



Tipping Neighborhoods to Success

To Succeed, Promise Neighborhoods Must Address People and Communities As A Whole

By Patrick Lester ¹
Updated May 31, 2009

SUMMARY

In July, 2007 then-presidential candidate Barack Obama pledged that, if elected, he would replicate the Harlem Children's Zone in 20 urban neighborhoods across the nation. He pledged to devote billions of dollars per year to the effort.

In its proposed budget for FY 2010, the administration confirmed its commitment to create the new initiative, called Promise Neighborhoods, which would combine "a rigorous K-12 education with a full network of supportive services." The budget proposed \$10 million for planning grants for community-based nonprofits. The funding was included in the budget for the Office of Innovation and Improvement in the U.S. Department of Education.

Neighborhood policies like the Promise Neighborhoods initiative have been proposed and implemented before, with varying degrees of success. Several lessons have emerged from this history and those lessons should inform the administration as it devises this new proposal.

To be successful, the new initiative should incorporate the following recommendations:

- Promise Neighborhoods must be more than an education program for children and youth. Either through collaboration or full integration with other programs, it must address the multiple interrelated issues affecting children, families and the communities they live in. It must also go beyond children and touch every generation in the community. It must address people and neighborhoods as a whole;
- Implementation should be centered upon neighborhood-based nonprofit organizations with a proven track record of operating and coordinating multiple programs affecting multiple generations of community residents;
- It should be appropriately funded, politically sustainable, and include a realistic plan for expansion;
- It should incorporate the views and unique skills, talents and needs of new Americans; and
- It should measure results and disseminate information about what works.

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THE PROMISE NEIGHBORHOODS INITIATIVE

On July 18, 2007, then-presidential candidate Barack Obama gave a speech on urban poverty in Washington, DC. During the speech, he spoke about his own work and experience in urban communities.

I was just two years out of college when I first moved to the South Side of Chicago to become a community organizer. I was hired by a group of churches that were trying to deal with steel plant closures that had devastated the surrounding neighborhoods. Everywhere you looked, businesses were boarded up and schools were crumbling and teenagers were standing aimlessly on street corners, without jobs and without hope.

What's most overwhelming about urban poverty is that it's so difficult to escape — it's isolating and it's everywhere. If you are an African-American child unlucky enough to be born into one of these neighborhoods, you are most likely to start life hungry or malnourished. You are less likely to start with a father in your household, and if he is there, there's a fifty-fifty chance that he never finished high school and the same chance he doesn't have a job. Your school isn't likely to have the right books or the best teachers. You're more likely to encounter gang-activities than after-school activities. And if you can't find a job because the most successful businessman in your neighborhood is a drug dealer, you're more likely to join that gang yourself. Opportunity is scarce, role models are few, and there is little contact with the normalcy of life outside those streets.²

During the speech, Obama pointed to the Harlem Children's Zone, a nonprofit organization in New York City, as a model of success.

If you're a child who's born in the Harlem Children's Zone, you start life differently than other inner-city children. Your parents probably went to what they call "Baby College," a place where they received counseling on how to care for newborns and what to expect in those first months. You start school right away, because there's early childhood education. When your parents are at work, you have a safe place to play and learn, because there's child care, and after school programs, even in the summer. There are innovative charter schools to attend. There's free medical services that offer care when you're sick and preventive services to stay healthy. There's affordable, good food available so you're not malnourished. There are job counselors and financial counselors. There's technology training and crime prevention.

You don't just sign up for this program; you're actively recruited for it, because the idea is that if everyone is involved, and no one slips through the cracks, then you really can change an entire community.³

Obama went on to pledge that, if elected president, he would replicate the Harlem Children's Zone in twenty cities across the nation. "The federal government will provide half the funding for each city, with the rest coming from philanthropies and businesses," he said. The effort would cost "a few billion dollars a year."⁴

On February 26, 2009, the administration released an initial outline of its proposed budget for FY 2010, which begins October 1, 2009. In it, the administration proposed an unspecified amount of funding "to support Promise Neighborhoods, a new effort to test innovative strategies to improve academic achievement and life outcomes in high-poverty areas. The program will be modeled after the Harlem Children's Zone, which aims to improve college-going rates by combining a rigorous K-12 education with

² "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Changing the Odds for Urban America," July 18, 2007. Available online at: http://www.barackobama.com/2007/07/18/remarks_of_senator_barack_obam_19.php.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

a full network of supportive services—from early childhood education to after-school activities to college counseling—in an entire neighborhood from birth to college.”⁵

On May 7, the administration released a more detailed budget submission that proposed \$10 million for competitive 1-year planning grants for community-based nonprofits.⁶ According to supporting materials from the U.S. Department of Education, grantees that “develop promising plans and partnerships would be eligible to receive implementation grants the following year.”⁷ The funds were included in the budget for the Office of Innovation and Improvement in the U.S. Department of Education, which appears to have been given lead responsibility for developing the initiative.

