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Leadership for Healthy Communities

Characteristics of Healthy Communities

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FOREWORD

Dr. Leonard Duhl, University of California professor of public health at Berkeley, has applied ideas about health within the human body to the community. He states that the community also is comprised of a set of interdependent organs. The reciprocal maintenance of these interrelated parts is key to the success of the whole.[3]

The purpose of this publication is to elaborate on this idea and share our perspective on the characteristics that define a community's health.

INTRODUCTION

People all over America are searching for healthy communities, which are in some cases small, rural places. Many are willing to move out of urban areas to reside in one. And even though a healthy community is not well defined, most of us can intuitively sense its presence.

Let us first define community as a place where residents interact and obtain the majority of their everyday needs and wants.

Our definition of a healthy community has three dimensions. It is a place where:

- residents hold a common vision of their collective future which challenges, motivates and unites them;
- leaders identify and resolve issues; and
- organizations and institutions anticipate and adapt to an ever changing environment.

CYCLES OF COMMUNITY CHANGE

Every community goes through prosperous times and difficult periods. Also, communities can be created, age and die just like living organism. However, the obvious difference is that communities are not destined to die. But sometimes the actions of the residents of a place will kill it.

Historically the life cycle of a community in Kansas starts with an outside force that gives a group of people a reason to organize. The Oregon Trail and the Santa Fe Trail gave rise to communities early in the history of Kansas. This phase of the life cycle is called the **growth phase**. It is the birth period where growth is externally driven.[4]

The next phase is the **development phase**, which is internally driven. Those who live in the community at this time have a vested interest in reinvesting in their public, private and domestic fixed assets such as streets, stores, phone systems and homes. The resulting efforts lead to further expansion of all facets of the community.

The next phase occurs when the driving of the growth and development phase has ceased to propel the community forward. This is the **stagnation phase**. The stagnation phase also may appear to be a stability phase. Stability is a temporary state in the community's life cycle. Something usually comes along to upset the status quo. It could be a natural disaster like a tornado, an economic disaster like a factory closing, declining wheat and oil prices, or a change in modes of transportation. Positive forces can, however, come along to reenergize expansion.

If the change that upsets the stability is negative, then next comes the **retrenchment phase**. In this period the actual economic vitality declines as the value of locally produced goods and services diminishes. People stop reinvesting in their businesses and their homes. Young people leave to find work elsewhere. And households increasingly shop for goods in nearby trade centers and central cities instead of their local retail businesses for a variety of reasons.

At this point three different directions of change can occur. The ideal one is a new phase of development called **revitalization**. Usually, this is an internally driven effort rather than a situation where an outside investor comes into the community to save it from further deterioration. Often the community leaders get together and combine local resources with outside resources to bring about the new economic activity to support an upturn in the community's vitality.

Two other scenarios are possible. Either a **new stability** is found; usually at a lower level of vitality, or no new stability is realized and the **community declines** until it loses all its economic activity. Then it turns into a rural neighborhood. These places tend to act as inexpensive places to live. Unfortunately for those who do not leave, the new immigrants who choose to live in the rundown houses commonly bring with them negative behavior patterns that can be antisocial. A vacuum of positive forces is usually filled by negative ones. Dr. Bill Eberle, KSU Extension Specialist - Land Resources, points out that for these new immigrants "a cheap place to live is an easy place to leave."

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The following summarizes the community life cycle.

Phases	*Cycle*
I	Growth
II	Development
III	Stagnation
IV	Retrenchment
V	a. Revitalization
	b. Stability
	c. Decline

The community life cycle graph is found in this publication on page 3.[5] Although the Community Life Cycle is drawn to show a complete cycle, in classical order, the phases can occur in different sequences.

RESOURCES TO BUILD HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

Healthy communities rely on eight different types of resources to build and rebuild themselves.[6] Having reserve quantities of resources provides healthy communities with the capacity to rebound and even accelerate their development during a new era of prosperity.

Ideally, during a slowdown and weak period, proactive leaders are planning and implementing new innovations so that their organizations and institutions are ready to take advantage of emerging opportunities, allowing them to take advantage of a new wave of prosperity.

These resources are fundamental to support the community's economy. Consider the impact of these resources and ask "Which ones will you need? Where will they come from—within your community or from outside sources?"

Human Resources

This refers to the individuals who make up the community and their learned skills that create the ability to lead teams of people, manage systems and produce goods and services. The sum of these skills among all residents as well as in-commuters equals the human capital available to tackle community issues.

Physical Infrastructure

These are the public and private investments that are permanently affixed to the land in the community such as water, sewer and phone systems, homes and office buildings.

Financial Capital

Monetary resources can flow from one account to another. They finance community, economic, and business development projects. Financial capital for business use can be classified as seed, venture or expansion capital.

Technology Innovation Capital

This is devoted to supporting the creation of new technologies and the transfer and commercialization of new innovations that are created from it. These new technologies can be applicable to both the private and public arena.

