MN JOURNAL

Expanding the Civic Imagination

Catch-22s inherent in today's welfare system block pathways to prosperity

By Bob DeBoer and Anna Schumacher

"Catch-22" is a commonly-used phrase in American culture. Coined in the 1961 novel of the same name by Joseph Heller, Catch-22 describes a no-win situation or a double bind. Two years ago, the Citizens League began examining its institutional history on poverty and gathering additional information through community meetings and interviews and research. The resulting project, New Pathways to Prosperity, is intended to reframe the issue of poverty in a way that can produce new ideas and new policy approaches.

So far, our efforts have convinced us that the current policies and conflicting incentives in place to address and alleviate poverty today often create a series of Catch-22s for the people living in poverty. For example:

• Current policies on poverty actually penalize people for earning more.

• The bureaucratic maze of agencies and requirements set up to address poverty waste the valuable human capacity of both those who administer the programs and those who benefit from them.

• Programs designed to help the poor fail to offer clear pathways out of poverty.

These conflicting incentives are difficult to address, but it is essential we understand them in order to develop new solutions to address poverty and the ways it contributes, both as a causal agent and negative outcome, to many other public policy dilemmas, including:

• dysfunctional families and generational cycles that increase crime and violence

• poor educational outcomes and disparities based on race and income

• poor health outcomes and disparities based on race and income (including criminalization from sexual exploitation)

• lack of mobility and access to job opportunities.

Since we began this inquiry in September 2008, the Citizens League, working with the Public Policy Project, has sought to broaden the conversation about poverty and its causes and impacts by applying a civic policy approach (see sidebar on page 8) to the issue. Part of that approach has included convening conversations between community leaders and people directly impacted by policies on poverty.

A working document available on the Citizens League website details the first phase of the New Pathways to Prosperity project. The findings and conclusions presented in that work provide the foundation for a committee to develop policy recommendations this fall.

THE WELFARE WALL AND DISINCENTIVES TO EARN

There is a cultural assumption that many Americans hold, and some assume is translated into public policy: If you hold a job and work hard, you should be able to work your way out of poverty.

Yet, it is clear that our current policies and the major programs and tax structures created to address poverty make it difficult for people to climb out of poverty without extraordinary effort. Government policies and programs actually penalize people for improving their economic situation.

Civic Policy Agenda

CONNECTIONS

Building a League of Citizens

MEET THE NEW CANDIDATES

These new candidates for the 2009-10 board of directors will be part of the slate that will be up for election at the annual meeting on October 29th. To see the list of returning board members and learn more about their interests in the Citizens League, go to www.citizensleague.org

BRIAN BELL

Brian Bell is the civic education manager for the Minnesota State Bar Association where he administers programs for youth on the law and democratic rights and responsibilities. From 2006 to 2008, he worked at the Citizens League as office manager and project coordinator. He has a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Minnesota. Brian serves on the Minnesota Supreme Court Historical Society's Education Subcommittee and on the Minnesota Council for the Social Studies Board of Directors. He volunteers as a Citizens League ambassador and is involved in the development and implementation of the Quantum Civics program where he is co-facilitating the first course.

EMMETT COLEMAN

Emmett Coleman is the vice president of government affairs with responsibility for Comcast's Twin Cities region where he oversees a team that works closely with regulators, public officials, and community organizations. He has more than 20 years of political, policy, and legislative experience. He served as a legislative assistant to Congressman Bruce F. Vento and led government performance reviews and economic and workforce development projects for the state of Texas before moving to the private sector where he managed state and local government affairs for Dell Computer and ran an independent public affairs consulting practice. He serves on the boards of the Minnesota and the Wisconsin Cable commissions.

CLAUDIA DENGLER

Claudia Dengler enjoyed 25 years in senior leadership at the Wilder Foundation, culminating with her role as the vice president of programs. In her various roles at Wilder, she provided leadership inside and outside the organization on a wide range of housing, health, education, and human service issues. She left Wilder in 2007 to pursue other civic, personal, and professional interests. She currently works as a consultant to mission-driven entrepreneurs and organizations on organizational sustainability and business planning.

MICHELE ENGDAHL

Michele Engdahl is manager for government and community affairs for Thomson Reuters, Legal and West, where she works closely with local, state and federal officials on issues affecting the business headquartered in Eagan. She is involved with the company's community relations programs and the pro bono initiative. Prior to joining Thomson Reuters in 2006, she was the director of community relations for the Insurance Federation of Minnesota. Before that, she spent more than a decade at State Farm Insurance, where she built their public affairs function and managed communications. Michele's experience includes managing political campaigns and building grassroots coalitions.

National CIVIC SUMMIT — MINNEAPOLIS 2009

The National Civic Summit, held in Minneapolis July 15–17, continues online. You can find the civic toolkit, videos, presentations, and more resources featured at the summit at **www.nationalcivicsummit.com**.

Achieving common ground for the common good is the business of democracy. In an era when political polarization and special interest agendas too often take center stage, the National Civic Summit invites citizens—each individual and organization—to re-imagine citizenship for our time.

New and rejoining members, recruiters, and volunteers

Individual members

Allen Dotson
Amy Ward
Mark Schiffman
Bjorn Stansvik
David Campana
Annie Fisher
Becky Girvan
Bethany Zucco
Brittan Zinnel
Christine Rehm
Christine Zimmer Lonetti
Dave Renner
David Kopstein

Dennis Levendowski
Diane Arenson
Mark Ritchie
Emily Reilly
Frank Hester
Greg Davidson
James Lonetti
Janet Silversmith
Jennifer Franklin
Jon Slock
Karen Cole
Krista Borton
Leia Christoffer
Linda Johnson
Lisa Knazan

Lynne Kolze
Marie Dotseth
Mary Watson
Nancy Gaschott
Noreen Fisher
Patti Kopstein
Richard Johnson
Ron Kelmenson
Roxanne Peterson
Sherry Knazan
Steve Arenson
Sylvia Knazan
Tom Bloom
Tom Watson

Firms and organizations

Minnesota Medical Association
Best Buy
Common Bond Communities
Education Minnesota
GovDelivery, Inc
Metropolitan State University
Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe

Minnesota State College & Universities
Saint Paul Riverfront Corporation
Ecumen
Phillips Products Company
Bailey Nurseries
Allianz Life Insurance
General Mills
Catholic Charities
Spring Lake Park District 16

Minnesota Minority Education Partnership
Securian Foundation
Himle Horner
Capella University
Inver Hills Community College
Anderson Corporation
Comcast Foundation
City of South St. Paul

Cogent Consulting Inc
Decision Resources
Designs for Learning
HealthPartners
Hubbard Broadcasting
League of Minnesota Cities
MACC Alliance of Connected Communities
Target
US Bancorp Foundation

Association of Metro School Districts
Local Initiatives Support Corp
M&I Bank

Recruiters

Robert Meiches
Keith Halleland
Brian Bell
Lee Anderson
Emily Barnes
Kevin Goodno

Volunteer

Sheila Graham

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comcast

VIEWPOINT
Voices In My Head

Do the Wright thing
We can create a new civic architecture and a new civic style

by Sean Kershaw

The largest gathering in Citizens League history, the future of public policy, and my secret hobby all have one thing in common.

Architecture.

