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Moving the Needle One Family at a Time

Community philanthropy at its best is seeing neighbors engaging their skills, their technology, and their entrepreneurial spirit to improve life chances for vulnerable children and families in their communities. I have a particular passion for rural America and building community philanthropy—not just charity—to create generational change in vulnerable rural families, moving them from poverty to prosperity. We know many things about the negative effects of poverty and lack of education among vulnerable families: fewer health services, inadequate housing, poor nutrition, higher incidence of social dysfunction and incarceration, and the list goes on and on. We also know that transforming rural communities and moving rural families out of poverty requires the reinvention of rural economies into economies where wealth creation, family self-sufficiency, and civic participation/leadership are norms. Transforming extreme and persistently poor rural communities and regions into healthy and viable living environments will ultimately require the creation of a rural movement for social and economic equity.

If that movement begins inside the communities in question, then there is greater hope for change and greater hope for improvement. One source of this hope is community philanthropy. Community philanthropy is an institution that must be built upon and sustained to change life outcomes for vulnerable children and families. Neighbors have a moral imperative, a service imperative, and a civic imperative to build upon and sustain local and regional community philanthropy to change life outcomes for vulnerable children and families.

Common Unity Strategically Investing to Change Families

The long-standing definition of community philanthropy is individual charitable giving—the donated time, talent, and treasure—of local people. I believe that the traditional definition needs to be broadened to create a new paradigm for community philanthropy. My proposed paradigm defines community philanthropy as neighbors in common unity making long-term strategic investments of their charitable resources—time, talent, and treasure—for the public good. Specifically for this paper, it is drawing on neighbors' common unity to make strategic investments of charitable resources—time, talent, and treasure—to improve outcomes for vulnerable children, youth, and families.

What is the impetus for this broader definition?

The word community is the combination of the words common and unity. Its Latin origins define community as together (com) to take charge of (munis). Charity is giving of the heart for the moment. It is giving to satisfy immediate needs and problems. Philanthropy is, by definition, a long-term strategic investment of charitable resources for the public good. It is making a strategic investment with a multiplier effect that contributes to social change. It is, or should be, the architect of social change—not just responding to immediate needs and problems (charity) but also searching for ways to solve them once and for all (philanthropy). Philanthropy is the one sector fully capable of innovating solutions, but it will not do so without a serious commitment and intentionality to do so.

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Steve Mayer of Just Philanthropy frames poverty as disparities of access to opportunities that can lead to success, as opposed to defining poverty as an income disparity. Poor people have less access to health insurance, well funded schools, livable wage jobs, better service in the justice system, and fewer opportunities to benefit from public systems and private markets. Thus, in the new paradigm I propose, community philanthropy is using charitable resources in common unity to support parents by making strategic investments that increase their economic mobility and educational attainment to improve the next generation's life chances.

Moral, Service, and Civic Imperatives

Community philanthropy provides the structure through which long-term, ongoing support for the public good can be sustained in local and regional communities for future generations. This new paradigm calls for the creation of new and alternative forms of philanthropy and other forms of community investment in which ordinary people and marginalized groups who live and work in rural communities can participate. In its most inclusive sense, philanthropy begins locally and is understood as civic participation in which all can help to shape their community's future. This broadening and creation of a new paradigm frames the moral, service, and civic imperatives to invest time, talent, and treasure to benefit vulnerable children and families.

Moral Imperative

Two Biblical teachings are especially applicable to community philanthropy: “To whom much is given, much is expected,” and “Love your neighbor as you love yourself.” Community philanthropy gives us an opportunity to exercise our love of humankind. Intergenerational poverty is all too prevalent among vulnerable families. The interventions employed must address the needs of the whole family and positively impact children.

For example, mental health services may be unavailable in an area to combat the related problems of substance abuse, violence, depression, and hopelessness, and perhaps

only academic programs are available for children. The community then has a moral imperative to figure out how to inculcate and support children in the midst of their reality. Neighbors can help children see beyond their current circumstances by working together with policymakers and business leaders to locate mental health services in the community, mentor the children of the struggling families, and/or develop relationships with these families as a means of support for positive changes within their respective families.

Through community encouragement and support, parents with low or negative self-concepts begin to see themselves as competent, capable people who can utilize resources community philanthropy brings to the community as a stepping stone for personal development. When the community expresses its belief in a family, its members will rise to the level of expectation: “They believe in me and I will do everything in my power to deserve their respect.” Community philanthropy offers a way to marry beliefs with action—doing something for the least among us to change their circumstances for the better. Community philanthropy invests in and celebrates human competencies and cultural traditions as assets, and uses common resources to foster risk-taking and creativity in tackling community problems.

Service Imperative

When an entire community coalesces around support for vulnerable families, a statement is being made to the public and to the families: “It is important to the future of our community that everyone has a fair chance and access to the services and supports necessary to achieve a good quality life. We are committed to seeing that happen.” Things need to get done because they are necessary for society to function well. If the agreed-upon goal is to change the life chances of the next generation, we have to serve the current generation. Community philanthropy should be the catalyst for change.