Capacity to change

This is defined as the financial, human and other types of resources devoted to planning and implementing community and economic development efforts. New organizations can be invented or adapted to support people, firms and agencies involved in the process. An example is a community foundation.[7]

Business Environment

This is the general support or lack of support given to local firms by local government, labor markets, foundations and others who impact the environment. Examples like building codes and zoning ordinances can positively and negatively affect the local business environment by encouraging or discouraging expansion or relocation.

Natural and Environmental Resources

The purity or lack of purity of water, air, soil and other dimensions of the environment are examples of environmental resources. Forests, coal and fisheries are examples of natural resources.

Quality of Life

This inclusive concept is the set of recreational, cultural, and amenity factors people can enjoy locally.

COMMUNITY CHARACTERISTICS

Healthy communities have some specific characteristics as well as the general ones already mentioned. Dr. Duhl suggests six characteristics which determine the health of a community. A healthy community has:

- A common sense of community, including its history and values that are strengthened by a network of leaders,
- People and community groups who feel empowered and have a sense of control,
- An absence of divided turf, conflict and polarization,
- Structures where people from diverse groups can come together to work out decisions about the community,
- Leadership that functions both from the top down and the bottom up,
- Effective channels for networking, communication and cooperation among those who live and lead there.[1]

EVALUATING YOUR COMMUNITY'S HEALTH

A 32-question checklist was developed to assist you in evaluating the health of your community. The questions are divided into four sections, each describing an important area of community health.

First, an appropriate "**community attitude**" must be present. Citizens of a community must feel a connectiveness and ownership of the community to make improvements.

Next, "**community leadership**" must be present. Leaders from within must be willing and able to handle the responsibilities associated with organizing, coordinating and managing community resources.

Third, a healthy community must have a "**community vision**." This vision must recognize the strengths and weaknesses of the community, be written into a plan of action and be acknowledged by those who live there if the action phase is to be successful.

Last, the vision and action plan must lead to "**community action**." Citizens must be willing to work together to make the plan a reality, even though the unexpected will probably happen. Flexibility and adjustments will undoubtedly be required.

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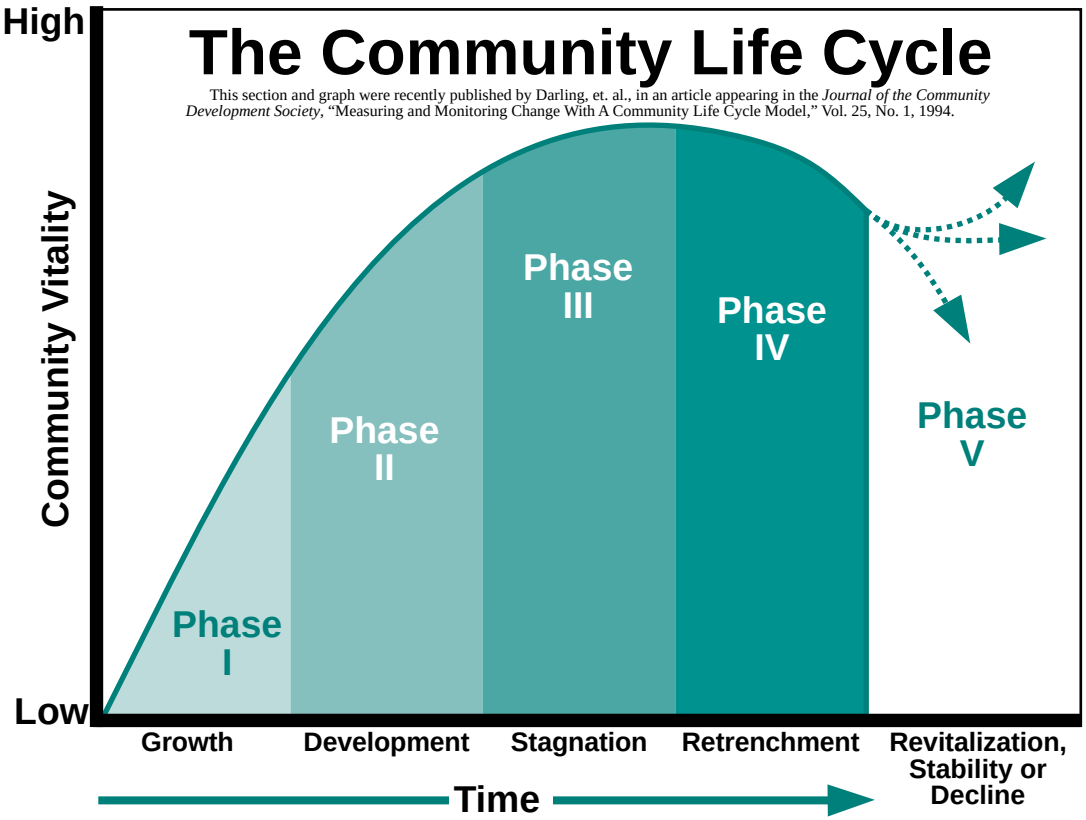

CHECKLIST DIRECTIONS

Administer the questionnaire to a representative group of the community, to obtain responses from a cross section, or administer to individual groups of the population. Compare results by noting the undecided and no answers. These responses will indicate the areas in which the community is weak, and where additional time and energy will need to be focused if community health is to be improved.

