

**Implementing Social Capital:
A Rural Community's Struggle to Provide Shelter for the Homeless**

Mark Andrew Bliss

Karen Bradley, Ph.D., Mentor

University of Central Missouri

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Abstract:

In May, 2011, the Johnson County homeless shelter in Warrensburg, Missouri, closed its doors leaving a group of 20 residents displaced. The following December, the shelter reopened on a five-month lease by a collaborative community group named Johnson County Cares comprised of religious, social service, and various nonprofit organizations. This case study explores the role of social capital in this community's struggle to provide shelter for their homeless population. Interviews and document analysis revealed the story as to how the new organization provides not only a sustainable permanent shelter, but also a steadfast support network reflecting a more comprehensive interpretation of homelessness. It was found that rural shelters lack the resources, volunteers, and funds to manage complex social problems, but social capital gained through the collaboration of agencies can provide possibilities and resources unavailable to isolated agencies. Social capital acquired by collaborating with churches, social service providers, and homeless shelters from neighboring towns allowed for unique opportunities which unlocked unique assets. For example, Johnson County Cares was able to conduct a countywide homeless count, something that had not been performed for years, and as a result, legitimized Johnson County's need and eligibility for funding. From this study, communities can take the direction forged by organizations like Johnson County Cares to implement social capital through collaborative and holistic approaches to combat the recent rise in rural homelessness.

Introduction

In May, 2011, the Johnson County Homelessness Eliminated by Loving People (HELP) Shelter in Warrensburg, Missouri, closed its doors, but not because the problem of homelessness had been resolved. In fact, a January 25, 2012, countywide homeless count revealed that 51 people were counted as unsheltered homeless, while 230 were considered sheltered homeless (Sterling 2012). Soon after the shelter closed, a group of local churches and concerned community organizations formed Johnson County Cares (JCC), took out a five-month lease and reopened the shelter. As the lease neared expiration, Destiny House, a nonprofit organization from a neighboring town, agreed to extend their services to Warrensburg and purchase a permanent shelter, projected to be fully operational by fall 2012.

The purpose of this study is to explore connections, networks, and resources available to rural communities like Johnson County, Missouri. This case study contributes to the conversation on advancing a successful delivery of rural social service, posing the question: what role does social capital play in this community's struggle to provide shelter for their homeless population?

Literature

Sociologists have been exploring the essential role social capital plays in communities. Social capital is the sum of resources "by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:119). Bourdieu emphasizes its role in reproducing an elite class, while Coleman "notes its value for all kinds of communities, including the powerless and marginalised" (Gauntlett 2002). Social capital includes central "features of social life--networks, norms, and trust--that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives" (Putnam 1996). Most

simply, social capital is about effective *networking* and *collaboration*.

Rural nonprofit organizations face unique circumstances that urban counterparts might not experience when serving the needs of the homeless. Rural residents in general have deficits in economic opportunity, social networks, services, and support that might be found in an urban community (Cochran, et al. 2002). Put simply, rural communities can lack social capital.

In response, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has created the Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR), using two methods to collect accurate numbers of the homeless: the Point-in-Time, a one-night count of sheltered and unsheltered homeless, and the 12-Month Count of those who utilize a shelter within the year. These standardized estimates are crucial in understanding the scope of homelessness and measuring progress in reducing it (Sullivan 2011b). However, counting the rural homeless remains problematic (Edwards, et al. 2009). Rural nonprofits tend to serve a smaller constituency and are themselves modest in size, yet reports reveal a 57% increase in rural and suburban homelessness across the country since 2007 (Sullivan 2011a). Smaller rural communities may delay implementation of these new methods until they can levy the volunteers and resources needed to manage these types of counts, giving them less access to grant funding.

In Missouri, the Governor's Committee to End Homelessness (GCEH) has followed HUD's lead by effectuating the two methods of counting homeless. Recognizing that rural areas lack social capital that might otherwise be found in metropolitan areas, the GCEH established strategies to promote public and private collaboration, just as HUD requires providers of homeless programs in rural areas to conduct joint planning and joint applications for federal funding (Snaveley 2000). Through collaboration and networking with other nonprofits, rural counties can resolve many problems that individual organizations could not previously manage.

It is important to point out that rural communities do have some resources at their disposal. Ginsberg (2011:13) writes, “Churches tend to play a larger role in rural communities than they might in metropolitan areas.” Rural churches often provide services like meals and counseling to the homeless, employing the church's social capital, i.e., members.

In this context, we can look at the struggle to create a sustainable shelter for the homeless in Johnson County, Missouri. The implementation of social capital within the community and issues of how the organization engages state resources are two central themes explored.

Methodology

A case study is an intensive, qualitative analysis of a unique social group, allowing for extensive investigation of detail (Kumar 2005:113). This case shows the particular situation of the community's struggle in Johnson County, Missouri. Two methods were used to collect data: key informant interviews and document analysis. Key informant interviews were used to collect data from shelter coordinators, administrators, and community leaders. Of the eight JCC board members, four were selected for interviews. Open-ended questions about the history, organization, and the daily operations of the shelter were asked. Participants were audio recorded at locations and times convenient to them for a duration of about 45 minutes. These interviews were transcribed and compared with other documentation including local newspaper articles and relevant public documents. This data helped develop triangulation of the information to improve validity and reliability of the case.