As of this writing, the administration has given no additional details about the proposal. However, on December 9, 2008, staff from the Harlem Children’s Zone and an allied organization, PolicyLink, met with members of the Obama transition team and submitted their proposal for the new initiative.⁸ It includes several additional details not yet publicly endorsed by the Obama administration, including:

- **Eligible Places and Entities:** To become a Promise Neighborhood, an applicant would have to show that the proposed area has a childhood poverty rate of at least 30%, with additional indicators of childhood disadvantage, or a childhood poverty rate of at least 40%. To become the responsible anchor entity of a Promise Neighborhood, an entity would need to be a nonprofit, with a 501(c)(3) designation. Several organizations could apply as a partnership, but one organization would be designated as the lead and have responsibility for overall accountability and coordination. The experience of a proposed anchor entity would be evaluated based on neighborhood-related factors such as: evidence of long-term engagement in the community; evidence of vision and capacity to launch successful initiatives; and an ability to partner with organizations, corporations, and community leaders.
- **Promise Neighborhood Grants:** Federal funding for Promise Neighborhoods would be awarded after an applicant had received a planning grant, met eligibility criteria, shown how it would serve children through high-quality programs/services in its beginning stages, and provided a plan for how it would build out the pipeline of services over time to serve 65 percent of all children ages 0-23 within the geographic boundaries.
- **Federal Governance:** Promise Neighborhoods would be governed by a newly created federal agency, similar to the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS).

BACKGROUND

The Promise Neighborhoods initiative and the Harlem Children’s Zone are both part of a long history of neighborhood programs dating back at least 100 years to the early settlement houses. To be successful, the new initiative should build not only on the experiences in Harlem, but also upon lessons gleaned from over a century of previous neighborhood-based work and initiatives.

⁵ Executive Office of the President of the United States, Office of Management and Budget, “A New Era of Responsibility: Renewing America’s Promise,” February 26, 2009, p. 60. Available online at http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/assets/fy2010_new_era/Department_of_Education.pdf.

⁶ Executive Office of the President of the United States, Office of Management and Budget, “Appendix: Budget of the U.S. Government: Fiscal Year 2010,” May 7, 2009, p. 364. Available online at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2010/assets/edu.pdf>.

⁷ U.S. Department of Education, “Fiscal 2010 Budget Summary – May 7, 2009.” Available online at: <http://www.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget10/summary/edlite-section3a.html#promise>.

⁸ PolicyLink and Harlem Children’s Zone, “Promise Neighborhoods: Recommendations for a National Children’s Anti-Poverty Program Inspired by the Harlem Children’s Zone.” Available online at: http://www.acy.org/upimages/H CZ_Plan.pdf. Attendees at the meeting included Geoffrey Canada and Kate Shoemaker of Harlem Children’s Zone, Angela Glover Blackwell and Judith Bell, PolicyLink, and Sterling Speirn of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

The Harlem Children's Zone

Launched in 1997 by its current President and CEO, Geoffrey Canada, the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) is a nonprofit organization that runs an interconnected network of social programs for an estimated 10,000 children living in Harlem in New York City.⁹ The annual budget for the project for FY 2009 is \$64 million, with services costing an average of about \$3,500 per participating child and adult.¹⁰

HCZ operates several programs intended to guide and promote a child's development from birth to college. These programs include the Baby College, a nine-week parenting program for parents of children aged 0-3, and Harlem Gems, an all-day pre-kindergarten program.¹¹ HCZ operates five Promise Academy charter schools, including two elementary schools, an upper elementary school, a middle school, and a high school.¹² It also operates several after school programs for middle school and high school youth, as well as a college success office to help students who have graduated from high school get into the most appropriate college and to succeed once they get there.¹³

HCZ also runs an Employment and Technology Center and operates a Community Pride program that organizes tenant and block associations, helping tenants to convert their city-owned buildings into tenant-owned co-ops.¹⁴

HCZ is based on several underlying concepts. The first is the "conveyor belt," a continuum of services that address a child's needs from birth to college. Some studies of other programs, such as Head Start, suggest that while there may be an increase in learning and academic performance for participants in the short term, these benefits may fade after participation in the program has ended.¹⁵ Program benefits may be negated by subsequent exposure to bad schools and other environmental factors.¹⁶ HCZ programs attempt to overcome this with continued services that progress through high school.¹⁷ HCZ's results have been impressive, with participating third graders scoring above the New York City average in reading and above the state average in math.¹⁸

A second concept is universality of service. HCZ's goal is not to serve a fraction of eligible children in a community – for example, those most likely to excel or benefit – but every child. To achieve maximum penetration of the community, HCZ sends recruiters door-to-door.¹⁹ Limited financial resources have prevented HCZ from accomplishing this intended goal for every program. In the case of its charter schools, rather than adopt an application process, HCZ has instituted a lottery to determine admissions, as required by New York state law.