I've always been fascinated by architecture, and I knew there was a connection between architecture and public policy, but I wasn't able to articulate it. However, several recent experiences with our current policy work finally made the connection clear to me—and reminded me that in 1957 more than 1,000 people showed up at the Citizens League's annual meeting to hear Frank Lloyd Wright describe our "cities of tomorrow."

As we look toward our 2009 annual meeting and beyond, I believe that architecture provides an excellent metaphor for our mission of rebuilding civic imagination and capacity in Minnesota.

WHY ARCHITECTURE?

Fundamentally, architecture is about designing physical spaces in very practical ways. Architects translate lofty aspirations and long-term goals into functional everyday environments and use physical space and infrastructure to solve practical problems. Architects design and create capacity: a house that helps a multi-generational family thrive or a workplace that promotes collaboration.

At its best, architecture also represents our dreams and imagination. Architecture, like policy, includes an ideal state that defines what we consider good in a given time, for example, the optimism and openness of the 1950s ranch homes in Saint Louis Park, or the structure and formality of the Victorian homes in Saint Paul. Wright's "cities of tomorrow" were not just random predictions about the future of city life. His ideas expressed how cities *should* be. The "Wright thing" was also the right thing.

POLICY EXHORTATIONS...AND JAILS

Our public policy failures of late, from our inability to prepare for the financial shock of the baby boomers' retirement to our

> I believe that architecture provides an excellent metaphor for our mission of rebuilding civic imagination and capacity in Minnesota.

struggle to improve student achievement, demonstrate our drastic need for a renaissance in our civic architecture. We need new civic policy designs that address our most pressing problem, and translate our democratic ideas into practical, workable solutions.

Right now, too many of our public policy recommendations amount to simple exhortations: "Close the achievement gap!" "Promote health and wellness!" "Reduce poverty!" They offer no guidance on *how* we should achieve these aims. It's like telling an architect to "build me a house!" Fine. But what style? For what type of family? Where? What's the climate? The budget? What raw materials are available? In essence, what's the architecture?

And when we aren't sure how to close the gap between our policy ideals and our political reality, we too often resort to mandates or regulation to get people to do what we want: Require algebra. Forbid trans fats. Mandate work for people on public assistance. When our physical environment dictates our every movement and obligation, it's not just a building—it's a *jail*. Increasingly, we've become trapped inside our public policy jails.

Architecture, like public policy, also exists in real spaces. We often forget that policy lives somewhere—in very real civic and social environments and institutions where personal motivation and practicality matter. We design buildings to accommodate the way people live, work, learn, and

worship. We need to design public policy in the same way if we hope to get the right result.

POLICY EXALTATIONS... AND OPPORTUNITIES

But at its best, architecture isn't just practical—it's inspirational and transformational. The original Guthrie Theater wasn't just a new design—it transformed the experience of live theatre. The IDS Tower wasn't just a tall commercial building on the horizon of a flat Midwestern prairie, it captured and inspired the imagination of a city and a region poised for new greatness.

Our existing civic architecture is far from inspirational and insufficient to meet our needs, and we need more than just practical alternatives. We need to be inspired, to open our imagination to new ideas and new solutions.

Here at the Citizens League we've been working with some new tools to help open our imaginations and to stimulate new ways of framing old issues and designing new solution strategies on issues like financing for older adult services. We're envisioning a new civic architecture that translates the ideals of democracy, active citizenship, and the development of human capacity into a civic policy agenda of pragmatic, relevant, and inspired solutions to our most pressing policy problems.

This is also the theme of our upcoming annual meeting on October 29th, where Nate Garvis will offer ideas about the new tools, designs, and opportunities than can help us achieve our civic ideals in Minnesota.

We invite you to join us in building and designing this exciting architecture for civic policy. Help us to create the "civics of tomorrow!" ●

Sean Kershaw is the Citizens League's Executive Director. He can be reached at skershaw@citizensleague.org, @seankershaw (Twitter), Facebook, or through his blog at citizensleague.org/blogs/sean/. Thanks to Ted Kolderie and Stacy Becker for inspiration.

TAKE NOTE

PHRAZER TRANSLATES BETWEEN DOCTORS AND PATIENTS

Next year Duluth-based GeaCom plans to release Phrazer, a hand-held devise capable of identifying and translating more than 70 languages within seconds. Aimed at doctors and hospitals, Phrazer can help medical practitioners communicate with patients in their native language, assist in diagnoses, and ask for patient consent in advance of procedures.

The Phrazer has a large touch screen interface and an interactive graphic of a three-dimensional human body that allows patients to point to the area where they are having a problem. The unit also will collect data gathered throughout the examination and compile it into a medical chart that can be streamed to the hospital's computer system.

For more information on the Phrazer and GeaCom go to www.geacom.net

PET THERAPY FOR KIDS IN TRAUMA

A new program sponsored by the American Humane Society is encouraging child welfare professionals to incorporate therapy animals into sessions with children who have been abused or neglected or have witnessed violence. TASK, or Therapy Animals Supporting Kids, was developed by Allie Phillips, a former prosecutor, now the vice president of the American Humane Society's Public Policy Office, and Diana McQuarrie, the Society's director of animal-assisted interventions.

Phillips and McQuarrie have co-authored a TASK manual that identifies situations where animal therapy could be beneficial, such as at police stations and hospitals and during court proceedings. It also offers guidance on establishing an animal therapy program and on the legal implications of incorporating animal therapy into work with children. Find more information at www.americanhumane.org/task

TECHNO WIZARDS

When the instructional television system at a Florida middle school failed, administrators did what many parents do when faced with a broken computer. They asked students from the neighboring high school to install a new system. Materials were provided by Blonder Tongue Labs, but the students designed and installed the updated system. More than 50 students participated, doing site surveys and drafting plans. The project took six months and is now capable of broadcasting up to 100 channels to all classrooms.

NYC's SEARCH FOR A BETTER SHED

The ubiquitous New York City sidewalk shed, which protects pedestrians from falling construction debris while effectively hiding the entrances of street-level shops, will be getting a design upgrade (hopefully). The city's building department has teamed up with the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects to sponsor a contest called Urban Shed. Contestants are asked to design an "innovative reinterpretation of a classic piece of New York's streetscape."

Sidewalk sheds have changed little since the early 1960s with the exception of the addition of florescent lighting, which became cheaper and more accessible in the mid 1980s. Originally built from leftover plywood at construction sites, the sheds are now ordered pre-fabricated from around three dozen scaffolding companies in the city that rent them to landlords and construction firms.

City officials are hoping the down economy, combined with the increased interest in urban design, will garner some interest in the contest. Past attempts to create buzz around the redesign of sidewalk sheds have failed, largely due to a lack of interest. First round judging takes place on Oct. 7. To find out more, go to www.urbanshed.org

TAKING THE WAIT OUT OF WAITING FOR THE BUS

Satellite and GPS tracking devises are taking the wait out of waiting for the bus for some New York City commuters, the *New York Times* reported. A pilot project by Long Island firm Clever Devices will place displays in bus shelters along the heavily trafficked 34th street route that provide a running count-down to the arrival of the next bus. Similar systems are already in use in Chicago, Washington and London. In Chicago, the Bus Tracker system covers the city's entire bus network and passengers can easily click and track buses online and using mobile devices.

