel threatened?
  - To what extent will decision-making and fiduciary power be shared broadly in the community and/or county? Or how much needs to be centralized to maintain responsible oversight of resources?

- How will the structures dedicated to supporting asset building throughout the county relate to existing county infrastructures? Will they be independent? Will they be embedded within existing structures and processes?
- Within a selected structure, initiatives organize their work in many different ways. Some of the options include:
  - *A centralized model*: Having an executive committee at the county level with final decision-making authority that provides oversight over staff, budgets, strategic plans, etc. This executive committee can include:
    - Representatives of major institutions (positional leaders)
    - Grassroots champions and advocates (youth and adults)
  - *A network of “champions”*: Often combined with an executive committee, this network tends to bring together those who are interested to do shared planning and action. It’s a voluntary, fluid group. In St. Louis Park, this has been called the “vision team.”
  - *A decentralized model*: Each community (self-organizing) develops its own decision-making, authority, budgets, and potentially even staffing. A less formal network is then created among these various community-based efforts for mutual support, shared learning, and shared action.
  - *An organizational model*: Having the staffing, budget, etc., embedded within an existing organization (e.g. the school district, a foundation), with advisory input from other key leaders in the community.
- Most initiatives engage a wide range of community volunteers in leadership roles (both youth and adults) to develop and implement strategies and plans (with some coordination or guidance through an executive committee or other group). Some approaches include:
  - Standing committees/task forces that focus on *specific sectors* in the community (i.e. an education task force, a neighborhood tasks force, etc.). This approach tends to be most common, as people can then focus on their own area of interest.
  - Standing committees/task forces that focus on *specific tasks*, such as communication, fund-raising, events, training, etc.
  - Standing committees/task forces that are focused on each of the five *action strategies* (engaging adults, activating sectors, mobilizing young people, invigorating programs, influencing civic decisions.)
  - The above options, but on an as-needed basis.
- **Staffing needs**: It is difficult to know what kind of staffing is needed until the other questions about functions, leadership, etc., have greater clarity. However, initiatives consistently find that they need some dedicated, on-the-ground staffing to do networking, technical assistance, coordination of task forces or committees, and other administrative functions.

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## **Systems and Processes: Issues to Address**

- How to develop an **infrastructure that acknowledges existing efforts** in the community and works with them in ways that benefit all parties.
- How to **run meetings and events** that are inclusive, balancing head and heart, learning and action, different personalities so that all are fully engaged.
- How to embed **learning about asset building** within the infrastructure so that the work remains strongly grounded in the theory and practice of building developmentally attentive community.
- A critical issue in terms of public communication as part of a grassroots movement is the question of **branding and identity**. From a communication perspective, it helps to create a centralized "brand" that is "franchised" throughout the community. However, this approach introduces critical questions about how much to protect and control the use of the "brand," which leads to inevitable questions about the balance of centralization vs. decentralization.

### **Getting Started with Building a Leadership Structure: A Movement-Centered Approach**

The following process is based on Parker Palmer's work on social movements. See Parker J. Palmer, *Divided No More: A Movement Approach to Educational Reform* (unpublished paper).

- Form an informal initiator group that is interim in nature. Palmer calls this step "nurturing support from like-minded people." It should be made up of people who are already committed, who can form a shared trust and respect, who really know the dynamics of making things happen in your location, who will be honest about issues and challenges, and who can eventually help draw in groups who have not yet been engaged. Use them as a "think tank" for how you will take asset building into the community.
  - Start by setting up only 3 or 4 90-minute meetings (within 2 weeks of each other to maintain continuity) that are informal and exploratory. Their primary tasks would be to work through the infrastructure issues and questions that are outlined in this document around leadership structures, power sharing, relationships among communities, etc.
  - While some of these people may continue in a more formal role, their task is to develop initial community receptivity and to shape a more formal initiative. This group can be somewhat fluid to engage additional people as they emerge.
- Host public conversations.
- Create a core network (6-10 people) or formalized system that is specifically focused on action. This will likely emerge from the work done by the exploratory group and from what is learned in the public conversations. This group may take the form of an executive committee.

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## **Available Resources and Training from Search Institute**

### **Resources**

- *All Kids Are Our Kids: What Communities Must Do to Raise Caring and Responsible Children and Adolescents*
- *The Asset Activist's Tool Kit: Handouts and Practical Resources*
- *Assets in Action: A Handbook for Making Communities a Better Place to Grow Up*
- *Building Community from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* by J. Kretzmann and J. McKnight, ABCD Institute
- *Building Community: A Tool Kit for Youth and Adults in Charting Community Assets and Creating Change*
- *Getting to Outcomes with Developmental Assets: Ten Steps to Measuring Success in Youth Programs and Communities*
- *The Journey of Community Change: A How-to Guide for Healthy Communities • Healthy Youth Initiatives*
- *Working Shoulder to Shoulder: Stories and Strategies for Adult-Youth Partnerships that Succeed*

And many additional resources for parents, educators, program leaders, businesses, youth and others. These are available through the on-line catalog at:

<http://www.searchinstitute.org/home.php>

### **Training**

- Essentials of Asset Building: A Training of Trainers Workshop
- Starting and Supporting Asset Building in Communities

For additional trainings, see the Training section of the Search Institute web site at:

<http://www.search-institute.org/training/sessions/>

### **Annual Healthy Communities Healthy Youth Conference**

This conference provides a place for asset builders from across North America to connect with and learn from one another. Last year 1300 adults and 500 youth came together to learn, renew themselves and share strategies. Conference information can be seen at:

<http://www.search-institute.org/hchy/>