A third concept is the "tipping point," a theory popularized by Malcolm Gladwell in a book by the same name.²⁰ As Paul Tough, author of "Whatever It Takes," explained in his book on the HCZ program:

⁹ Paul Tough, "Harlem's Man With the Plan," *Mother Jones* (January / February 2009). Available online at <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2009/01/harlems-man-plan>; According to HCZ staff, HCZ served 10,000 children in 2008. The HCZ Project (part of HCZ, Inc.) served over 8,000 children during that period.

¹⁰ Harlem Children's Zone communication, May 29, 2009.

¹¹ Harlem Children's Zone, "The Harlem Children's Zone Project: 100 Blocks One Bright Future." Available online at: <http://www.hcz.org/programs/the-hcz-project>.

¹² Harlem Children's Zone communication, May 29, 2009 and Harlem Children's Zone, "Promise Academy Charter Schools: Going Beyond the walls of the classroom." Available online at: <http://www.hcz.org/programs/promise-academy-charter-schools>

¹³ Harlem Children's Zone, op. cit. (11).

¹⁴ Harlem Children's Zone, op. cit. (11).

¹⁵ Alison Aughinbaugh, "Does Head Start yield long-term benefits," *Journal of Human Resources*, 36(4), September, 2001.

¹⁶ Paul Tough, *Whatever It Takes: Geoffrey Canada's Quest to Change Harlem and America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008), p. 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 189-196, 212.

¹⁸ Tough, op. cit. (9).

¹⁹ Tough, op. cit. (16), p. 5

²⁰ Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (Little, Brown & Company, 2000).

[Canada] believed that in troubled neighborhoods there existed a kind of tipping point. If 10 percent of the families on a block or in a housing project were engaged in one of his programs, their participation wouldn't have much influence on their neighbors, and the children who did enroll would feel at best like special cases and at worst like oddballs. But if, say, 60 percent of the families were onboard, then participation would come to seem normal, and so would the values that went with it.²¹

Many programs that try to help poor children, including charter schools, charities, and social service agencies, take as their premise that the best way to help children in a bad environment is to separate them as much as possible from that environment. ... Canada, by contrast, wants to leave Harlem's poor children exactly where they are, so that they change the neighborhood and the neighborhood changes them.²²

According to HCZ materials:

Children's development is profoundly affected by their environment. The most important part of that environment is, of course, the family and the home. But it also matters greatly what children face once they step outside their home. Will their role models be drug dealers loitering on the corner or neighbors in work attire walking to the train every morning to go to work? Will children jump rope in safe playgrounds or congregate in vacant lots?²³

For these reasons, community building is an essential part of the HCZ model. Residents have advised us on local needs and guided our growth at every stage of our development. Through leadership training, community organizing, neighborhood beautification, connections to social services, and a host of other activities, we work every day to build a strong community and mend the fabric of Central Harlem.²⁴

The goal is to create a "tipping point" in the neighborhood so that children are surrounded by an enriching environment of college-oriented peers and supportive adults, a counterweight to "the street" and a toxic popular culture that glorifies misogyny and anti-social behaviour.²⁵

To achieve that tipping point, the collective programs offered by a non-profit must reach about 65% of the total children in the area served.²⁶

HCZ, then, is intended to be more than just an educational program for children in a given community. Its goal is to transform and heal the community itself. This is what makes HCZ a neighborhood program.

The Fall and Rise of Urban Neighborhoods: Tipping Points In Action

The history of urban neighborhoods in the United States has also been about tipping points, but in the early to mid-20th century, these tipping points were often more about decline than renewal. This decline can be traced as far back as the 1920s, when manufacturing jobs began to leave New England cities for the south and Congress cut off most immigration, the lifeblood of many inner city neighborhoods.²⁷

This continued into the 1940s, when increased mechanization of farming, coupled with industrial job opportunities created during World War II, encouraged a growing internal migration of African Americans

²¹ Tough, op. cit. (16), p. 4.

²² Tough, op. cit. (16), p. 124.

²³ Harlem Children's Zone, "The Harlem Children's Zone Project Model: Executive Summary," p. 4. Available online at: http://www.hcz.org/images/executive_summary4.09.pdf.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Harlem Children's Zone, op. cit. (11).

²⁶ Harlem Children's Zone, op. cit. (23), p. 2.