Arrival times are updated every 30 seconds using technology currently used to track military vehicles in Iraq and Afghanistan. New York City officials hope this "mesh network" will work better than the last attempt to track and time bus routes that ended after four months due to massive technical errors.

With cities turning their attention to underperforming mass transit systems, the timing system appears a relatively easy approach to improving rider experience.

Where we've come from, where we're going

Through MACI, the Citizens League has renewed its commitment to active citizenship, civic leadership, and democratic governance

by Sean Kershaw

Over the past few years, members have undoubtedly noticed numerous references in my Viewpoint column and other articles in the *Minnesota Journal* to active citizenship and civic organizing. While these concepts have always been part of the Citizens League's work in one form or another, they have become a significant focus of our work over the past three years.

However, it dawned on us recently that we've never put these concepts into the context of my, and the Citizens League's, involvement in the Minnesota Active Citizenship Initiative (MACI). MACI is dedicated to developing a new foundation for active citizenship, civic leadership, and democratic governance with the intent of creating a more just and democratic society.

MACI was co-founded in the early 1990s by experienced organizer Peg Michels, whose background is in Minnesota's government, political, and educational institutions, and Tony Massengale, who works with youth in Los Angeles. They developed an organizing framework based on the core believe that everyone is a policymaker and that all institutions should be centers for policymaking.

MACI seeks to reconnect the function of governing with the role of the citizen, to expand the definition of citizen beyond its narrow legal meaning and to enlarge the idea of "active citizen" beyond simply the good works that people do in their time off to encompass the idea of citizen as a governing member of a democratic society.

MACI educates and organizes citizens to govern for the common good within their own institutions and demonstrates how their day-to-day decision making relates to, and is connected with, the complex challenges faced by society today. This ability to imagine that our actions relate to and have impact on a larger scale is crucial to policymaking and to the Citizens League.

The concepts of civic organizing and active citizenship developed by MACI have long formed the core of Citizens League's mission, values, and guidelines, and over the past three years, they have become fundamental to our strategic work plan. The Citizens League, along with the other institutions that make up MACI, is demonstrating a case for these ideas by implementing them within the organization and by showing:

- how individuals impact the common good by leveraging the resources they have available to them within their institutions,
- how they practice the core elements of policymaking and governance (defining problems, solving problems, developing rules) in their daily lives,
- how they can practice and teach these disciplines to others and within other institutions.

MY STORY

I became involved in civic work in Minnesota in the mid-1990s while trying to organize twenty-somethings around issues such as the national debt and entitlement reform. While these issues are perhaps much more relevant today, it was tough to organize (and retain) a consistent group of 25-year-olds around these concepts back then. We understood that policy issues mattered a great deal to our generation, but weren't sure what to do about it.

CIVICS 101

Active citizen • An obligated, governing member who contributes to the common good.

Civic infrastructure • The interrelated economic, physical, political, and social structures, processes, and practices that support and drive a democracy.

Civic capacity • The ability to contribute to the good of the whole within the tensions between democratic ideals and the real social, economic, and environmental situation. Civic capacity is developed through practice in everyday institutions using the skills of public deliberation, public problem solving, and public policymaking.

Civic leader • A leader with an intentional agenda to increase the civic capacity of self, the institution, and the whole with attention to the economic, ethical, and civic consequences of his or her actions.

Civic organizing • The political work of developing public relationships among individuals and across institutions in order to establish a base of citizen leaders with the power to create the common good and justice.

Common good • Found in the tension between what is good for the parts and what is good for the whole. Understood by engaging people with diverse interests and negotiating to find agreement based on shared civic values, that is mutually acceptable.

Find out more about the Minnesota Active Citizenship Initiative at **www.activecitizen.org**

After multiple unsuccessful efforts to keep the great people who would show up coming back, many of us became increasingly interested in the concept of active citizenship as a way to renew and redefine our ability to contribute to the common good. But we needed a way to put our ideas into action.

We began working with leaders such as Harry Boyte, from the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, and Michels, who had just formed the Minnesota Active Citizenship Initiative.

Initially, we tried to highlight the work that other people and groups were doing on active citizenship, but we again fell into the same trap; people would show up, say they liked what we were doing, and then never come back.

Finally, on a cold January night, after an exhaustive planning effort and another event where not many people showed up, it dawned on us that we didn't want to just talk about active citizenship, or talk about someone else's work on active citizenship. What we wanted was to apply these values and strategies to our own lives.

Each of us was spending time in an institution (at work, in our community, at worship, etc.) where we wanted to have an impact consistent with our vision of active citizenship. We needed an organizing strategy that would allow us to put the principles of active citizenship to work in the places where we had influence.

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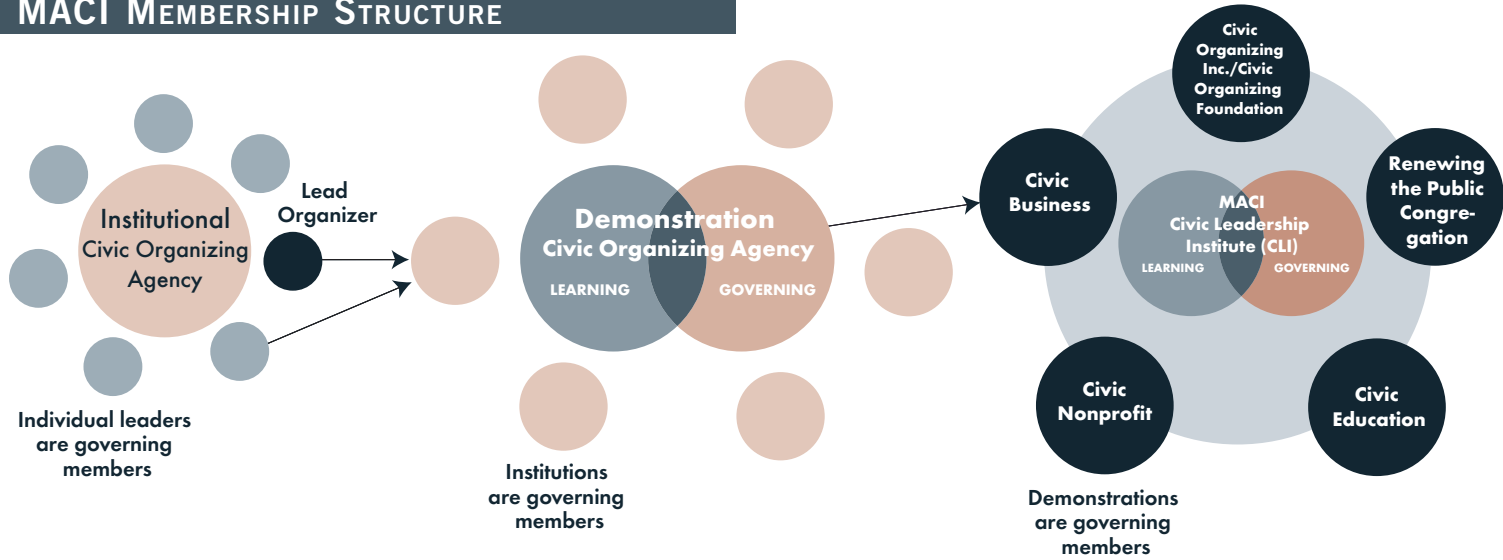
That night we began to develop a civic leadership training program that would offer a curriculum for young adults focused on the ideals of active citizenship and the skills needed to apply those ideals to daily life. This experience prepared and motivated me when I became executive director of the Citizens League in 2003. The theories and principles of active citizenship and civic organizing have been a central part of our "turn around" at the Citizens League these past three years. We view this question of how to build this civic imagination and capacity inside all of our institutions, including the Citizens League, as a fundamental opportunity to transform public policy and governance in Minnesota.

