Services are Bad for People

You're either a citizen or a client

John McKnight

Human services need clients. They need clients to survive because without clients the United Way or the government will no longer fund them. Therefore, professional social service providers have a vested interest in people needing them. If they can't claim that there are many people out in the neighborhoods who need their services, then their funding dries up and the middle and upper middle class service providers lose their jobs. Those of us who have spent a considerable time in low income neighborhoods know that service providers traditionally manipulate their data to make it look like they are providing an invaluable service to a community where, they claim, there are evermore people in need.

Communities, unlike human services, need citizens. Citizen is the name for the people in a democratic society who have an equal share of the total power of the society. However, a citizen has much more power than a vote. Voting is a very individual act that entails giving power away to someone who will hopefully represent you. The definition of a powerful citizen can't end there because really powerful citizens make power by coming together and take power by acting together.

In *Democracy in America* Alexis De Tocqueville said that ours was the strongest democracy on the planet, not because of our free voting system, but because of the preponderance of active citizen associations that worked on solving problems collectively.

Service systems require clients and community organizations require citizens. That is why service systems are often antithetical to powerful communities.

Systems are hierarchal and not democratic. They harness people's power to execute the plan of a central authority.

Community organizations are the vehicles that harness the potential power of the citizens to create and execute their own plan. Citizens make power by coming together and take power by acting together on issues.

When citizens get together and say, "Our organization can solve many of the problems that human service systems control, then there will be a conflict. TThe vested interests of the social service system will attempt to thwart the efforts of the community organization to control what happens in its neighborhood.

The professional/client model is a superior versus inferior, or dominant versus submissive relationship. While well-run services have their place, they are never going to empower neighborhoods. In fact, when analyzing communities, you'll find that the more services there are in that neighborhood, the less power that community has to control its future.

Service systems act on the premise that the professional has expertise and the client has the problem. The problem solving power of the people in the neighborhoods is unimportant. That professional idea is exactly the opposite of what community organizing attempts to do. The organizer tells the people that they have problem solving abilities and they can change their community.

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Let me use the example of my calcified big toe. I'm certainly happy that there are professionals out there who know what to do to treat this problem, and I use one of them. But my personal power is directly related to my use of professionals. I try to depend upon them as little as possible. Because if my life is heavily involved with the social worker, the doctor, the psychiatrist, two things begin to happen to me. One is that I enter into a world of dependence. The other is that my money is increasingly consumed by these people, diminishing my ability to make financial choices. If I become surrounded by a forest of services, then I've lost much of my

power to make decisions.

It's the same with a community. If it is surrounded by a forest of services, then it loses the power to decide as a community. It should go without saying that community organizers should not act as arborists, teaching people how to grow a forest of services around them. That is the approach of the misinformed community organizer. This organizer mistakenly tries to make more clients, rather than expanding the power of the citizen. The powerful community organization, conversely, seeks political and economic control over the services in its community.

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A good test of the community's control over services can be accomplished by asking four questions. The first is, who actually controls the service? Does the community have the final say in the decision making process or is it just an outpost of a big system where local opinion has no value?

Second, who does the service system hire? Does it hire professionals who take money or human resources out from a community, or does it put money and jobs into the community?

Third, who does the service provider purchase its resources from? Are they buying locally or is the money in the community being circulated out of its domain?

And fourth, and least important, although this question receives the most attention, who is being served? Answering these four questions will give a community organization a pretty good idea whether they have control over the service providers.

Saul Alinsky, in many ways the founder of modern community organizing, hated anything resembling social workers. I remember when Sargent Shriver was heading up the federal government's anti-poverty program. We persuaded Saul to come to a conference and debate Shriver about the merits of the work of the anti-poverty program. Saul was absolutely contemptuous of the social service focused anti-poverty program, assailing it as a substitute for real problem solving in poor neighborhoods. He finished his presentation at the debate by telling Shriver, "Your goddamned program is political pornography!"

Alinsky realized that all the money that went into the social service systems in a community competed directly with the organizing process. The more services and money for services in the community, the harder it is to organize and empower that community.

Today, on the front lines in the community, the agents of the service system are mainly non-profit agencies and individual professional providers. The government used to provide services directly, but now it is the major funder of services and not the providers of services. However, the government is not entirely out of the service business.