²⁷ Alexander Von Hoffman, *House By House, Block By Block: The Rebirth of America's Urban Neighborhoods* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 8, 11.

from the rural south to northern cities.²⁸ Those job opportunities were brief, however, as GIs returned home to claim jobs and war-related manufacturing came to an end. Meanwhile, a new federal highway system built after the war and housing policies that encouraged home ownership, but discriminated against African Americans, encouraged white flight from the cities to the suburbs.²⁹ Later, this white flight was followed by second flight of African American professionals, as a wave of civil rights laws increased their residential and professional mobility.³⁰

The result in many inner city neighborhoods was a sharp collapse, with many losing more than half of their populations.³¹ Those left behind were often the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, resulting in increasingly concentrated poverty in inner city neighborhoods.³² This concentrated poverty fed a vicious cycle of discrimination and unemployment,³³ crime,³⁴ drug use,³⁵ and despair.³⁶ By the mid-1960s, riots tore the fabric of many of the nation's largest cities, from Watts in Los Angeles in 1965 to Washington, Baltimore, and Chicago in 1968.³⁷ In some neighborhoods, arson – often landlords burning their own buildings to collect insurance payments – destroyed much of what was left.³⁸

The state of urban neighborhoods seemed to reach a low point in the late 1970s and early 1980s. On October 5, 1977, President Carter visited Charlotte Street in the South Bronx. Surrounded by burned out buildings, he announced support for rebuilding the nation's inner cities.³⁹ Unfortunately, the president's proposal never made it out of Congress,⁴⁰ and three years later, in August of 1980, Ronald Reagan revisited the spot during a campaign swing and blamed Carter for the lack of progress. Viewing the devastated surroundings, Reagan said he had "not seen anything that looked like this since London after the blitz."⁴¹

Reagan's own presidency was marked by indifference to inner city issues,⁴² but in some ways it was also the beginning of a modest turnaround. While federal policy degenerated to one of neglect, signs of rebirth were emerging in some neighborhoods around the nation. Some of the rebirth was due to demographic changes in the communities themselves. Starting in the 1980s, new immigrants arrived and, just as they had decades before, they breathed new life into older communities.⁴³ Some communities also saw an influx of middle and upper-class professionals who rejected suburban life and returned to older neighborhoods closer to city centers, where they were often closer to jobs and had increased access to cultural amenities.⁴⁴ In some cases, these migration patterns resulted in gentrification.

²⁸ Robert Halpern, op. cit. (32), p. 58.

²⁹ Robert Halpern, op. cit. (32), p. 63.

³⁰ William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 56; Tough, op. cit. (16), p. 31.

³¹ Alexander Von Hoffman, op. cit. (27), p. 13.

³² Robert Halpern, *Rebuilding the Inner City: A History of Neighborhood Initiatives to Address Poverty in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 196; The number of poor people living in neighborhoods with at least a 40 percent poverty rate almost tripled during the 1970s in the five largest American cities. These areas became a brand-new kind of urban ghetto, almost all poor and all black.– Tough, op. cit. (9).

³³ Robert Halpern, op. cit. (32), p. 61.

³⁴ Robert Halpern, op. cit. (32), p. 200 ; Alexander Von Hoffman, op. cit. (27), p. 13.

³⁵ Alexander Von Hoffman, op. cit. (27), p. 22.

³⁶ Robert Halpern, op. cit. (32), p. 199.

³⁷ Alexander Von Hoffman, op. cit. (27), p. 11.

³⁸ Alexander Von Hoffman, op. cit. (27), p. 22; see also: Terry Wynn, "South Bronx Rises Out of the Ashes," NBC News, January 17, 2005. Available online at: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6807914/>.

³⁹ Alexander Von Hoffman, op. cit. (27), p. 19.

⁴⁰ Alice O'Connor, "Swimming Against the Tide," in Ronald F. Ferguson and William T. Dickens, *Urban Problems and Community Development* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press), pp. 111-112.

⁴¹ Jim Yardley, "Clinton Praises Bronx Renewal As U.S. Model," *The New York Times*, December 11, 1997. Available online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/12/11/nyregion/clinton-praises-bronx-renewal-as-us-model.html>.

⁴² Alice O'Connor, op. cit. (40), p. 113.

⁴³ Alexander Von Hoffman, op. cit. (27), p. 16.

⁴⁴ Alexander Von Hoffman, op. cit. (27), pp. 16-17, 252.

A third critical contributor was a new generation of community leaders and the nonprofit organizations they often started or led.⁴⁵ Some of these individuals and organizations established neighborhood watches and coordinated with local community policing efforts. Some renovated housing. Others established child care, job training, and drug rehabilitation programs.⁴⁶ Over time, these efforts were aided by constructive governmental policies, described below, which began to help rather than hurt inner city neighborhoods.

