

Community as Client:
How Working with the Community Brings About Positive Change
in Individuals and Neighborhoods

Angela L. Anno
Cincinnati, Ohio

Correspondence regarding this article may be addressed to Angela L. Anno, St. Leo the Great Catholic Church, 2573 St. Leo Place, Cincinnati, OH 45225. E-mail: alannoleo@aol.com.

Community as Client: How Working with the Community Brings
About Positive Change in Individuals and Neighborhoods

I never planned on being a counselor, but I always wanted to make a difference.

When I was in college I had dreams of joining the Peace Corps and making such a change in a third world country that there would be a statue of me in the town square and an annual festival in my honor. If that dream fell through, I would be a revered teacher on an Ivy-covered college campus.

Those dreams never materialized. Instead, I became a reporter with a chance to be part of the civil rights and anti-war movements of the turbulent 60's. I was a high school teacher, a full-time mom, a counselor to alcoholics, addicts, and troubled children. Today, I draw on all of these skills in my role as a pastoral associate doing a kind of community based pastoral counseling at St. Leo's, a poor urban parish with a diverse congregation of long-time residents, African Americans, Hispanic immigrants, and Burundian refugees. There are no statues or festivals but this is the most satisfying and difficult work I've ever done and stretches my counseling skills to new levels. Communities, not individuals, are my "clients." There are no set treatment plans, but in working together with faith and community leaders, we are setting and reaching measureable goals in advocacy and improving the quality of life of our community

Long before I ever entered a counseling classroom, I realized that successful interventions with an individual really needed the support of the community. As a La Leche League leader, supporting nursing mothers more than 30 years ago, I quickly saw how much family and community backing factored into a mom's success in breastfeeding. The monthly meetings and time on the phone didn't stand a chance against critical family members or a busy bureaucracy at the WIC office. Later, as a student, and then a teacher in a faith based program of teaching adults listening and "rational Christian thinking" skills, I saw the positive impact that a small group of individuals could have on their families and communities. After I received my degree in pastoral counseling and began working with addicts and alcoholics, I grew in my conviction that family involvement and community support are essential in achieving and maintaining sobriety. When I later worked with troubled youth and began advocating for them with children's services and courts, it became even clearer that gains made in my weekly hour of therapy quickly faded without consistent reinforcement in the community. And, while there were problems in the home, school, and neighborhood, there were also strengths there that weren't

often taken into account in the traditional counseling approach. As a result of my positive experience working in a community providers' network and my exposure to ecological counseling, I decided I could achieve better results for more people by working full time in the parish.

This move expanded my palette of interventions and I learned that, if I were flexible and open one small step in this kind of "counseling" setting led to unexpected and often delightful outcomes. For example: in order to connect people in the neighborhood with resources available to them, the parish hosted a block party, inviting churches and other service providers in the area to attend. In the midst of music, face painting, and munching hot dogs, residents got first-person contact with "helpers" and "helpers" began to form relationships with each other that led to the development of the Fairmount Providers, a group that has been meeting monthly to network, advocate, and support each other for over four years.

One outgrowth of that collaboration is Childhood Food Solutions (CFS), a new non-profit that seeks to provide a safety net of food to children on the 187 days school is not in session. For the past two school years, CFS has been providing and seeking funds to provide weekend, school break, and summer "kid friendly" food sacks to schools in some of the poorest schools in the Cincinnati district. Similar to the counseling I am doing now, CFS's approach doesn't fit the mold in that it doesn't wait for children to come to it, but takes food directly to the children. Some people see providing food security as impossible and give up. We see it as a matter of justice and press on, seeking grants, advocating with local agencies and helping with presentations before such groups as the Executive Committee of Children and Family First, the Governor's Office of Faith Based Initiatives, and our local US congressmen and state representatives.

Another result of our work together as Fairmount Providers is our current collaboration in smoothing the transition of Burundian refugees into our community. They come from camps in Tanzania, having fled genocide in Burundi. They speak Kirundi, not a common language for translators. Many were farmers, fishermen, and tailors, skills not in high demand in Cincinnati's housing projects. All are assumed to be victims of torture and several are experiencing symptoms of PTSD, but focus on survival and views about sharing problems with others limit utilizing traditional mental health services. Our goal now is to welcome and support them where they are. The recreation center is engaging the children in sports and after-school activities. The parish

nurses are making home visits and helping people negotiate the health care system. The local extension program is providing classes on nutrition and how to use local foods. St. Leo's food pantry is serving families twice a month and seeking out the chicken, rice, and beans they enjoy. The Fairmount Community center is providing land and water for a community garden. St. Leo's is offering English classes, and because their faith is such a strong source of strength for them, I am able to get Sunday Mass readings in Kirundi for them, thanks to the kindness of a Burundian priest at Georgetown University in Washington. In addition, I am working with first year doctoral counseling students at the University of Cincinnati to explore further ways to apply ecological counseling principles of utilizing all the internal, educational, spiritual, and community strengths to help the refugees grow and flourish.

Because the churches in our neighborhood are small, but actively involved in working in the community, we do things together, both in prayer and in service. A small group meets before the monthly Providers' meeting to pray for the needs of the community and explore ways we can work together. On the National Day of Prayer, we join together in a caravan to circle the neighborhood in prayer with a different church leader praying at a dozen locations—schools, recreation centers, food pantries, senior housing—and then coming together for food and fellowship. We've promoted environmental justice issues, spoken out against neighborhood mom and pop stores that overprice food, offered support for ex-felons re-entering the work force, worked on neighborhood safety, and supported the local food pantry. We also work together on Angel Food Ministries, a low-cost/high-quality food program that provides a set menu of food (mostly protein items) for about half of what would be paid in the grocery store. The crumpled bills and tearful "thank you's" more than make up for the aggravation of balancing cash intake and pre-dawn unloading of trucks. I used to dread the sitting and waiting for orders. Now I realize that it's mostly about listening to their stories and fears and offering support—not much different from the counseling I learned about in pre-practicum.

Due to the shortage of priests in the Catholic Church, we are moving less in the direction of individual parishes, but more toward pastoral regions. St. Leo's is working with two other churches, also located in poor urban areas. The planning process ahead of us will draw on all my counseling skills and abilities to live in the tension that change requires. There will be anger and pain as people are asked to let go of cherished places and traditions. There will be the need for compassionate listening coupled with the challenge to move forward. There will be setting of

measurable, attainable goals for the future and frustration with the pace of things. But, as in counseling, there will always be hope for something better, something new.

Everything I have learned and done so far has led up to this. I never did make it to that third world country, but Africa came to me. I didn't win a Pulitzer for journalism, but I get to convene and write summaries for monthly Fairmount Providers' meetings. I never got to teach on a college campus, but I get to collaborate with the University of Cincinnati's ecological counseling students. Not the life I planned, but it's more satisfying than any I could ever have imagined.

Applications for Social Justice

- Individuals and communities want the best for themselves and will make positive choices given the resources, support, and opportunity. Healthy communities foster healthy individuals and families.
- To facilitate growth and positive change, clinicians need to assess and utilize not just a person's individual strengths and resources, but those in the family, and the community.
- Collaboration with others working in the community benefits everyone, provides needed support and networking, and often uncovers resources that might have been otherwise missed.
- To be successful in working in communities, clinicians need to be flexible, creative, and willing to change how things were previously done. It is a slow, often painful, process made easier by regular networking and support.