DOING THE COMMON GOOD

In 2003, the Citizens League "Doing the Common Good Better" report highlighted the erosion of Minnesota's civic infrastructure, the individual and institutional relationships and skills that comprise our capacity to solve problems. The report made it clear that developing policy recommendations and white papers focused on government action wasn't sufficient to create the real, systemic change that Minnesota needs to succeed in the 21st century—or to create the capacity necessary to advance the good ideas that we and others have already proposed. Too often, these recommendations have been relegated to a shelf somewhere and left to collect dust.

MACI MEMBERSHIP STRUCTURE

Institutional Civic Organizing Agency

Lead Organizer

Individual leaders are governing members

Demonstration Civic Organizing Agency
LEARNING   GOVERNING

Institutions are governing members

Civic Organizing Inc./Civic Organizing Foundation

Civic Business

MACI Civic Leadership Institute (CLI)
LEARNING   GOVERNING

Renewing the Public Congregation

Civic Nonprofit

Civic Education

Demonstrations are governing members

Although we have been successful at developing and implementing innovative ideas in the past, (tax base sharing and the Metropolitan Council, for example), to be successful in the future, the Citizens League needs to expand its mission beyond the traditional advisory roll and embrace a new mission: developing civic imagination and capacity.

It is essential that we embrace this role now. The seemingly intractableness of our policy problems is directly related to our inability to govern together for the common good—either to develop new ideas or to implement the good ideas that are already on the table.

CIVIC GUIDELINES

- Those impacted by the problem help define the problem in light of democratic ideals and the realities of their environment.

- All stakeholders contribute to solving the problem.

- All stakeholders participate in decision making and policymaking.

- All stakeholders contribute to sustainabile outcomes that benefit the common good.

To break this logjam, we can no longer afford to view public policy as something that happens "out there," where we volunteer, at the Capitol or city hall, or even in the voting booth. We need to see public policy and governance as something that we each do daily within the institutions where we spend our time working, learning, and worshiping. The solutions to almost every public policy issue that we face today require policy changes that impact all institutions, not just government. Take health care reform, for example. Addressing the ways we can promote wellness in our families, communities, and workplaces is just as critical to improving health as addressing our access to insurance coverage and medical care.
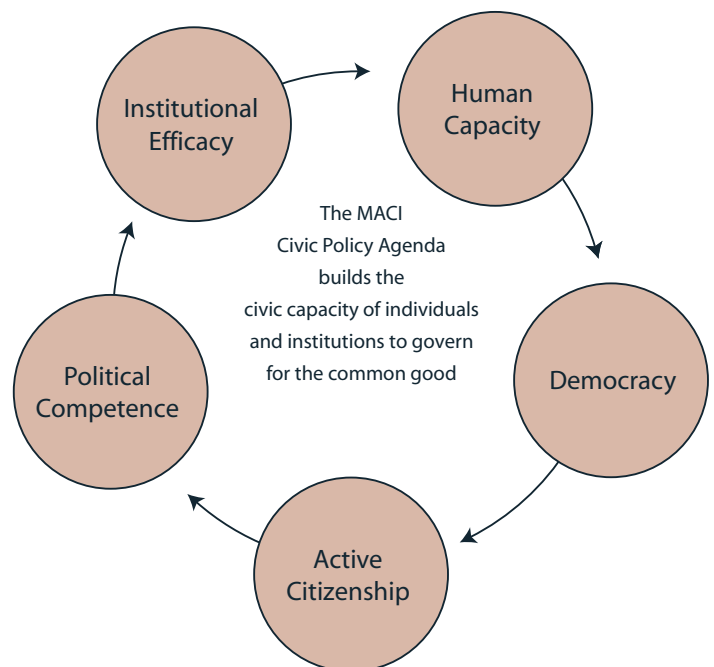
Civic organizing provides a theoretical framework and practical standards and disciplines that take these realities into account. Civic organizing allows us to develop solution strategies based on the common good and teaches the disciplines and skills (the civic capacity) needed to utilize the framework.

MACI'S STORY

To quote Peg Michels, MACI is "a grand experiment in democracy."

The Citizens League is a founding member of the MACI Leadership Institute along with Kowalski's Markets, Cretin Derham Hall High School in Saint Paul, and Dar Al Hijrah Islamic Civic Center in the Cedar/Riverside neighborhood of Minneapolis. The leadership of the members meets monthly to share insights and learn from each other. MACI is funded primarily through the membership and through the development and implementation of its civic leadership model.

Each of these member organizations has committed to organizing a civic infrastructure within their institution and to teaching the principles and practice of active citizenship and civic leadership. This approach has two advantages: it advances the institution's goals and it develops the civic capacity of individuals within these institutions to become better citizens in their community.

The results have been very encouraging.

At Kowalski's, 160 managers have now completed a 10-session civic leadership training program and developed a personalized civic workplan. The impact has been an almost top-to-bottom change in Kowalski's internal operations and their external partnerships. The Citizens League has just completed its three-year pilot and is now working to integrate civic organizing principles and standards into our everyday practices.

Richard Engler, president and principal of Cretin Derham Hall, says working to become a civic educational institution has changed the way he sees his institution's mission. "Like most high schools, our mission focuses on preparing students for post secondary

> MACI is "a grand experiment in democracy."
>
> —Peg Michels

MACI CIVIC POLICY AGENDA

The MACI Civic Policy Agenda builds the civic capacity of individuals and institutions to govern for the common good

Institutional Efficacy

Human Capacity

Democracy

Active Citizenship

Political Competence

For those receiving government assistance, working more and earning more usually results in losing more economically than they gain, except for those able to make an astounding leap in income. "Disincentives to Earn," a 2007 study by the Minnesota Center for Public Finance Research, reveals the conundrum: For a single parent with two children, an increase in annual earnings from $12,800 to $44,000 would result in a significant reduction in monetary resources when all the program eligibilities, tax credits, and deductions are factored in. That single parent would:

- take home $23,600 more in wages
- lose $30,600 in tax benefits and wage assistance.

This is the scenario for someone whose earnings jump from $12,800 to $44,000. The disincentives can be even greater for those who make more modest gains. If that same single parent's earning grew from $33,000 to $34,000, the family would lose $2.50 in monetary resources for each dollar earned. These structural disincentives to earn are more commonly referred to as the "welfare wall."

While it may seem that an increase in income would create positive change for a family, for those up against the welfare wall the outcomes are more complicated. For someone relying on government help for food, housing, or child care, each decision can lead to a serious Catch-22 that might mean the difference between working or not, having a place to sleep or not, or putting food on the table or not.