A community should strive for "yes" answers to each question. As each statement is reviewed, use creativity to achieve it based upon the amount of resources available. Finally, to obtain "yes" answers, may require additional group process, communication and team building efforts.

SUMMARY

No matter the size of your community or the amount of resources available, community health can be achieved. Health of a community is composed of the appropriate attitude of the citizenry, responsible leadership from within, a shared community vision and a willingness to act together to pursue common goals. The method used to achieve these can and will vary from community to community and that is a key to success. Additional information on building healthy communities is found in the following publications: MF-2122, C-679, L-830, L-775, and L-832.

REFERENCES

[3]Duhl's ideas were discussed by John Schweitzer in *Community News and Views* section, "Defining a Healthy Community," Michigan State University, Community and Economic Development Program, Vol. 6, No. 3, Fall 1993.

[4]A good source of information describing the early history of Kansas communities is contained in *Ghost Towns of Kansas : A Travelers Guide*, Daniel Fitzgerald, The University of Kansas Press: Lawrence (1988).

[5]See Figure "The Community Life Cycle."

[6]These eight types of capital were first conceived as five and presented as essential building material to restore the economic strength of the State of Kansas by University of Kansas professors Tony Redwood and Charles Krider in 1986.

[7]For more information on community foundations see *Foundation Equals Self Help* by Martha Leibhart (Albright), KSU Extension Leaflet L-832 (1991).

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Building Healthy Communities Checklist

Traits, Characteristics and Ongoing Activities that Strengthen Kansas Communities

Read the following list and determine if it applies to your community by marking the "yes" column. If it does not apply, mark the "no" column. If you need more information before making a decision, mark the "Undecided" column.

Community Attitudes: "Does your community . . ."	Yes	Undecided	No
1. Try to solve its problems before seeking outside help?	_____	_____	_____
2. Have evidence of community pride (i.e., positive attitude, clean streets, nice park)?	_____	_____	_____
3. Willingly commit local dollars to improve the quality of life?	_____	_____	_____
4. See the community as extending past the city limits to include rural areas?	_____	_____	_____
5. Cooperate within the community among the civic organizations and with the local government when planning events?	_____	_____	_____
6. Cooperate with other communities on projects?	_____	_____	_____
7. View quality medical health care as a community concern?	_____	_____	_____
8. Utilize information from other communities who are successful in dealing with the same issues?	_____	_____	_____
9. Believe in itself and its ability to create a viable future?	_____	_____	_____

Comments: _____

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Community Leadership: "Does your community . . ."	Yes	Undecided	No
10. Have an ongoing committee or group to oversee Community Development?	_____	_____	_____
11. Have an ongoing leadership training for citizens?	_____	_____	_____
12. Have a person to coordinate community affairs and represent the community?	_____	_____	_____
13. Have a professional staff person to represent business interests?	_____	_____	_____
14. Look to a variety of people for leadership?	_____	_____	_____
15. Encourage both adults and youth to take an active part in the community?	_____	_____	_____
16. Carefully use local government financial resources?	_____	_____	_____
17. Build upon its historical and cultural uniqueness?	_____	_____	_____

Comments: _____

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Community Vision: "Does your community . . ."	Yes	Undecided	No
18. See its own strengths and weaknesses?	_____	_____	_____
19. Know all the resources it has available within its boundary (i.e., human capital, financial capital, physical infrastructure, etc.)?	_____	_____	_____
20. Take advantage of county, state, regional, and national resources (i.e., grants, technical assistance etc.)?	_____	_____	_____
21. Have a written action plan based on a strong vision statement to guide development?	_____	_____	_____

Comments: _____

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Community Actions: "Does your community . . ."	Yes	Undecided	No
22. Seek creative solutions to address its concerns?	_____	_____	_____
23. Schedule regular meetings of staff in order to network across organizations and agencies?	_____	_____	_____
24. Utilize information gathered from network meetings to address community concerns?	_____	_____	_____
25. Involve the youth in discussions, decisions, and actions?	_____	_____	_____
26. Provide a special fund for community development (i.e., a community foundation)?	_____	_____	_____
27. Have a program to welcome newcomers and visitors?	_____	_____	_____
28. Have a program for the retention of local businesses.	_____	_____	_____
29. Have a program to promote business formation?	_____	_____	_____
30. Encourage the use of current communication technology (i.e., the internet)?	_____	_____	_____
31. Maintain a good physical infrastructure (i.e., bridges, sewer, water systems).	_____	_____	_____
32. Have a mens of publicizing issues and strategies in an unbiased way?	_____	_____	_____

Comments: _____

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This checklist was created by: David Darling, Stan McAdoo, and Gayla Randel

References: David Darling, (1991), "An Imperfect Recipe for Success," published in *Creating Economic Opportunities*, a KSU Community Development Newsletter.
Cornelia Flora, (1988), "The Future of Rural Communities in the Great Plains," an Extension video from KSU.
Myron Wall and Vicki Luther, (1987), *Clues to Rural Community Survival*, from the Heartland Institute for Leadership Development in Lincoln, NE.