

CHAPTER 7 BUILDING COMMUNITY CAPACITY TO CHANGE

The Northcentral Montana Community Ventures Project has enlivened the community interest and commitment to form a strong foundation for broad community change to reduce poverty.

Building community capacity is a long-term process that is an essential ingredient of the implementation of a ten-year plan. In Northcentral Montana, increasing the community capacity to change means to:

- Change individual and community expectations about what is possible,
- Design avenues for hope about the future,
- Develop individual and community leadership,
- Expand the network of relationships,
- Involve low-income people in shaping change,
- Create opportunities for collaboration across sectors and cultures,
- Be models for new ways of doing things, and
- Create shared experiences that invite people to take risks and make change.

Through the planning process, the Coalition has built community capacity. Here, we describe what has changed and what we have learned during the planning process. Based on the lessons learned, we outline a new organization that will oversee the 10-year poverty reduction plan and what remains to be done to build community capacity and reduce poverty.

'Just by getting together, change will ripple out and increase awareness. It brings hope to a lot of people.'

A Strategy Team Member

Successful comprehensive community initiatives share some important, basic understandings:

Communities are complex systems, with many layers of relationships and interactions, and multi-faceted, interconnected problems.

There must be a focus on a strategic driver such as poverty reduction.

Work is carried out strategically, not by doing everything at once.

The comprehensive quality of the initiative will evolve with the capacity to implement change.

The knowledge and abilities of individuals must be expanded.

The people most affected by what happens in a community must be included in discussions and decisions.

Community institutions are strengthened by creating links between systems

(Adapted from Voices from the Field II/Reflections on Comprehensive Community Change, The Aspen Institute, 2002)

What has changed during the planning process?

The Community Ventures Project continues to be a vehicle to connect people across the region for the common good. Indian and non-Indian affirmed their commonalities at the same time that they claimed their differences. Participants had the opportunity to get to know each other over time, over multiple experiences, wrestling with difficult and challenging subject matters. A network of individuals and organizations understand themselves to have joined forces for a common vision.

We have raised community awareness. Each participant in the Coalition and member of the community who has been touched by the project has been exposed to new ways of thinking about poverty and new understandings about the region that they live in. People are asking questions and gaining insights that serve as the foundation for needed change.

The support for the project has grown. County Commissions from each of the 11 counties, Tribal Councils from each of the three reservations, and the Little Shell tribe have passed resolutions of support for the project. In addition, the Montana Legislature passed a resolution of support during the 2003 session. Other letters of support from organizations and communities across the region and can be found in Appendix H.

As a result of the Community Ventures planning process, the region now has a strategic plan to reduce poverty over a ten-year time frame with seven strategic directions to reduce poverty. It is a thoughtful and realistic strategic plan that will

comprehensively address the issues associated with poverty to assure that there is fundamental long-term change.

Leadership for the plan has been steadily built over the life of the project. Steering Committee members, Co-Chairs of Strategy Teams, and other individuals have invested large amounts of time and talent to put forward a potent plan to better the future of the region.

Every participant has been exposed to new techniques and tools, developed new skills, and gained new information. Experiences such as the Dialogue Training in October or the keynote speech by Bill Grace, from the Center for Ethical Leadership, in April inspired the Coalition to focus on values, community, collaboration and courage. Coalition members can apply the planning processes that they learned developing goals and strategies to other settings and situations.

The use of Catalyst and web-based surveys has been a cornerstone for the planning process. Participation on Catalyst increased over time with more people finding it comfortable to navigate the online workspace. The web-based survey has been a successful tool for gathering input from members of the Coalition, where face-to-face meetings would be unlikely to generate the same level of response given the distance within the region.