There is another important element to the welfare wall. Families and individuals receiving assistance are also discouraged or often prohibited from accumulating capital in the form of cash or assets. Without a financial cushion, people living in poverty are ill-equipped to face even the smallest financial mishap. A working mother who attended one of our convening sessions explained how this impacted her family. At one point, she earned too much

Applying a civic policy agenda to poverty

For several decades, the Citizens League's main policy tool has been the study committee process: gathering a group of civic-minded people together to examine policy issues in a non-partisan way. This process has served Minnesota well over the decades and is still a central part of our work. (A water policy study committee is just completing their work this fall.)

But for the Citizens League to apply its mission, principles, and guidelines to policy work in the future, we need to develop a model for policymaking that relies on a wider variety of tools and processes to engage a more diverse group of Minnesotans.

With that in mind, we embarked on the Minnesota Anniversary Project (MAP 150) from 2005 to 2008, which helped us develop and refine some new processes and tools. What we learned from MAP 150, along with our years of knowledge from study committees and our mission, principles, and guidelines now forms the framework of our civic policy agenda currently under development.

In addition to study committees, we plan to test and evaluate new tools through our Policy Advisory Committee, including:

- convening efforts
- workshops
- policy review groups
- action groups
- policy events
- variations of all these approaches

The Citizens League began the poverty project by looking at research and the Citizens League policy history related to poverty.

We have since structured this type of effort into something we call a policy review group.

In September of 2008, we held a convening effort consisting of four discussions with more than 40 policy leaders and citizens to help us define some of the key areas to consider.

Then we applied our mission, principles, and guidelines to Phase II of the project in a very direct way. The current working document explores our primary value of developing human capacity to meet the goal of building civic infrastructure. The development of human capacity will increase political competence and the ability to govern. This effort led us to ask the following two questions.

Do current poverty policies develop the capacity of people to govern?

Do current poverty policies spur connections and build relationships that create and support paths to move out of poverty?

Current policy approaches to poverty—with foundations put in place decades ago—are often not well informed by those who are impacted by poverty. People in poverty are not often engaged as "problem solvers"—people with the capacity to be policymakers and develop better policies.

In Phase II of the poverty project, the Citizens League is directly applying our first guideline: people who are affected by a problem will help define it in keeping with our mission and principles. This is one way to ensure a democratic method of defining approaches to solve problems. More importantly, perhaps, this is a way to test whether the policy recommendations produced can be effectively implemented.

to receive medical coverage for herself and her oldest child (her youngest child was covered by Medical Assistance), so she spent years paying off a bill for an emergency room visit for her oldest son while trying to work her way out of poverty.

A number of things happen to a family when income rises. A parent may lose health coverage, for example, but one of the most consequential losses is the loss of a child care benefit.

Child care, or the lack thereof, is one of the biggest barriers to employment faced by those living in poverty. Under the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP), child care is one of the last benefits phased out as income rises. But, proportionally, it represents the biggest benefit, due to the extremely high cost of child care. When presented with the opportunity to work, many parents will choose to work even if it means losing medical coverage. But losing the child care benefit is often an insurmountable barrier to employment. A parent can work while uninsured, but cannot work if there is no one to take care of the children. Forced to choose, some people leave their children with relatives, friends, or others who may not be equipped to provide appropriate care.

HUMAN CAPACITY WASTED NAVIGATING THE LINE

Efforts to alleviate poverty in Minnesota and the United States have evolved into a fragmented and often contradictory system that relies on sanctions and punitive regulation to control individual behavior and choices. The choices that do exist are fraught with Catch-22s and require those receiving assistance to navigate a maze of agencies and requirements that siphon off large amounts of human capacity in efforts that often do not offer clear pathways out of poverty—even for those individuals who successfully navigate the maze.

The need for recipients to report to different agencies is just one example of the fragmented nature of the welfare system. Eligibility for various programs and tax benefits are determined by a complex set of equations, and even if an individual is eligible to receive benefits, he or she may not receive those benefits for any number of reasons. Inconsistent practices and regulations between and within county systems present another time-consuming set of challenges.

One example that illustrates this dynamic takes place around nutrition and health care eligibility. Recent changes in income requirements for the Women Infants and Children (WIC) nutrition program caused a number of women to lose their benefits. However, a clause in the regulation states that women can retain their WIC benefit if at least one child receives Medical Assistance (MA). One of the organizations we interviewed reported numerous referrals from clients who were instructed to apply for MA in order to maintain WIC benefits. Clients may not have needed or wanted MA, but both parties still had to expend human capacity in the application process just to comply with the rule change.

A very important issue to note in the area of health care coverage is that the application and renewal processes were designed and are mainly administered by people with generally stable lives to serve an economically unstable and highly transient population.

What does it mean to be a policymaker?

- Everyone has knowledge based on their experiences and has authority to act in some setting.

- In order for individuals to think of themselves as policymakers (or "experts"), they must first focus on their experience and their authority.

- They should then be part of a process that requires them to seek answers through examples related to their experience and authority in their own organizations or settings. This could mean their workplace, their neighborhood, their church, their family, or an organization where they volunteer.

- To prepare people to become policymakers on a particular issue, we must first ask the question, "What would I change in the organization or setting where I have knowledge and authority?" related to the problem to be addressed.

- This first step blunts a dynamic that typically occurs in policy discussions, the tendency for people to focus on something outside their knowledge and authority as the source of their problems, followed by an appeal to traditional policymakers to "fix" the problem.

- When individuals examine their knowledge, authority, and roles (which includes identification of self interest) in order to seek solutions, they become policymakers.

- This prepares them for authentic interactions that explore problems with other policymakers and build connections to sustain policy solutions, while avoiding some traditional policymaking traps.

- Groups will be challenged to suspend their individual judgment and ask open-ended questions no matter how much expertise they have or the strength of their existing opinions. This has always been a core principle in Citizens League work and has been a key way to guide study committees through the stages of completing their findings and conclusions and to keep participants from taking the "policy shortcut" to recommendations.

The result is a system that is often not well designed to meet the needs of those it serves.

Postal Service: The welfare system relies on permanent addresses, which are generally difficult for poor people to get and keep. All application and renewal activities are conducted via the

Convening at the intersection of poverty and health care

By Loren Niemi

In April and May, the Citizens League, in partnership with the Public Policy Project—the public policy consulting and training partnership of James Trice and Loren Niemi—conducted a series of 90-minute-long conversations on the intersection of poverty and health care. Four conversations were held in St. Paul at the Paul & Shelia Wellstone Center/Neighborhood House in April and four more in Minneapolis at the Midtown YWCA in May. The Public Policy Project facilitated the conversations attended by a mix of individuals with low wealth, health care system providers, and Citizens League volunteers. Eighty-four people participated with an average of 14 per conversation in St. Paul and 36 in Minneapolis.

The Public Policy Project, which specializes in working with individuals with low wealth, immigrants, and communities of color, managed the process and provided snacks. In both locations, there was a lively session-by-session discussion about the refreshments and the right mix of salt, fat, and sugar that mirrored the larger discussion about the distinction between health and health care. Cookies gave way to fruit and the chocolate got darker.

There are two specific features to these conversations that deserve highlighting. The first is that they were sequential, with each conversation building on the one before it. The sequence began in the first discussion with the question: "What has been your experience?" This was the foundation of the conversation. Both the Citizens League and The Public Policy Project were less interested in individuals identifying systemic answers to health care questions than they were in the kinds of questions that would flow out of specific personal experience. The conversations that followed asked participants "What was the difference between health and health care?" "If you could create a system that met your health needs, what would it look like?" and, finally, "What are you willing to do to make your ideal health system a reality?"

