

## **Wicked Issues For Neighborhood Leaders and Organizers**

By John McKnight

Co-Director, Asset-Based Community Development Institute

Senior Associate, Kettering Foundation

Most effective people acting as neighborhood organizers or leaders have a primary value of maximizing participation – more people means more power to advocate and create. This places a high value on community questions that unify rather than divide.

In the Alinsky model of neighborhood organizing, the questions focused on have been mainly about the inadequacies of outside institutions, for example, local government, schools, merchants, etc. The neighborhood's common perception of these inadequacies maximizes the participation of residents. In the lingo of Alinskyism, the organization grows powerful as a common external 'enemy' is identified.

While external institutions are frequently a problem, there are also many questions within the neighborhood where collective resident action would be required to resolve them. It is these internal questions that many leaders and organizers understand as divisive rather than inclusive. Some of the most common issues with divisive possibilities include child abuse, domestic abuse, sexual predators and abortion, etc. Each of these questions is a major issue in the lives of local residents although they tend to be publically invisible. Whenever residents raise these issues, most organizers and leaders recognize their divisive potential and typically engage strategies that sidestep them.

In one sense, there are visible and invisible issues in a neighborhood. Those typically acted upon are the visible, external and internal problems. However, is a role for neighborhood organizers and leaders to make visible the kinds of issues described above? Is there a way for these kinds of issues to be raised so that they do not reduce the participation of local residents in civic life?

Several years ago, as I drove through a small Wisconsin town, I noticed on one block that the same signs were posted in many of the yards. The signs said, "There is No Room for Domestic Abuse on This Block." I wondered whether these signs were the results of a few concerned individuals on the block or the result of an initiative from some local association or institution. Certainly, the signs made visible the invisible and would have affected the consciousness of many people in the neighborhood who were not on the block. One wonders whether the signs stimulated discussions in families, other blocks or neighborhood and community organizations. What kind of community discussions might

build upon the visibility of an issue that was once discussed only behind closed doors? In practice, the typical public response to these wicked issues is to place them in the domain of professionals – certified people who have expertise in child abuse, domestic abuse, etc. Could it be that this professionalization of issues removes citizens as critical actors in dealing with the problem? Could it be that a collectively energized local citizen could have more real impact on the issue than the professional interventions?

Another question with great divisive potential is whether neighborhood civic associations should endorse particular candidates. It is customary that local groups might hold forums involving all candidates in order to inform their constituency about the choices. However, when local activist citizens attempt to get a local association to endorse a particular candidate, they are likely to be told that the local organization is not-for-profit and cannot legally endorse candidates, or that the association is non-partisan. These responses preclude a discussion of the comparative relevance of the positions of the two candidates in terms of significant community issues. Could it be that a discussion of the impact of these candidate's differing positions as they affect the neighborhood, is a critical civic function? And, what use is a discussion about community impacts of the various candidacies without the ability of the group to select the one whose positions are most congruent with the association's goals? In many localities, the candidacy question is redirected to those local associations that are political parties or activist groups. Therefore, the vital citizen role of making associational decisions about potential officials who will vitally affect the neighborhood's life is precluded. However, the unity of the civic association is enhanced.