Take public housing for example. Public housing tenants are clients, the receivers of services provided by the housing authorities. No one would say that theses tenants are empowered. The conditions of public housing developments show the effects of this dominant/submissive service relationship. Today, however, there has been a push by residents to become managers and providers in the projects. Resident groups across the country are trying to overthrow the service ideology created in public housing and replace it with the principles of community organization.

The principles of community organization are simple and straightforward: One, everyone is a citizen first, a client-consumer second. Two, to attain power people have to act collectively. They must come together and say, "We are the principal problem solvers in this community."

A good example of this idea in action is the present school reform measures in Chicago. For years educators protected centralized power in the city's school system. Communities were essentially in a professional/client relationship with educators, and became powerless to change the poor conditions of the schools. Initially, reform efforts were focused on the top management of the system. So Chicago proceeded to go through 5 superintendents. Only "the best and the brightest" educational professionals were sought for the position. But student test scores kept going down regardless of which professional controlled the system.

Communities finally realized they could no longer afford to be clients of the systems controlled by professional educators. They saw that changing

the professionals at the top, but leaving the system of professional control in place was not going to solve anything. What was really needed was genuine reform. That meant changing power relationships by redefining who was in control. Therefore, Chicago neighborhood organizations worked strenuously to get legislation passed that would return control of the schools to the local communities.

As a result, the state legislature passed a law dividing the school system into 468 school boards elected by local citizens. Now, the locally elected board has the power to hire and fire the principal, develop curriculum and budget the school's money. The intent of the neighborhoods to regain control over the professional service system succeeded. Neighborhood power has replaced the professional dominance of the centralized management system. It is clear from this example that the community organizations should never let the professionals become dominant.

Effective organizing also mobilizes people to help each other. Human services are a second rate substitute for the community building process. Services cannot get people together to form a day care cooperative or a neighborhood watch. This is the unique power of citizen associations, tackling community-wide problems like crime and drugs, or working to keep elderly residents in the neighborhood.

Community organizations that have real power have an economic focus rather than a service focus. In our society, power equals organized people or organized money. Effective community organizations, for the most part, use people power to affect money power. The organizing question is, "How can we have a local economy that offers real choice and the potential for a good living?"

Because power comes from choice, community organizations should realize that if money in the community goes to the United Way service systems, and not for community empowerment or economic development, then the community needs to work hard to regain control over the money the service system siphons off. Education, welfare, social services, all this money needs to be redefined and controlled by local groups.

A fair indicator of an empowered community is the amount of goods and income being generated by the residents. In powerless communities, goods and income are scarce. Instead, government programs, the United Way and private foundations offer services, not straight income. In Chicago, for instance, 25,000 public dollars comes into the city for every low income family of four people. But this family receives only 9,000 dollars in cash. The rest of the money is consumed by health and human service professionals provided for low-income communities. Thus, the low-income family is service rich and money poor. This is, in effect, legislated poverty because adequate public income is appropriated but is not available for choice. It is available for services only.

People will argue however that poor people can't be trusted with cash. They will say the government knows best how to spend poor people's money. This notion is what built the social service empire on the backs of America's poor. As people have more power they become more responsible, not the other way around. Responsibility grows with authority. Community organizing leads neighborhood residents to become responsible problem solvers in the neighborhood. When residents realize they have the power to change things, they start to see how the community gives away its own power in exchange for services.

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Unfortunately, some of the biggest community busters within the neighborhoods have been some of the churches. In these churches there is a heavy emphasis on charity. It is manifested in church members who hear a call to "serve" others. While this is a natural part of the church experience, it degenerates easily into the dominant-submissive relationship so common in professional services. These churches say they are involved in or sponsor organizations that benefit the community. But the church's charity motive weakens the capability of building empowered community institutions dedicated to social change. In these churches the result of the congregation's concern is to create, fund or become part of a professional service network. In these churches the pastor responds to those with problems by sending them to service agencies, saying in effect, the power is not in this church to solve

your problem, the power lies elsewhere in professionals. These are the community busting churches, those who assume the task of creating more services rather than building problem solving religious congregations.

Effective pastors connect people to help each other. They work to bring the knowledge and capacities of the congregation together. However, many mainline churches are powerless today because they actively give away the power of the congregation to help each other or its community. Their pastor will refer a "problem kid" to a professional youth counselor and will lead a drive to get more youth counselling services into the community. This action robs his church and his community of potential power.

An effective community is one where people are committed to each other and solve problems together. An effective community is moving away from being filled with clients. A powerful community is the home of the citizen, and can harness the power of citizens through the vehicle of community organization.

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