The second feature that deserves highlighting is that the majority of participants were individuals with low wealth speaking directly to their experience of health and health care. This is worth noting because one of the clear themes coming from the conversations was that while the poor may have limited access to health care or none at all, they are acutely aware of their needs and desire for health.

Each set of discussions came to a working definition of basic health care that includes dental care, routine physicals, emergency visits, preventative care, and long-term chronic or rehabilitative care. Basic health care shouldn't give preferential treatment to people who have more money.

In response to the question of what didn't work, the range of responses included:

- The cost of health care.

- Doctors aren't focused on preventive care.

- Dependents are not covered.

- Some feel like they are over-prescribed and under-insured.

- Nutrition is very tied to health care but is not the focus of treatment.

- There are many gray areas in the health care system especially in the provision of mental health and dental services.

- Bottomline, health care is unaffordable for low-wage workers.

Money and how it is used was a dominant theme in every conversation. A common thread: the backwardness of downplaying health and focusing on health care services. Traditional ways to raise food have become more expensive then industrial foods raised using expensive technology. It is now cheaper to eat food that is bad for you—the free "playground" comes with fries—than it is to have consistently good nutrition.

There was strong sentiment for access to better food options in low-income communities, to health education and prevention programs, and to alternative and natural—or traditional—medicines. Here is a sample of participants comments:

- Ability to maintain activity and strength and, if you are not feeling well, access to resources.

- A prevention focus is needed that can be promoted in places like the grocery store.

- A public service option that contributes to healthy communities and nations.

- Spirit, mind, and body awareness, with physicians that are in tune with the energy of the person they are treating to identify ailments and appropriate remedies.

- Focus needs to be off the money and on the people.

- Empowering people to care for their health within their own individual cultural norms.

- Have people involved in their own care; have some things be culturally centered and specific.

- Someone who can see past the ailment to the person.

- More natural medicine that works with the body.

- Dialogue at the community level about health and bringing that dialogue to the legislature.

These were spirited discussions with people from a range of age, race, religious and political affiliations. That said, respect for the diversity of individual experience and opinion was the rule. As an example, when participants were asked, 'What would the ideal health care system look like?' there was strong support for a single-payer system. One participant opposed single payer as an economic necessity to keep business competitive while others rooted the need for comprehensive coverage in a feeling that for America to be true to its credo of "justice for all," the inequities of access and care currently determined by income would have to end. As one participant said, "No patient left behind."

One solution envisioned "all Americans paying on a sliding fee scale" while others saw subsidy as supplemental to private pay insurance. "Rather than needing a doctor-centric clinic, a nurse clinic/nurse practitioner clinic would be more affordable and consistent with a prevention model of health care. Sometimes nurse practitioners give better service as they are trained to deal with the whole person." Another participant pointed out the need for "a system design where your medications are inclusive in the treatment experience and not a separate item that cost you more."

Other conclusions with significant agreement noted by conversation facilitators included:

• There needs to be a community effort for success. Quite a bit of the discussion was focused on community support and the importance of including whole communities.

• Having enough choices and options to accommodate for different types of people. Not everyone fits in the same box.

• Culture, closeness, and trust include seeing the same doctor or nurse practitioner for all your primary care concerns. Having a doctor that allows care to be patient-centered and seeing the same doctor encourages patient compliance and prevents missed necessary treatments and appointments. Several people noted how seeing more people of color as doctors increased their trust of the systems in place.

• Health care should start at home. Educating people that may not have access or know the things they need to know is the key.

At the end of each set of discussions, participants were asked whether they would be willing to do more, be it further conversations or participating in a Citizens League-sponsored working group to move the policy statements along. More than a dozen have indicated they would and are looking forward to continuing the process.

Loren Niemi is a founding partner for The Public Policy Project providing public policy consulting, training, message framing, and advocacy management services.

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postal system. That means the system relies upon a person's permanent address to deliver important and time-sensitive information regarding eligibility, acceptance, denial, and penalties or sanctions. Backlogs in county systems can delay important notices and the variance in grace periods make reinstating medical coverage after a sanction difficult and time consuming. Imagine a woman in an abusive relationship who takes her children to live with a relative. If her name is not on the mailbox, she can lose her benefits and have to reapply.

Proof. Proof. Proof: As noted before, a person may be eligible for benefits but still be denied. MA and MinnesotaCare require recipients to turn in every pay stub and renew coverage every six months or annually. Many people in poverty do not have steady employment, but instead receive cash payments for odd jobs and seasonal or temporary employment. Failure to provide proof of this income results in denials or a termination of benefits.

The 50% Rule: At a certain income level, welfare recipients become ineligible for MA and are referred to MinnesotaCare, a health coverage plan that charges discounted monthly premiums based on ability to pay. But an individual is only eligible for MinnesotaCare if his or her employer does not provide medical insurance and pay at least 50 percent of the monthly premium. If the employer does offer coverage, that individual becomes ineligible for any public medical assistance, regardless of income and regardless of whether they can afford employer-based insurance. Those who can't often chose to work without insurance. There is also no assessment of the coverage provided by employer-based plans, so workers who do buy employer-based insurance may incur significant out-of-pocket costs and receive poor coverage.

CATCH-22s AT EVERY TURN

People in poverty who try to "do the right thing" are often confronted by a system riddled with Catch 22s. At one community meeting, a young woman shared this story: She had worked to attain her associate's degree for three years and then lost her child care benefit the day she graduated, leaving her with no one to care for her children while she tried to find a job with her newly-acquired skills. This and other systemic Catch 22s waste huge amounts of human capacity and resources when people who work to improve themselves are then unable to compensate for the immediate loss of benefits that results from their improved situation and return instead to poverty and dependency.

A particularly vicious Catch-22 circles around the dynamic of those in poverty trying to keep stable housing, a requirement that must be met in order to keep custody of children and maintain benefits. That requirement gives landlords extraordinary economic power over impoverished tenants. If a woman cannot pay rent on time, there are predatory landlords who will settle the debt by accepting payment in other forms, most often sexual favors. Most often it is women and their children who are targeted for these "payments". Because eviction can permanently ruin the family's ability to find and keep housing, a woman can feel

Social media and a new model of civic engagement

By Nick Troiano

Gone are the days in which tasks were, often by necessity, delegated and completed by a relatively small group of people in a hierarchal fashion.

While there remains a vibrant debate over whether social media is creating new activists or just enhancing the tools used by existing ones, it is clear there has been a fundamental change in the way citizens are interacting with each other and organizations. This was a central topic recently at the Personal Democracy Forum, an annual conference that explores the intersection of technology and politics.

Social media has drastically decreased the barriers of entry for citizens to have their voices heard and to take action on an issue. While the average citizen might not be transformed from Couch Potato to Code Pink overnight after hopping on Twitter or Facebook, he or she is able to easily take small, simple actions without much effort. Taken together, this can have an extraordinary impact, as we have seen again and again, most recently following the Iranian elections.

This civic crowdsourcing is the new model of citizen participation in the 21st century, bringing more people into the political process than ever before, particularly within previously untapped demographics. Successful organizations are those that will adopt and build off the new model.