Aided by a broader economic recovery, urban centers began to revive in the 1990s and crime dropped precipitously.⁴⁷ On December 10, 1997, President Clinton visited Charlotte Street in the South Bronx – the third presidential visit in twenty years – and in many ways his visit marked the larger urban rebirth. "If you can do it," he said at the local Boys and Girls club, "everybody else can do it."⁴⁸

Set against this backdrop, the Harlem Children's Zone is actually part of a much larger story. It is one of limited, but growing success, as entrepreneurial, neighborhood-focused nonprofit organizations learn what works and replicate these successes in neighborhood after neighborhood.⁴⁹ Some of the most successful of these efforts are, like HCZ, holistic in nature, focusing on the whole person and whole community in an effort to tip neighborhoods to success.

In many ways, these successes reflect a long and often forgotten history that traces back to the settlement houses of the late 1800s and early 1900s. Many of those same organizations still exist today, and they are holistically and deliberately contributing to the rebirth of their own urban neighborhoods. Their efforts have produced important lessons that can and should inform federal neighborhood policy.

Federal Neighborhood Policy: History and Lessons

The Obama Promise Neighborhoods initiative, if implemented, will be part of a long history of federal neighborhood policy. In the early years, those federal policies were often worse than ineffectual and actually contributed to neighborhood decline. Over time, however, they evolved and improved. Today they are important contributors to our contemporary, if limited, urban rebirth. To be successful, Promise Neighborhoods must build on the lessons of these earlier initiatives.

The First Wave: A Focus on Infrastructure

Early federal neighborhood policies focused on infrastructure, rather than people. In some ways, these policies reflected the same sentiments that spawned the settlement house movement and its early focus on tenement reform in the early part of the 20th century. In that era, "slums" were viewed as inherently unhealthy, both physically and mentally, for the people who lived there. Reformers backed increased regulation and inspection to improve conditions. In 1901, for example, New York City enacted a tenement law that established standards for ventilation, overcrowding, fireproofing, and sanitation, but often this imposed costs that discouraged the building of new housing.⁵⁰ In some cases, reformers backed slum clearance efforts, displacing residents without building new housing to replace what was destroyed.⁵¹

The first wave of federal neighborhood policies followed this pattern. In 1949, Congress enacted the Federal Housing Act. The centerpiece of the new law was a slum clearance program that targeted "blighted" areas for "redevelopment" with new housing. The law provided funding to local governmental

⁴⁵ Alexander Von Hoffman, op. cit. (27), pp. 252-253.

⁴⁶ Alexander Von Hoffman, op. cit. (27), p. 15.

⁴⁷ Alexander Von Hoffman, op. cit. (27), p. 20.

⁴⁸ Jim Yardley, "Clinton Praises Bronx Renewal As U.S. Model," *The New York Times*, December 11, 1997. Available online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/12/11/nyregion/clinton-praises-bronx-renewal-as-us-model.html>

⁴⁹ Alexander Von Hoffman, op. cit. (27), p. 31.

⁵⁰ Robert Halpern, op. cit. (32), p. 28.

⁵¹ Robert Halpern, op. cit. (32), p. 28.

agencies to acquire targeted properties through the power of eminent domain.⁵² The resulting urban renewal efforts destroyed four units of low-income housing for every new one built, effectively destroying hundreds of neighborhoods across the nation.⁵³ Half of the land that was cleared was never developed and most of the people who were displaced were African American or Hispanic.⁵⁴ Federal mortgage subsidies were established to spur housing construction, but they primarily promoted suburban development at the expense of inner cities and did not prohibit discrimination against minorities.⁵⁵ Responding to the resulting affordable housing shortage, the federal government helped fund public housing projects, but most were built in low-income neighborhoods, further concentrating urban poverty.⁵⁶

The destructiveness of early federal housing policy was echoed in the federal highway program, which displaced almost as many people as urban renewal.⁵⁷ Highway planners typically built them through low-income and minority areas, uprooting and destroying whole communities in the process. As one observer noted, "very few blacks lived in Minnesota, but the road builders found them."⁵⁸ Those low-income residents who were not displaced were often physically isolated from the rest of the city by the new structures, and the highways themselves made it easier for commuters to move out of the cities to their new suburban enclaves, often driving over communities that they would rarely visit.

