

## **A Guide to Government Empowerment of Local Citizens and Their Associations**

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In his legendary analysis of American democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville observed that, “the more government stands in the place of associations, the more will individuals, losing the notion of coming together, require its assistance: these are causes and effects that unceasingly create each other.”<sup>1</sup> In effect, he is describing a closed hydraulic system. As the government, or any large institution, takes over community functions, power is relocated and institutions grow stronger as the associational communities lose power and become more dependent. Today, many kinds of institutions are seeking to engage and empower citizens and their associations. However, many are not clear about the nature of the citizen power they seek to enable.

Tocqueville reminds us that acting in association, citizens take on three powers:

...Power to decide what is to be done

...Power to decide how it is to be done

...Power to mobilize themselves to produce the outcome they have defined.

These three are the powers to decide what to do, how to do it and who will produce it. The last century has seen these three powers flow from community to institutions. For example, Jamie Vollmer, in his book, “Schools Cannot Do It Alone.”<sup>2</sup> documents over 85 new functions assumed by schools since 1900. The majority are functions previously performed by associated citizens in their neighborhoods. Similarly, Robert Putnam in “Bowling Alone” documents the precipitous decline of American associational life since 1970.

The reality is that we have actually seen a century of community disempowerment as community power and functions have flowed to institutions. This transfer of functions from the neighborhood to institutions and the marketplace has created a consumer society where once productive citizens have become clients and consumers.

The costs of this functional transfer is that most institutions try, for money, to do what productive associations of citizens could do more effectively and less expensively. Seven of

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<sup>1</sup> Tocqueville, Alexis de, Democracy in America, Vintage Books, New York, NY, 1945.

<sup>2</sup> Vollmer, Jamie, Schools Cannot Do it Alone, Enlightenment Press, Fairfield, IA, 2010

these functions include safety, health, enterprise, food, ecology, raising children and the provision of care.<sup>3</sup>

For institutional leaders concerned about their dysfunctional efforts to replace uniquely local functions, we can learn about alternatives from some wonderfully inventive institutional experimenters. While we have yet to recognize a common name for these experimenters, they act like precipitants or catalysts. Intentionally, they do not become involved in the local power to decide what is to be done, how it is to be done or who shall do it. They recognize that to interject their authority in any of these three functions is actually disempowering. Therefore, they act in ways that result in powerful associational action that would not have happened without their action. Paradoxically, they are initiators of citizen action that empowers associational functions rather than replacing them. And they benefit by initiating local invention and problem solving that their institutions could never equal. Five examples of institutional precipitators are:

1. In Savanna, Georgia the municipal government sent a letter to the residents in a low-income neighborhood saying that it wanted to support efforts for block level improvements. They asked interested residents to write a brief letter describing the initiative they wanted to undertake. The letter needed to be signed by at least two people on the block who would also be involved. If the initiative required some money in order to be fulfilled, up to \$100 would be available. Initially, people from 80 blocks responded by indicating what they wanted to do, how they would get it done and who on the block would do it. They usually indicated the specifics for which they needed some money.

The result was more improvement in the neighborhood than had been achieved from a sizable block grant. Of even more importance, the city was able to know who were the natural leaders in the community because they were the people who signed the proposing letter. Subsequently, the city engaged in supportive activities that increased the number of local producers and the scale of their production.<sup>4</sup>

2. In a small town in Quebec province, when residents came to the Mayor and told him about a problem, he asked them how the problem they had defined could be solved. Then he asked who would join them in solving the problem. In recognition of their initiative, the Mayor “officialized” them by making them an official problem solving

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<sup>3</sup> See [www.abcinstitute.org](http://www.abcinstitute.org), Publications, [Neighborhood Necessities: Seven Functions That Only Effectively Organized Neighborhoods Can Provide](#) by John McKnight (2013).

<sup>4</sup> See [www.abcinstitute.org](http://www.abcinstitute.org), Publications, City-Sponsored Community Building: Savannah’s Grants for Blocks Story by Henry Moore.

committee of the city with the ability to meet in the council meeting room and to call on the council if they needed additional resources.<sup>5</sup>

3. In Edmonton Canada, a group of neighbors began to meet with people on their block to find out what skills, abilities and interests they had. Then they began to connect neighbors with similar interests, creating one-on-one matches as well as new associations. The civic results of this connecting process were so impressive that the City “seconded” (lent) an employee to work under the direction of the neighbors’ group. This assistance was invaluable because the volunteering neighbors had somebody available full time to take on administrative and technical tasks.<sup>6</sup>
4. In St. Paul, Minnesota, the city government outlined a series of functions that it was performing in neighborhoods. It offered neighborhoods the power to take on these functions for the amount of money that the city had used to carry them out. This unusual process of “de-functioning” reallocated authority, responsibility and money based on local citizens’ response. And the citizens were free to improvise their own methods of implementation.
5. In Chicago, an alderman delegated his decision-making power to the block organizations in the ward. They were informed of legislative issues to be decided by the city council. Then they were able to discuss their position and cast their block’s vote with the alderman. He then voted the way the majority of the participating blocks desired. He delegated his power to decide, creating something like an informed referendum that made clear to local citizens that they had a real voice and public power.<sup>7</sup>

In each of these cases, local citizens and their associations created community benefits by taking on new functions and in each case, institutional leaders led by stepping back so that the neighborhoods and the city could each be more effective. These experimenters started with the common assumption that their principal role was to enable local citizens and their associations to become more powerful and productive. As a result, they have developed unique ‘precipitating’ tools. Through their work they are creating a new approach to empowerment that reaches beyond more traditional empowerment methods that involve hearings, consultations, community advisory boards or even co-production. Their methods

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<sup>5</sup> See [www.abcdinstitute.org](http://www.abcdinstitute.org), Publications, [A Guide for Government Officials Seeking to Promote Productive Citizen Participation](#) by John McKnight (2019)

<sup>6</sup> See [www.abcdinstitute.org](http://www.abcdinstitute.org), Publications, [Asset Based Neighborhood Organizing: The Method of the Abundant Community Initiative in Edmonton, Canada](#) by Kim Hopes, John McKnight and Howard Lawrence (2015).

<sup>7</sup> The Forty-fourth Ward Assembly: an Experiment in Neighborhood Democracy, Greta Salem, Center for Urban Policy, Loyola University of Chicago, Chicago, IL 1980.

are doubly powerful because they not only enhance the productive capacity of local citizens and their associations, but they are also gaining the community-wide benefits of new citizen creativity and problem solving.