An advocacy group on immigration reform present at the conference explained that it is using new methods to engage its target audience, which is low on the socioeconomic scale. While they might not have Internet or even a computer, most have a cell phone. Thus, text-messaging campaigns are used to gather signatures for petitions, notify people of protest locations, and spread other important messages. The cost of participation to each person is very low, but the effectiveness of tens of thousands of people sending a digital letter to Congress is very high.

ActBlue, a political action committee, recently integrated with Twitter to ramp up political donations on the microblogging site, 140 characters and $5 to $10 at a time. SeeClickFix is an emerging online tool that is charting new territories in the field of micro-volunteerism by allowing people to geo-tag issues they see in their community, such as littering, and work towards resolving them. These and other organizations focus on the least common denominator, requiring a small buy-in from participants while providing an opportunity for them to scale their efforts at their own desire.

The conference also revealed that creating a community in which each person has a stake and can interact with others is important to engaging people. Organizations and platforms that offer participants friendly competition (i.e., earning "political capital" at WhiteHouse2.org) or a chance to set the agenda and vision (i.e., ranking priorities at Change.org) are capitalizing on the social nature of citizens today. Organizations that seek to engage Citizen 2.0 should have the same characteristics: open-source, highly collaborative, and impact-oriented.

In sum, social media and networking are the keystones to the bridge between the 20th century activist and the 21st century citizen and vital in sustaining our collective civic engagement in the long term.

Nick Troiano is an undergraduate student at Georgetown University and co-founder of myImpact.org. This article has been reprinted with permission from the National Conference on Citizenship website.

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pressured to accede to such payments. If she does, she can be prosecuted if she refuses future sexual demands and seeks help. Prosecution can result in the loss of child custody and benefits.

SEEKING A NEW FRAMEWORK

The ideas presented in this article are an attempt to reframe poverty in a way that we hope will spur new ideas and new approaches. They are part of a working document available on the Citizens League website.

This fall, a Citizens League committee will take the New Pathways to Prosperity project to the next level, developing policy recommendations to resolve the Catch 22s that make it difficult for people living in poverty to climb out of poverty.

The committee's work will be guided by our civic policy agenda and two assertions that we think will push the discussion to the necessary policy level:

- Systems designed to support people when they are poor should not keep them poor.
- Policies should not encourage family breakdown or penalize families trying to stay together.

These two statements will be tested broadly as the Citizens League seeks policy solutions that move us forward. If you are interested in participating on the committee, visit us online at www.citizensleague.org. ●

Bob DeBoer is the Citizens League Director of Policy Development. He can be reached at 651-293-0575 ext. 13 or at bdeboer@citizensleague.org.

Anna R. Schumacher is a senior at the College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University where she received the first John Brandl scholarship. She interned at the Citizens League over the summer.

education. We need to acknowledge that a parallel role is to prepare young people to be productive citizens in our democracy," Engler wrote in a case study.

Adopting civic organizing disciplines has also improved productivity and accountability, Engler adds. "Our meetings are more productive…And once we make a decision based on our principles and using civic standards, the decision stands, and we do not need to readdress it."

NEW OPPORTUNITIES

The members of MACI have demonstrated the success of civic organizing within each of their institutions and are now looking to expand the effort by inviting other institutions and organizations to participate.

> The seemingly intractableness of our policy problems is directly related to our inability to govern together for the common good.

To that end, the Citizens Leagues is launching a new civic leadership training program this fall, based on the MACI framework of civic organizing.

Visit our website to find out about upcoming opportunities to get involved. We will begin offering two-hour sessions and six-hour introductory classes in November. Contact Sean Kershaw at skershaw@citizensleague.org to learn more and sign up. ●

Sean Kershaw is the Citizens League's Executive Director. He can be reached at skershaw@citizensleague.org, @seankershaw (Twitter), Facebook, or through his blog at citizensleague.org/blogs/sean/.

MACI CASE STUDY: KOWALSKI'S MARKETS

When Kowalski's agreed to pilot civic organizing within their company, owners Mary and Jim Kowalski already believed that democratic principles were compatible with ethical business practices, but they wanted to show concretely that intentionally organizing a business in light of civic principles could sustain the company for succeeding generations, could be replicated by other businesses, and could contribute to improving the quality of civic life in Minnesota.

"My husband, Jim, and I have always run our business with strong values and a high level of involvement in the communities where we have had grocery stores," says Mary Kowalski. "But over the years, I had become increasingly troubled about what is not working in our society, and I began to wonder if we were doing enough. Civic organizing helped me see that we need a systemic approach to civic renewal, and that I had a role in making the renewal happen. I believe that my primary role is to build my own civic capacity and then work within our company to build the civic capacity of others."

Kowalski's has spent the past six years slowly and methodically implementing a strategy to build this internal governance capacity. All management level employees have attended a 12-week class, Civic Organizing 101, which introduces participants to the meaning of democracy and to organizing concepts such as self-interest, public, justice, power, and politics—as well as the disciplines that help people integrate these ideas into the workplace at Kowalski's.

The management team uses the disciplines of civic organizing, including lifework, public meetings, power analysis, work plans, and evaluation in their work every day, and they use civic standards in all aspects of their jobs.

As a result, Kowalski's has developed an internal civic infrastructure that builds the civic capacity of their employees in ways that extend beyond the workplace and helps them do a better job meeting their business goals. Employees are more active decision-makers, and as a result, they feel greater ownership in the company.

Kowalski's has documented how these changes, including changes in how they work with vendors and local unions, have helped to improve their overall business performance, even during the current economic downturn.

One store manager observed: "From my experience at Kowalski's, moving through change that results from difficult economic times is a much easier process. And I would have to say that it is due to our civic principles and standards and the civic climate created within the stores and by the lead organizers (upper management). With the civic approach we are all allowed to govern through these changes, creating greater ownership in making the changes work and in reaching desired results.

"I believe all of us want to direct our lives and when that is missing we are unable to build our human capacity and at times feel helpless. The ownership created by using the civic approach allows stakeholders to create their course of action and achieve the desired result of helping to create and build the common good."

PERSPECTIVES

Transforming health one town at a time

The AARP/Blue Zones Vitality Project in Albert Lea focuses
on improving health by creating healthier environments

by Joel Spoonheim

The citizens of Albert Lea, Minnesota are undertaking an experiment to measurably improve the health of their entire community. Led by Minnesota's own global explorer, Dan Buettner, a team of committed public servants and community volunteers is implementing one of the most innovative and comprehensive health initiatives ever undertaken in the United States, the AARP/Blue Zones Vitality Project, sponsored by United Health Foundation.

The Vitality Project implements the lessons detailed in Buettner's bestselling book, *The Blue Zones: Lessons for living longer from the people who live the longest*, which codifies nine common elements that contribute to long, healthy lives in the world's five demographically confirmed longevity hotspots.

Unlike most health initiatives that focus on changing individual behavior, this project seeks to improve health by changing the environments we live in. This approach is supported by a 2006 St. Louis University School of Public Health survey that found infrastructure and policy approaches create more permanent changes than many public health programs focused on individual behavior. For instance, if an employer stocks a vending machine with healthy options placed at eye level, employees are more likely to make consistently healthy choices than if simply told to eat better. Likewise, if sidewalks connect residential and retail environments, individuals are likely to incorporate more sustainable exercise into their daily routines than if they are encouraged to join a gym.

