

Community Dreams: The Power of Citizen Authority

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For many years before Ronald Reagan's administration, the Federal Government provided funds to Regional Health Planning Agencies. These agencies oversaw the area health planning focusing on medical systems and resources. The Reagan administration discontinued support for these agencies and many then sought to replace the Federal Funds.

On Chicago's Westside there was great concern within this African American community that local hospitals would close or move away. Many felt that the Regional Agency had provided some control over the hospital exodus. Therefore, local neighborhood and activist groups convened to decide what they could do without the regional group's helpful authority.

They developed a plan to create their own citizen organization to replace the useful functions of the Federally supported agency. Near the conclusion of their planning meeting, there was a discussion of the name they should use for their new organization. Should it be the 'Westside Health Committee' or 'Health Council' or 'Health Coalition'? Suddenly, a woman who was a wise elder from the community said, "In the past, the government was the authority but now they are gone. So, we have a plan to replace them. Now we are the authority. So, let's call ourselves what we are – the Westside Health Authority.

The participants were unanimous in accepting the new name. Thirty years later, the Westside Health Authority (WHA) has provided shelter for all kinds of community building initiatives. They include student health career planning in local hospitals, building a large community Wellness Center, buying a closed hospital and turning it into a clinic. In addition, they created a neighborhood organization called "Every Block a village," a housing rehabilitation organization employing local African American contractors and craftsman, a men's group, a women's group, youth organizations and, most recently, a "Good Neighbor Campaign" designed to reconnect residents in order to have a stronger community.

Local leaders believe the title of "Authority" has been a vital factor enabling WHA in mobilizing and engaging citizen action. The idea that residents are the authority calls forth community dreams and replaces the tendency for neighbors to wait to fulfill the dreams of planners and institutions.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines an authority as “those who have control.” Local resident groups are usually defined as advisors, advocates, or co-producers but rarely as the people who are in control. However, a citizen authority calls forth a critically different role for residents. That role is to be the responsible party. Authority means you have responsibility because of your control. It is this power of residents to be responsible for their future that has proliferated the functions and the powers of citizen authorities like the Westside Health Authority.

For those interested in more detail about the Westside Health Authority see:

<http://healthauthority.org/>

<https://www.facebook.com/WestsideHealth/>

<http://healthauthority.org/good-neighbor-campaign-austin/><https://www.facebook.com/GoodHood5417/>