Results

When the HELP shelter's closing was first announced in the local newspaper, the town felt the urgency to reopen the shelter, yet few knew where to turn. Behind the scenes, a small group of pastors, community leaders, and social service providers were already coming together

to seek out an agency with the ability to reopen the shelter. JCC did not intend to run a shelter long-term, but would serve as a network of support, supplying volunteers, funds, and resources to the new agency. But by October, 2011, no agency was found in a position to undertake the project. JCC had funds earmarked for a temporary emergency shelter, including a \$4000 match by Catholic Charities from a benefit concert. FEMA grants were discovered by collaborative efforts used to relocate residents to motels and transitional housing. JCC worked with the property owner of the HELP shelter and secured a five-month lease, from December to April. At JCC's first public meeting, some 35 people pledged their support. One board member explained, "We started getting furniture donations, you know, identify volunteers, house wares, things like that." At this point, JCC began securing grants and volunteers and locating new streams of income. On December 19, 2011, the shelter hosted an open house to "give the community a better look at the services offered, and to see what they were helping to create" as reported in the local paper (Cooke 2012). In March, Destiny House began to take the reins and prepare a permanent shelter while JCC offered continued support. Unfortunately, due to zoning regulations, Destiny House was not able to purchase a building in time, and on April 30, the shelter was evacuated a second time. Again, JCC worked hard with the residents to find them temporary shelter until Destiny House was able to open a new shelter in fall 2012.

Analysis

While many things contributed to the closing of the original shelter, what role did social capital play? One JCC board member summarized, Johnson County HELP was "spinning their wheels with nowhere to go" because of internal administrative problems, leading to vacancies in the advisory board. For some, the job was too taxing. There were disagreements within the organization and some people simply walked away. Internal struggle led to disarray and a lack of

faithful monetary support. A JCC member told me, "what wound up in the newspaper was that they were basically shut down by the IRS because they owed I think \$14,000." But of all the reasons, two stood out to be seemingly most destructive; first, a lack in organization to accomplish data collection, and second, a fractured administration with no support network to share the burdens they encountered. Both reflect central aspects of lacking social capital.

When JCC initially came into existence, their first order of business was to organize a countywide homeless count. Established by HUD and GCEH, an accurate count was necessary to qualify for some grants. According to a JCC board member, "Johnson County had not had an accurate homeless count for years... that's really important if another shelter is going to be set up, especially for funding purposes." For a need to be considered by financial supporters, data must back the claim, and in Johnson County, "there was no data to identify need... the reporting said like zero." Using the methods provided by HUD and GCEH would have not only legitimized the gravity of the county's homeless situation, but would have unlocked resources available from these government agencies. The board member continues, "We need to make sure [the counts] happen twice a year because that shows... there is a legitimate need here and... opens up grant funding and all sorts of resources." At the first Point-in-Time homeless count on July 25, 2011, JCC counted seventy-five unsheltered homeless people in Johnson County, and in a rural community, "That's pretty significant" a board member explained. With these numbers, nonprofits began working together to access funds and grants that had not been utilized before, as well as to search out new sources of support. A simple count of the homeless was the key to unlocking financial assistance previously unavailable to the HELP shelter. However, pulling the various organizations together to coordinate their activities produced the social capital needed to accomplish the count.

One can infer that a countywide homeless count conducted in a single night cannot be accomplished easily and requires an army of volunteers. JCC made it a posture of the consortium to be what they call a *collaborative*, that is, "a model of community involvement and joint participation" bringing a diversity of organizations to the table to pool resources, share experiences and wisdom, offer assistance particular to that agency's mission, and create a ubiquitous support network with the expectation that cooperation offers sustainability within organizations. A lack of networking with other agencies contributed to the closing of the HELP shelter and was a key mistake to avoid when designing a new shelter. JCC opted not to establish themselves as 501(c)3, instead aiming for "poststructural de-isolationism" —an alliance organization without definitive boundaries. As one pastor explains, "We don't need to set up more agencies; we need agencies that are in place to start working together.... What we're really trying to say is we're a collaborative. We want to identify problems and address them in a holistic way."

The ability to bring experts and organizations in from religious, public, and private sectors takes dedication and authentic trust in each other, as Putnam would suggest is necessary to acquire and maintain social capital. In one member's description, "You have pastors; you have people that work at recovery programs; a school administrator. I think that's the strength of it. We have the school social workers; we have concerned citizens; we have the Chamber of Commerce that's been supportive." Board members of JCC are typically made up of high-profile leaders with the advantage of being able to pull in an entire organization's resources. The acquisition of social capital and the ability to discuss issues from multiple vantage points is crucial in formulating a sustainable organization and is a solution to the lone rural nonprofit. The HELP shelter lacked this type of social capital, lending it to failure. JCC uses models of social

capital to reproduce a lasting network, in order to serve the powerless and marginalized, while pursuing the shared objective of providing a sustainable homeless shelter.

Not only is a collaborative holistic in administrative design, it also approaches social issues from the foundational assumptions of holism. If the assumption is held that homelessness is the consequence of a network of contributing factors, social capital may serve as a remedy to that network of ills. A JCC co-chair adds, "One of our goals is to try to answer the five pillars of poverty, which are housing, education, health, employment, and food.... Housing is just a small part of it." A holistic approach to social problems calls for a network of agencies, as to gain social capital through trust and shared visions. Thus, JCC sees social capital as a necessary tool when facing complex social problems.

Conclusion

Johnson County Cares implements social capital as an antidote to rural homelessness with a collaborative and holistic model for rural shelters to emulate. Collaboration equips rural communities with assets not available to isolated organizations. The cooperation of service providers allowed for successful completion of a homeless count with real defensible numbers, thus validating rural homelessness as a legitimate social problem. On the path forged by Johnson County Cares, rural homelessness is finally on its way off the road of neglect and has initiated a journey into new research and understanding of the rural homeless situation.

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