The Vitality Project partners national experts with local leaders to identify short-term, high-impact policy changes that local governments and employers can make, and to develop a roadmap for longer-term priorities. The result is a quick-acting, 10-month, cross-sector initiative employing more than a dozen strategies for lasting change, including zoning code amendments, school health policy reform, and business-friendly recommendations for employers.

The project is quickly gaining traction. The first four months focused on public policy work. Then, on May 14, an overflow crowd of 1,300 people arrived at the Albert Lea High School to hear Buettner and Brian Wansink, M.D., professor of Consumer Behavior at Cornell University and co-director of the Blue Zones Project, talk about lessons for living longer. The mood was festive, almost rock-concert-like, and the event left the town abuzz. More than 2,000 citizens pledged to participate, signing up for workshops, cooking classes, and walking teams. By early accounts, the project has been a success: 15 percent of the population is participating. The goal is to increase their expected lifespan by an average of two years by October 13. But the policy changes aimed at local government and businesses may be of the most interest.

INSTITUTIONALIZING CHANGE

Dan Burden, America's leading expert on walkable communities, visited Albert Lea on the coldest January day in years and led citizens on a walking audit to identify ways to make the town more walkable and bikeable. By spring, the city council had restructured priorities for summer construction to ensure a major pedestrian system would be completed *this year*. And the city council is now considering amendments to the comprehensive plan and zoning code to ensure that future investments promote daily physical movement.

Leslie Lytle, M.D., a professor at the University of Minnesota School of Public Health and a leading national expert on childhood obesity, has worked with school officials to audit policies related to student health. This fall, the district is expected to implement new policies that could reduce the body mass index of many children to healthy levels. One of the top priorities is to reduce the use of food as a reward for achievement, since the kids who eat those free pizzas weigh more.

Private businesses are also making policy changes, from simple things such as trying to move those candy bowls on desks out of arms reach, to comprehensive changes, such as restructuring health insurance policies to provide better cessation tools for tobacco users.

Usually, employers feel their preventative health efforts are only marginally effective because they don't reach spouses or dependents covered under employee insurance plans. But the Vitality Project's community saturation approach impacts children at school and is likely to reach spouses at work, church, or other places where they spend time.

It is perhaps this lesson that is the most important: Health improvement projects targeting isolated tactics like weight loss may work for certain individuals, but they fail to transform a culture that over the last 30 years has made a majority of the population less healthy. The Vitality Project's systemic, cross-sector efforts combat these negative trends structurally—through policy and institutional changes—and as a consequence, improve health for all individuals in a community. As the citizens of Albert Lea realign public and institutional policies they will find that healthy choices become easy choices. ●

Joel Spoonheim is the Director of Health Initiatives for Blue Zones and leads the day-to-day operations for the Vitality Project in Albert Lea.

Register online at
www.aarp.org/bluezonesproject
and get daily tips, videos, and images,
and learn about what practices have
been effective. After October 13,
you can check out the results
from Albert Lea.

How can we change the relationship between wealth (or lack thereof) and health?

On health care reform, let's listen to the ideas of those living in poverty

by Nancy Feldman

With all of today's talk about health care reform, do we know what Minnesotans who live in poverty think about improving our health care delivery system?

The effects of poverty on health status are well documented. Minnesota has lower rates of poverty than other states and a better health status overall than most. Yet, Minnesota has some of the highest rates of health status disparities (between African American and white residents, for example) in the United States. It is this situation that gives me and others in the Minnesota health care community great concern.

People living in poverty experience worse health than the population at-large in several ways, including:

- low infant birth weight, premature birth, infant mortality
- malnutrition
- maternal depression
- higher childhood hospitalization
- exposure to violence and environmental toxins
- delays in physical, cognitive, and language development

As a nonprofit health plan serving low-income individuals and seniors, UCare has developed a relationship with urban and rural clinics and community organizations that provide care for many of Minnesota's poor residents.

Now, as a sponsoring organization working with the Citizens League's poverty project, New Pathways to Prosperity, we're helping to better understand how and where poverty and health care intersect. A series of public conversations began last fall between Minnesotans who live in poverty, community agency representatives, and participants from the Citizens League and the Public Policy Project.

At one of these forums, Minnesotans living in poverty spoke about their perception that the health care system focused more on treating illness, diseases, and injury than on prevention and health promotion. "It's like we have a 'sick care' system instead of a 'health care system," one person observed. Others noted that health prevention doesn't always take priority over other daily life decisions. Many pointed out that they and their neighbors opt for fast food for their families, acknowledging that convenience trumped nutritional value "on some days."

From my vantage point as a nonprofit health plan CEO, I've seen effective models for how private/public partnerships can help address health care needs of Minnesotans living in poverty. In 1984, UCare started as a demonstration project to help low-income Minnesotans connect with primary care clinics in Minneapolis and then in the rest of the state. This philosophy has not changed: identify one clinic for your primary health care needs, establish a long-term relationship with that provider, and work to develop long-term health goals to manage illnesses or injury recovery.

This is now being discussed in national public policy circles as the "medical home" concept. In Minnesota, state health care officials are referring to this as "health care homes," and have charged health care organizations in the state with implementing models to achieve outcomes related to the concept.

Some health plans, like ours, offer incentives to members who live in poverty to help them take advantage of services that will educate them on child health issues, get their children immunized, provide transportation to appointments and screenings, provide free child care seats, and offer smoking cessation support. These services help but can't address all the health needs of those living in poverty.

So, when we ask our own members who are living in poverty what they think is important in their health care, they tell us: "Make it more convenient for us to get appointments." "Speak in our languages when you're talking to us." "Treat us just like you treat everyone else."

To those ends, we've undertaken initiatives like our mobile dental unit, which brings dental check-ups and cleanings to low-income Minnesotans throughout the state, updated our written materials to reflect the greater diversity of languages spoken by our members, and offered assistance to members who have difficulties getting clinic appointments.

A recent Kaiser Commission policy brief documented once again the relationship between poverty and poor health status, in this case, for adults without children. Here are a few findings:

- Nearly one-third of U.S. adults under age 65 are from low-income families (below 200 percent of the federal poverty level); 15 percent of adults live in poverty.
- The chances of being healthy decline with income: 19 percent of poor adults describe their general health as fair or poor; one in seven has only fair or poor mental health.

These are the very adults most affected by Gov. Tim Pawlenty's funding cuts to General Assistance Medical Care (GAMC) that will result in thousands of Minnesotans losing health care coverage.

This conversation on health care reform is continuing at a national level. I recently joined 14 other nonprofit health plan CEOs at a meeting with the White House Office of Health Reform to discuss how we might change our health delivery system. People living in poverty are one focus of this work, but these issues affect all Minnesotans, regardless of income. ●

Nancy J. Feldman is President and CEO of UCare, a health plan serving more than 175,000 people in Minnesota and western Wisconsin.

10/14 Conference on Policy Analysis

Continuing Education and Conference Center,
University of MN. 7:30 a.m.–5 p.m.

10/29 Annual Meeting: Naked Civics

Pantages Theater and Seven. Appetizers 5 p.m.
Program 6:30 p.m. Reception to follow.

For more information go to www.citizensleague.org

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