Mobilizing the Community

Communities can mobilize to work for changes that will benefit the social, emotional, financial and physical needs of citizens. Each community is a microcosm of a nation. It includes a dozen publics. It is the educational and professional groups, members of fraternal organizations, women's and garden clubs. It is business and industry, civic leaders, youth, media, labor and church leaders and the elderly. It is the community at large, which may react differently as a group than its members would as individuals. (White, 1)

Mobilizing the community begins when:

- Concerned citizens organize to take a stand.
- Needed community changes are determined.
- The public is concerned about the problems and need for collaboration among the community groups and individuals.
- The community at large is involved in the situation.
- Emerging community leaders are recognized and encouraged.
- The efforts for change are kept going after the coalition is ended. (Owen and Miller)

Prerequisite for Mobilization

When individuals and organizations come together to work on an issue, it is common to see them scramble over "turf" issues and for multiple, unrelated programs to result. The group needs to come to a consensus of moving toward collaboration. For this to happen, there needs to be time allowed for trust building. This is where the different individuals and organizations examine their capabilities and motivations. Ideas are exchanged, problems resolved and participants learn to give and take. (Dye and Wood 1981, 2)

For successful coalitions to happen, working relationships must be developed between each member of the coalition and the groups must put the plan into practice. Coordinating mechanisms can help. In addition, it is necessary that any collaborative effort be as open as possible. Involve the broadest circle of agencies and organizations to encourage collaboration around the common issue. It is essential that any collaborative effort does not threaten or duplicate existing efforts on the same issue. The coalition also must recognize that the public will be pushing for action and results.

What is Needed to Mobilize a Community?

- **Concerned citizens** ready to take a stand, say they want something different and are willing to work to see it accomplished.
- **Emerging leadership** that inspires and guides the project.
- A common **community vision** of the results.

- **Involved people** who recognize that the means to achieve their goals will vary but who support the common goal.
- **Recognition and encouragement** of those who contribute to reaching the goal.
- **Specific plans and goals** to reduce impact of at-risk situations.
- **Leadership that encourages**, builds and finds strategies but doesn't become the focus of the situation.
- **Recognition** that human relationships are important.
- **Time**. (Owen and Miller, 7-8)

Who Needs to be Involved?

The natural allies for mobilization are those persons who have a common interest in an issue. This can include community-minded individuals and all persons and groups affected by the issue. It is important that the group have linkages either by representation or delegation to the power structure, government agencies, key communicators, advisory boards, local businesses and educational institutions.

Membership in a community coalition falls into three categories:

- Activists who take an active role and provide leadership, write grants and serve on subcommittees and steering committees.
- Helpers who work on a limited basis or on specific designated tasks such as letter writing, newsletter distribution, etc.
- Communicators who share the work of the coalition to the outside through educational sessions and coalitions with other groups. (Burghard)

Strategies to Use

Various strategies are used to form coalitions. It has worked successfully to form an organization of the diverse groups who have a common interest, identify and recruit potential members, and establish a governing board. The coordinator of the group facilitates the decision-making process and helps members work together. Due to coordinating effort and visibility, formal groups are able to carry out large projects. Unfortunately, this strategy requires more time and effort to develop and operate. Another strategy is less formal and can be applied to a community of any size. It targets particular segments of the population through building informal networks.

Methods

Various methods for mobilization can be used, including a town meeting approach or speakouts. Their common factors are they are process oriented activities and include individual, follow-up and concrete portions. The initial large meeting allows for education and suggests the democratic process. Sign-up sheets at this meeting will help with the next phase, which is done by subcommittees who follow through on assignments and issues. It is here the individual is recognized and appreciates the openness. Finally, there is the concrete work of the subcommittee that shows the community they are working for change. (Burghard 1986, 40)