NWAF Criteria
Development of local abilities to achieve long-term community goals

NWAF Criteria
Substantial involvement of diverse interests

Each of these elements builds community capacity. A momentum has been created that will attract human and financial resources to address the issues illuminated by the plan. A few examples of projects already underway that are building on the work of the Northcentral Montana Community Ventures Project include:

- Youth Development Project - The Alliance for Youth in Great Falls, in partnership with the Coalition, has received a grant from the Montana Board of Crime Control to develop a planning process and engage local agencies to support a Youth Asset Development Program based on the Alaska Model. The grant will bring in Alaska ICE (Initiative for Civic Engagement) and the Search Institute for a workshop. The community will be invited into the planning process at our October 17th Coalition meeting. (See Community Strategy 1.2)
- Open Book - This is a program of the Montana Council for the Humanities. They have agreed to sponsor a discussion series in the Northcentral Montana region focusing on books that deal with cultural diversity and poverty. The Council provides the books and the discussion leaders. The three books that are part of the discussion series include, Perma Red, The Death of Jim Loney, and Breaking Clean. Hill County Library, Teton County Library, Great Falls Library, and Fort Belknap have agreed to host discussions. (See Community Strategy 1.3)
- The Center for Ethical Leadership and Strategic Learning Resources are working with the Steering Committee to design and develop a community capacity building and leadership development process for Council leadership and sub-regional and project teams. The collaborative project will engage in the formation of the Coalition,

Regional Board, sub-regional PROS and project teams to build skills in community leadership and change for the implementation of the ten-year plan. It will touch persons living in poverty, interested community members, tribal and public officials, and representatives of stakeholder organizations. Members of the Steering Committee will meet with staff from the Center and SLR on November 24 and 25 in Seattle to finalize the project model. (See Community Strategy 1.1.)

- A pilot “Health Watch” program has been discussed with Public Health and the Rocky Boy Clinic for early start-up. (See Health Strategy 3.1)
- The Montana Housing Network is expanding affordable housing opportunities and housing assistance for Native Americans on and off reservations. (see Housing Strategies)
- A Youth Build Grant is going to be completed by District IV HRDC. It will create a learning project for youth as well as homes for families. (See Housing Strategy 1.1 and Education 1.1)
- Fort Belknap Improvement Project sponsored by Triangle Telephone. (See Economy Strategy 4)
- Cultural Tourism Conference at Rocky Boy. (See Economy Strategies 3.2 and 3.3)
- Health Disparity – The United States Commission on Civil Rights Report has stimulated presentations to and conversations with key stakeholders across the region about the health care disparity between Indians and non-

NWAF Criteria
*Thoughtful and realistic
 strategies for accomplishing
 community goals*

Indians. These efforts are likely to result, at minimum, in raised awareness about the disparity and identification of clear pathways to closing the gap that currently exists. (See Health Strategy 1.1)

- The Office of Public Instruction applied for a grant and requested a letter of support from the Coalition since the technology project reflected several strategies included in the poverty reduction plan. (See for example Education Strategy 4)
- The North American Rural Futures Institute (NARFI) has recently completed a strategic plan that relied on input from members of the Coalition and specifically mentions continuing to partner with the Coalition on future projects. As a result of the collaboration from the strategy teams, NARFI has been invited to the Rocky Boy reservation to conduct an alternative energy workshop. (See Economy Strategy 2)
- As a result of the Community Venture planning process, health departments from Pondera, Glacier, Teton, and Cascade County are discussing sponsoring a workshop

featuring Ruby Payne to discuss her book, "Framework for Understanding Poverty". (See Community Strategy 1.4)

- Blaine County recently reconsidered a signage project for the Bear Paw Battlefield to reflect Native American input on the cultural appropriateness of the sign. This approach was due to increased awareness about diversity issues, as a result of the Community Ventures project. (See Community Strategies 1 and 2)
- A medical clinic in Cut Bank just received a grant to provide medical services for uninsured low-income persons. (See Children, Youth and Families Strategy 1 and Health Strategy 1)
- The Lewis and Clark Foundation is using strategies from the plan to help apply for a grant relating to cultural tourism. (See Economy Strategies 3.2 and 3.3)