Returning to the example of the lack of mental health services in a community, neighbors will have to do something to find the long-term solutions necessary to address the lack of services and supports for the vulnerable children and families in their community. Building a network of community-based mental health workers to deliver quality services may be the most efficient way to deliver mental health services in rural communities where there may not be a hospital or service provider for miles. Also, programs during or after school hours will need to be developed to meet the needs of children whose parents are in need of mental health services. To make these services for parents and support services for children available locally, neighbors must use their time, skills, relationships, and more to advocate for and work on behalf of the families. The service imperative calls for efforts to create more supports for families working to change their circumstances. The supports include mentoring, tutoring, rehabbing housing, cleaning neglected areas of the community, raising money for local nonprofits, increasing access to information and networks, volunteering in a service activity, and more.

In April 2009, President Obama signed the Serve America Act that will make resources available for AmeriCorps workers to serve the nation’s most vulnerable communities. Locally we must take our tradition of service and transform it into a system that will reproduce the leaders needed to develop and implement long-term solutions necessary for our communities. While AmeriCorps workers are desperately needed,

they come and go depending on resources. Neighbors are invested in the long-term health and well-being of their community. Commitment to service in the community becomes important to building leadership and sustaining change over time.

Civic Imperative

Transforming disinvested and disadvantaged communities into positive environments conducive to raising healthy children must begin within the communities themselves. This recognition helps with the broader definition of community philanthropy, which recasts it as a broadly democratic and civic endeavor through which rural families design their own community-based strategies, models, and institutions of support. Grassroots efforts to shape and develop the vision and change the agenda are essential to reinventing local rural economies. Civic participation must be developed and encouraged to support the change agenda and the resulting new economy through service. A plethora of civic participation data shows that where there is high civic engagement, there is a positive well-functioning community.

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Civic participation is what will make the services and supports to families in need of mental health services happen. Neighbors must work in common unity around a common cause in a process that is inclusive and makes every effort to reach out to everyone in the community. In this case, it is the civic duty of all neighbors to ensure adequate mental health services are available to those who need them and to hold the system accountable to outcomes that benefit the families served and the community as a whole.

Despite the best efforts of local organizations, getting neighbors to participate can be difficult. Some may be apathetic, indifferent, disinterested, unaware, or misinformed. Others may be conflicted, concerned, or outright opposed to a particular course of action. Nonetheless, neighbors must reach out to critics and skeptics and engage those who are constructive by focusing on common interests and encouraging involvement.

Community philanthropy recognizes neighbors strategically investing their time, talent, and treasure to improve the local and regional rural economy, jobs and the workforce, education and the environment. This should not be done at the exclusion of vulnerable families and youth. It has been my experience that youth involvement is important, since the ultimate fate of the community rests in the hands of the next generation. Research suggests that when parents are civically involved, their children are also likely to be engaged in their community.

Community philanthropy must include those who live and work in rural communities as part of the solution and not simply as the recipients of benevolent gifts. If strategies to address root causes of problems and to move those families on the margins of our communities toward the mainstream are to be effective, individuals and communities must be included in their own development.

A Word on Treasure

In the traditional definition of community philanthropy there is a great deal of focus on the giving of treasure, in addition to time and talent. The broader definition and above discussion hopefully shows that community philanthropy is not the sole responsibility of the wealthy or well-endowed foundations. Rather, it is about working in common unity to effect positive change for vulnerable children and families. The role of endowed foundations like the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation (WRF) should be to support community philanthropy—philanthropic institutions such as WRF and communities joining together in collective or collaborative strategies for community change.

Fundraising is challenging among neighbors. Data shows dollars are available and need to be directed to community philanthropy. *Millionaires in the Millennium: New Estimates of the Forthcoming Wealth Transfer and the Prospects for a Golden Age of Philanthropy* provides a metric for estimating the potential for charitable giving. The Nebraska Community Foundation used the metrics developed in the study and estimated that by 2050, \$94 billion in wealth will be transferred among generations of Nebraskans. The Wisconsin Donors Forum contracted with the Nebraska Community Foundation to use its metrics to predict Wisconsin's transfer of wealth. Wisconsin's application of the metrics predicts an estimated \$687 billion in inter-generational transfer in the next 50 years. In Trempealeau County, home to 27,000 people, the transfer of wealth in the next 10 years is estimated at \$320 million—averaging over \$42,000 per household.

Steve Gunderson, President and CEO of the Council on Foundations, states in *Philanthropy & Rural America*: “But imagine: If just 5 percent of the \$320 million in Trempealeau County's generational transfer of wealth were captured by community philanthropy, we would create an endowment of \$16 million. Using the 5 percent payout of private foundations as our guide, this would provide \$800,000 in annual support for local programs serving the common good of our rural county.”

Conclusion

Community philanthropy is an institution that must be built upon and sustained to change life outcomes for vulnerable children and families. I am not an idealist. I recognize how tough this is to achieve. Mistrust among neighbors, biases, pre-judgments and the like get in the way of achieving long-term sustainable change efforts. In my work in philanthropy focused on community change, I have learned that sustainable change to positively impact the lives of vulnerable children and families requires four things:

- Authentic demand from residents and others not normally at the decision-making table
- Committed allies within and across the faith community, business sector, community organizations, and government who champion the work and can “make things happen”
- Dedicated resources, including dollars but also data and volunteers; and
- Vigorous leadership that can replenish and sustain itself over time.

To achieve these you have to be strategic and in it for the long term (philanthropy) and not support what feels good for the moment (charity). Community philanthropy—working in common unity to improve life chances for vulnerable children and families—provides the perfect infrastructure to facilitate sustainable change one family at a time.

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