

Asset-Based Community Development

Asset-based community development (ABCD) is a strategy for discovering a community's capacities and assets, and mobilize those assets for community improvement.

(McKnight and Kretzmann. <http://www.northwestern.edu/IPR/abcd.html>.)

The Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) process focuses on the strengths of a community and how to bring those strengths to bear in community improvement activities. For example, a typical needs assessment may ask, "What is the problem?" In contrast, ABCD work asks, "How can our community assemble its strengths into new combinations, new structures of opportunity, new sources of income and control, and new possibilities?"

Each community boasts a unique combination of assets upon which to build its future. One can discover in every community a vast and often surprising array of individual talents and productive skills, few of which are being mobilized for community-building purposes.

Five Steps Toward Whole Community Mobilization

McKnight and Kretzmann offer the following steps, not as a complete blueprint for broad, asset-based community development, but as some of the major challenges. They may point to a potential process. They include:

Step 1. Mapping the capacities and assets of individuals, citizens' associations and local institutions that exist and that can be marshaled in the community

Mapping can be done at the individual, organizational or the community level. It can be used to identify whom to involve, which issue(s) to work on, or after the issue is prioritized, to further plan and implement activities. Mapping tools are located on the web site mentioned above.

Step 2. Building and strengthening partnerships among local assets for mutually beneficial problem solving within the community

Mapping can be used to identify and recruit potential partners in ways that are different than the way we tend to recruit (e.g., recruit participants by approaching professional organizations in the community and asking for a representative). Again, this can be done at multiple levels and in the context of the different priority health areas.

There are many examples of ways that this can be accomplished. Specifically, recruiting unique individuals who might not otherwise participate; finding persons who can be involved not as clients but as contributors; associations and clubs; local private, public and nonprofit institutions; the community's physical assets (land, buildings, streets, transportation systems)

and collaborative leaders who are interested in constantly expanding the numbers and kinds of people involved.

Step 3. Mobilizing the community's assets for economic development and information sharing purposes

Beyond locating assets and beginning to build relationships, ABCD involves mobilizing all of the community's assets. Each local association and institution can be urged to begin making its own set of contributions. For example, organizations can provide support (e.g., encouragement, direction, mentoring, guidance, linkages, transportation, etc.) to those who have contributions to make as part of the solutions/activities that are being implemented. The capacity to exchange information is central to the success of any community-building project. So it is important to learn about all those places in the community where communication of a "public" nature takes place: churches, clubs, beauty and barbershops, even street corners. How can these be validated, strengthened and expanded?

Step 4. Convening as broadly representative a group as possible for the purposes of building a community vision and plan

Asking who are we in this community and what do we value most? Where would we like our community to go in the next five, ten, twenty years? These are simple, but compelling questions that can be adapted to the work of eliminating health disparities. There are many community planning models and approaches. What works in one community will not necessarily work in another. The main ideas here are *begin with assets, expand the table, and combine planning with problem solving*.

Beginning with assets means starting with a thorough inventory of the capacities of individuals, associations and institutions in the community. Expanding the table refers to making the planning process as open and participatory as possible, including participants not normally thought of as community leaders. Finally, combining planning with problem-solving means choosing practical activities that the group can start working on now, while at the same time planning long-term efforts.

Step 5. Leveraging activities, investments and resources from outside the community to support asset-based, locally-defined development

According to McKnight and Kretzmann, this is only done when all of the steps above have begun. A community that has mobilized its internal assets offers opportunities for real partnerships, for investors who are interested in effective action and in a return on their investment.

For more information on these and other ideas see the website:
<http://www.northwestern.edu/IPR/abcd.html>.