The Second Wave: A Focus on People

By the mid-1960s, activists and community organizers were able to slow the tide of urban renewal and highway construction, fighting off new projects that targeted their communities for destruction.⁵⁹ Federal programs were still developed that focused on physical aspects of urban neighborhoods, but they were typically less damaging or even helpful. A variety of federal housing programs, for example, helped rebuild and renovate older housing, such as the HOPE VI program, which funds renovations of public housing, and the Section 8 program. Several other community development programs stimulated private investment and construction, including the Community Development Block Grant,⁶⁰ Empowerment Zones and Enterprise Communities (EZ / EC) program,⁶¹ and New Markets Tax Credit program.⁶²

Starting with Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, however, a second wave of federal policies began to focus as much on people living in urban neighborhoods as the physical structures located there. A full accounting of every federal program affecting neighborhoods is beyond the scope of this paper, but they tend to fall into several categories. There are programs that focused on promoting jobs and local economies (e.g., the Workforce Investment Act and Community Reinvestment Act) and transportation programs helping local residents reach jobs in neighboring communities. There are a variety of community-based health programs (e.g. community health centers, community mental health centers, visiting nurse programs, and drug treatment programs). There are community-based anti-crime efforts, such as community policing and anti-gang initiatives. Schools have also become the focal point of several community-minded programs, including school-based health services and school lunch programs, among others.

⁵² Lawrence L. Thompson, "A History of HUD," p. 7. Available online at: http://mysite.verizon.net/hudhistory/hud_history.pdf.

⁵³ Robert Halpern, op. cit. (32), p. 68.

⁵⁴ Robert Halpern, op. cit. (32), p. 68.

⁵⁵ Robert Halpern, op. cit. (32), p. 3.

⁵⁶ Robert Halpern, op. cit. (32), p. 74-81.

⁵⁷ Robert Halpern, op. cit. (32), pp. 69-70.

⁵⁸ Robert Halpern, op. cit. (32), p. 70.

⁵⁹ Robert Halpern, op. cit. (32), p. 71.

⁶⁰ Helen Eisner, "The Community Development Block Grant," November 5, 2008. Available online at: http://www.alliance1.org/Public_Policy/budgets/CDBG.pdf.

⁶¹ Government Accountability Office, "Empowerment Zone and Enterprise Community Program: Improvements Occurred in Communities, but Effect of the Program Is Unclear," September 22, 2006 (GAO-06-727), p. 5. Available online at: <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-06-727>.

⁶² Jennifer Forbes, "Using Economic Development Programs As Tools For Urban Revitalization: A Comparison of Empowerment Zones and New Markets Tax Credits," *University of Illinois Law Review*, 177 (2006).

Nonprofit organizations have played a central role in many of these programs, including the implementation of Community Reinvestment Act and the Low Income Housing Tax Credit, for example. These activities are supplemented by a variety of other federally-funded social services provided by community-based nonprofits, such as Head Start, after-school programs, child care, English as a Second Language (ESL), family counseling, and programs for seniors, such as Meals on Wheels. Many of the original settlement houses, dating back to the late 1800s and early 1900s, provide these services today with funding that originates at the federal level.⁶³

This explosion of governmental and nonprofit activity helped slow or reverse the decline of some urban neighborhoods like the South Bronx and Harlem. The community-based nonprofits were themselves the launching pads for community leaders who lived in, understood, and were thus uniquely qualified to serve their communities.

While these programs made a significant difference, however, they were still not the whole solution. Programs tended to be categorical, focusing on narrow issues, and were often underfunded. Many neighborhood residents, as a result, fell through the cracks.

The Problem of Silos

By necessity, most governmental programs addressing domestic human needs must reach people where they live, work, or go to school – i.e., at the local level. Moreover, our federal system typically tasks states and (ultimately) local bodies with implementing these federal programs. However, these elements are not sufficient to make them true neighborhood programs.

The history of domestic federal policy making has been one of picking specific problems and attempting to address them individually, often in isolation from the many related factors that may be major contributors. For example, problems of drug abuse, mental illness, joblessness, and homelessness are all highly interrelated, but most programs address these issues separately, in silos.

This problem of silos plays out in several ways. One is legal and organizational, reflecting the structure and history of government programs themselves. Most of these programs were developed in isolation from one another, leading to the development of specific governmental agencies with institutional turf to protect. Each of these agencies, in turn, has typically developed a set of complex regulations and bureaucratic processes that often hinder coordination and communication with other programs.⁶⁴

A related problem is the professionalization of the social work, health, and education fields, particularly with respect to the elevation of graduate degrees and specialization as professional prerequisites. While appropriate knowledge, expertise, and training are important determinants of success for any program, they can be taken too far. Put in simple terms, “street smarts” – including knowledge of the local community and its culture – are often as important as, or even more important than, the “book smarts” learned in graduate programs and long tenures in specialized professions.

Over-professionalization of the workforce may have had a number of related consequences, including the creation of cultural and class distinctions that hinder trust and communication with those being served.⁶⁵ In some cases it may have led to paternalistic decision making styles that fail to consider different points of view.⁶⁶ The emergence of clinical social work during the 1920s, with its emphasis on psychoanalytical theory, may have contributed to these issues in some cases – including a tendency to treat those being helped as patients⁶⁷ and to subject them to a casework method that relies heavily on self referrals and

⁶³ United Neighborhood Centers of America (UNCA) represents over 140 such organizations across the nation.

