Building from Strength: Asset-based approaches

What is asset-based community development?

When communities tackle social and economic challenges they typically think in terms of needs, problems and deficiencies – lack of jobs, lack of opportunities for young people, lack of skills, lack of investment. This needs-based approach, however, ignores the resources, skills and abilities that already exist in a community. An asset-based approach to community development taps into the strengths of a community – the skills of local residents, the power of local associations, and the supportive functions of local institutions – as a starting point for building stronger and more sustainable communities. This idea comes from the Asset-Based Community Development Institute at Northwestern University (Chicago), founded by John Kretzmann and John McKnight.
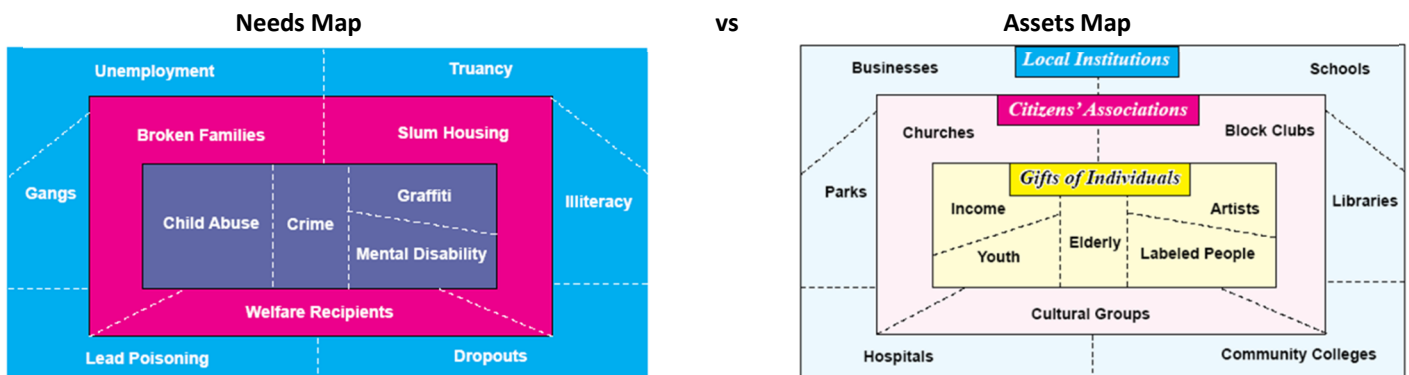
The assets approach:

- Starts with what is present in the community, rather than what is absent
- Concentrates on the agenda-building and problem-solving capacity of stakeholders
- Stresses local determination, investment, creativity, and control
- Is relationship-driven, constantly building and rebuilding relationships between and among stakeholders, associations and institutions
- Works well as a complement to a needs-based approach

Why is an assets approach important and what makes it effective?

- Asset-building opens up a different way to approach the challenges a community faces. It can mean seeing the same person or community or issue through a very different lens.
- To be powerful, a community must have people who are citizens and producers – not just clients and consumers. Think of a carpenter who has lost one leg in an accident years ago. Clearly, he has a deficiency; however, he also has a skill. If we know he has a missing leg, we cannot build our community with that information. If we know he has a capacity as a wood-worker, that information can literally build our community.
- A community that is depicted in terms of emptiness, needs and problems will be on the receiving end of all sorts of services designed and delivered by outside experts. Residents will be positioned as passive, powerless, and dependent on outside help and assistance. A neighborhood that is portrayed as resourceful and gifted will be more likely to draw upon the skills of local people to address issues and solve problems. Outside assistance/resources may still be needed but the agenda will be set by the local community.

What is an asset map?

An asset map identifies school and community resources, gifts, talents, and barriers. It is a tool to help you strategize how best to use resources and to explore and understand a community. It provides a starting point for building comprehensive and effective partnerships and creating sustainable community change. Think of it as a survey of the community moreso than a visual or geographic map (although these can be useful too).

Needs Map   vs   **Assets Map**

How do I get started?
As you build your asset map, you might include individual assets, institutional assets, physical space, neighborhood economy, associations, relationships, stories/history of a community, cultural groups and activities/customs, and more. You might use a visual map, a survey, a database, a community/school walk, newspaper investigation, photography, Google maps, and/or other tools. Don't feel obligated to use just one method or tool! Be sure to document:

- **Personnel** – who is at your site? What do they do? What projects are they working on? How do they communicate/interact with parents/community/stakeholders? What are their individual assets?
- **Programs/services** – what are the existing programs and services available within your site? What do they do? Who do they serve? What resources does this service utilize? How effective is this program/service at addressing needs and priorities of the community? What are the gaps in programming/services?
- **Community resources** – who is in the community? What do they do? Who do they serve? Which have existing partnerships with your site? What resources do they have available for your site?

As you create your map, things to consider:
- Who will help you in this process? (tip: use the community to help you create your asset map!)
- What type of info will you be gathering and from whom?
- What info do you already have?
- How well are resources coordinated and integrated?
- Which programs and activities could be enhanced?
- What is missing and where is the capacity to fill these gaps?

Sample questions for an asset map survey/listening session:
- Introduce yourself and your project
- Logistics: program name, contact info, hours of operation, website
- What services do you offer?
- What is your mission statement or goal of your program?
- What are your concerns for our community?
- Do you partner with any other organizations or know of any that would benefit from this project?
- What don't you have that you would like to have, that could contribute to both of us?
- Do you offer trainings or workshops educating the community on your services? Would you like to?

What other resources can help me?
- **Asset-Based Community Development Institute** – The organization that started it all…. Find research, tools, sample community practices, and more at http://www.abcdinstitute.org.
- **"Mapping Community Capacity"** – a paper written by ABCD Institute founders John Kretzmann and John McKnight with ideas and tools for creating an asset map, as well as the theories and research behind the asset-based approach. http://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/publications/papers/mcc.pdf
- **Smart Communities: How Citizens and Local Leaders Can Use Strategic Thinking to Build a Brighter Future**, by Suzanne Morse (book) – based on the results of more than a decade of research by the Pew Partnership for Civic Change, *Smart Communities* provides directions for strategic decision-making and outlines the key strategies used by thousands of leaders who have worked to create successful communities, including a chapter on asset-based community development.

adapted from ABCD Institute's "Intro to Asset-Mapping", "Shifting focus: alternative pathways for communities and economies" a Resource Kit produced by Latrobe City and Monash University, and Wisconsin DPI VISTA Program Materials

ASSET MAPS DUE: with first Quarterly Report, October 15**