⁶⁴ Robert Halpern, op. cit. (32), pp. 169, 191.

⁶⁵ Robert Halpern, op. cit. (32), p. 44.

⁶⁶ Robert Halpern, op. cit. (32), pp. 155-156.

⁶⁷ Robert Halpern, op. cit. (32), p. 159.

appointments.⁶⁸ Where used in this manner, this method can limit the number of people being helped,⁶⁹ limit the help being provided to whatever falls within the confines of a professional's field of expertise, and sometimes involve little contact outside of the professional's own office building.

Together, these silos – created by separate government programs, increased professional specialization, and isolated casework focused on narrow populations and problems – have all undermined a more comprehensive approach to social issues that considers people and communities as a whole.

The Third Wave: Neighborhood Programs

True neighborhood programs are very different. A true neighborhood program builds on the neighborhood's inherent strengths to transform an entire neighborhood, including its economy and culture. To accomplish this, it strategically focuses enough resources to help communities reach a tipping point, where negative feedback loops from many interrelated issues become positive ones. It seeks to transform more than isolated aspects of a few individuals. It seeks to transform the whole person and the whole community.

Accomplishing this, however, requires a neighborhood program to have certain characteristics, including (but not necessarily limited to) the following:

- It must recognize that linkages exist between the many interrelated issues that affect people, their families, and the neighborhoods in which they live and address them comprehensively and holistically;
- It must be sufficiently resourced – recognizing that this is a significant challenge in many low-income communities and that local and/or private resources may not be sufficient;
- It must not rely solely on self-referrals and case management methods that only touch a small sliver of the community. Instead, it must actively reach out in some way to most or all community members;
- To the extent practical, it must co-locate services in single locations, not refer people from place to place. Where appropriate, it should provide services in the home;
- It must not treat community members as patients who are sick and need treatment when they are not, but as people who are equals with skills and talents to contribute, deserving of respect; and
- It must be sustained over a long enough period of time to achieve cultural and economic transformation, a period that may need to be measured in terms of generations (10-20 years or more). However, sustainability (most importantly sustainability of resources) must not be confused with lack of flexibility or adaptability, either to changing times or improved knowledge of what works.

Most federal programs fall well short of these standards. While they may affect neighborhoods, most are not neighborhood programs. It is in the nonprofit arena, where entrepreneurial organizations stitch together myriad government programs and funding streams, that neighborhood programs come closest to these ideals. But even here, the vagaries of the grant writing process have prevented most from reaching complete fruition. Even the Harlem Children's Zone – and by extension the Promise Neighborhoods initiative that will be modeled on it – features only some of these characteristics, not all.

⁶⁸ Robert Halpern, op. cit. (32), pp. 44-46, 160.

⁶⁹ Robert Halpern, op. cit. (32), p. 186.

If implemented properly, however, Promise Neighborhoods could be more. It could become the crest of an emerging third wave of social policy that, at long last, could bring real and enduring change to our nation's urban neighborhoods.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As the Obama administration devises this new initiative, it should consider the following recommendations:

- ***To truly tip neighborhoods to success, Promise Neighborhoods must be more than an education program for children and youth.*** Education is critically important, but it is only one issue affecting urban neighborhoods. Focusing solely on education would turn Promise Neighborhoods into just another siloed federal program. It should be more than that. Either through collaboration or full integration with other programs, it must address multiple interrelated issues affecting children, their families and the communities in which they live. It must also be multi-generational. It must address people and neighborhoods as a whole.

For children, the program should be connected to an array of health, substance abuse, summer job, gang, lead abatement, child welfare, and teen pregnancy programs, to name a few. To truly transform neighborhoods, however, the program must be more than a children's program. It should be multi-generational, connecting to adults who serve as family members, guardians, and role models. It should collaborate and coordinate with adult literacy programs, job training, job placement, ESL, health, mental health, and family counseling programs. To transform cultures and communities, it should be connected to faith-based organizations, community centers, and other nonprofits that are the bedrock of communities.

The U.S. Department of Education should certainly play a lead role in designing and implementing the program, but Promise Neighborhoods should be more. As a (and perhaps the) signature anti-poverty program of this president, it should be a presidential initiative. It should involve one or more White House offices, including the Domestic Policy Council, the White House Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation, the White House Office of Urban Affairs, and /or the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. These offices should play a key role in breaking down federal silos separating the Department of Education from other cabinet-level offices that should also be involved, including the Department of Health and Human Services, HUD, the Department of Labor, and the Corporation for National and Community Service, among others.

- ***Implementation should be centered on neighborhood-based nonprofit organizations with a proven track record of operating and coordinating multiple programs affecting multiple generations of community residents.*** Silos at the federal level are only part of the problem. Silos must also be broken down at the neighborhood level where the program will be implemented. Nonprofit organizations with a proven track record of integrating multiple programs for neighborhood residents should be central to its implementation.

Encouragingly, the administration seems to partially agree with this position, at least with respect to multiple services, if not multiple generations. According to budget summary documents released May 7, 2009, the U.S. Department of Education will encourage planning grantees "to coordinate their efforts with programs and services provided by other federal agencies, including the Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services, Justice, and the Environmental Protection Agency."⁷⁰

⁷⁰ U.S. Department of Education, "Fiscal 2010 Budget Summary – May 7, 2009." Available online at: <http://www.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget10/summary/edlite-section3a.html#promise>.

- ***It should be appropriately funded, politically sustainable, and include a realistic plan for expansion.*** During the presidential campaign, then-Senator Obama said he would devote billions of dollars per year to the Promise Neighborhoods program. As president, he has been forced to confront severe financial realities facing the federal budget. Given current budget realities and the long history of uneven federal support for community programs like the Community Development Block Grant, Community Services Block Grant, and others, there must be a politically realistic plan for sustaining the program over the many years it will probably take to transform communities and achieve results.

According to Harlem Children's Zone estimates, an adequate neighborhood program must spend at least \$3,500 per participating child and adult per year. In the short term, achieving that level of financial support may require limiting the program to the twenty neighborhoods the president called for during the campaign. But the history of similar programs, such as the Model Cities program in the 1960s⁷¹ or more recent programs like Empowerment Zones and Enterprise Communities (EZ / EC), suggests that Congress will eventually spread these limited resources across many more communities than that.

This should be expected and planned for. Given limited resources, the only way to maintain sufficient funding across a larger number of communities is to plan to incorporate other, already-existing federal programs and funding streams into the program, both at the national level where policy is made and at the neighborhood level, where it is implemented. This will take foresight, planning, and time.

- ***It should incorporate the views and unique skills, talents and needs of new Americans.*** History suggests that immigrants have always been the lifeblood of healthy urban neighborhoods. When immigration has dwindled, neighborhoods died. According to White House officials, the administration expects to begin pushing for immigration reform later this year.⁷² While immigration reform will likely be considered separately, Promise Neighborhoods should be designed with immigrants in mind. It should be based on an expectation that a path to citizenship will eventually be established for these new Americans, and it should be designed to leverage their skills and address their needs, both before and after that happens. Representatives of immigrant communities should be invited to participate and to help shape the program.
- ***It should measure results and disseminate information about what works.*** Neighborhood policy, like many policies, is often more trial-and-error than tried-and-true.⁷³ Like the many programs before it, Promise Neighborhoods will be a learning experience. As such, it should include limited funding to measure performance, learn what works, and redistribute this information to neighborhood-based organizations across the country in communities beyond the initial list of 20. National organizations representing neighborhood-based programs should be involved in this process, both as participants and conduits for collecting and disseminating information. Federal funding should be set aside for them for this purpose.

Is Promise Neighborhoods really a neighborhood program, or does it aspire to be? Or is it merely a children's program focused narrowly on education? The latter is a worthy effort, and it could certainly help transform the lives of participating children. But it is less likely to transform the neighborhoods that those children live in. To truly transform communities, Promise Neighborhoods must be more. It must draw upon the history of neighborhood programs and truly become one of them. Only then will it tip neighborhoods to success.

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⁷¹ Robert Halpern, op. cit. (32), p. 121.

⁷² Julia Preston, "Obama to Push Immigration Reform Despite Risks," *The New York Times*, April 8, 2009.

⁷³ Alexander Von Hoffman, op. cit. (27), p. 256.

About the Alliance for Children and Families and United Neighborhood Centers of America

The Alliance for Children and Families, a nonprofit association, was formed by the 1998 merger of Family Service America and the National Association of Homes and Services for Children. The Alliance represents over 370 nonprofit organizations across the nation that provide services and economic empowerment to children and families. Alliance agencies cover a wide spectrum of providers, including a diversity of faith-based organizations and nonsectarian agencies. Together, these organizations deliver more than \$2 billion annually in services to more than 8 million people in nearly 6,700 communities across the United States. More information about the Alliance is available at www.alliance1.org.

United Neighborhood Centers of America (UNCA) is a voluntary, nonprofit, national organization with neighborhood-based member agencies throughout the United States. Formerly known as the National Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centers, it was founded in 1911 by Jane Addams and other pioneers of the settlement movement. UNCA members build neighborhoods with neighbors. More information about UNCA is available at www.unca.org.

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