



Hearing the Call:
Community Listening
at
Hope Community
2008

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INTRODUCTION

Why We Write About Listening

In the mid-1990s we were a small organization in a neighborhood just outside of downtown Minneapolis. Illegal drugs, violence, and abandoned and destroyed properties brought desperation to the neighborhood where we had run a small hospitality house for women and children since 1977. We began to sow the seeds for major organizational change and growth in response to what was happening around us. In 1997 when we had closed the shelter and made a commitment to a revitalization vision, we began our first Community Listening Project. As Hope Community has become a respected community developer, we have also become known for our "Listening." Now over 1,500 people have participated in community dialogues organized by Hope. We write this overview because of our commitment to communicating what we learn from this challenging work and in response to the many requests we get.

Hope Community

Hope Community has undergone sweeping changes throughout its 30-year history. But the core stays the same—belief in the power of people and place. Beginning as a shelter for women and children in a 100-year-old Victorian house, Hope has since created a working model for change. Now in 2008 Hope owns and manages 126 units of housing (90%) affordable and indoor and outdoor community space - another 49 units are under construction. Our headquarters and community center completed in 2003 stand at the intersection of two major Minneapolis streets – an area that had been abandoned. This intersection is the core of a major development project that will include over 250 units of housing when completed.

Our model of community development integrates revitalization of housing and community spaces with extensive community engagement. Using organizing, education and community building, we relate to people as citizens, not clients. The overriding goal of all our work is to sustain the residency of low-income people and diverse cultures in this neighborhood for the long term. These people will play a strong leadership role in establishing a sustainable mixed-income community.

The Community Where Hope Works

Hope is located in the Phillips Community in South Minneapolis where there are long-time American Indian, African American and largely low-income European American communities. Large immigrant populations include people from African and Latino countries, as well as countries in the Mid-East and Eastern Europe. The median household income for a family of four in the Phillips Community is about 35% of the median income level in the Twin Cities area. Hope tenants and participants reflect the neighborhood demographics. Isolation and significant housing instability are major challenges impacting working class and low-income families living in Phillips and surrounding neighborhoods.

Why Listening?

How It Started

At St. Joseph's House, the shelter where we began our work, respect was always a centerpiece. The beginnings were built on the philosophy of Dorothy Day who founded a movement of hospitality houses for the very poor across the country. "Comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable," she said. The culture of respect and the shelter's strong connection to neighborhood people became a foundation for our growing organization.

As our efforts progressed, we knew that we needed to continue that strong community connection. The challenge was to find a way to do that as our vision grew far beyond the original shelter. We started early. Hope's first formal Community Listening began in 1997 long before we knew where our new mission would take us. Some core assumptions shaped the process:

- It wasn't enough to talk with a few people;
- Politics as usual wouldn't work: too many residents didn't trust the typical public process. They perceived "official" process as dominated by homeowners and too often driven by narrow anticrime agendas, and a vision of a gentrified future;
- The voices of low-income people from diverse cultures (the majority of neighborhood residents) were too often silent in public decision making. They had to be central in our process;
- We would engage people through dialogue in groups, not individually.

Why It Continues

As we write this in 2008 over 1,500 people have been involved in small dialogues through Hope's Community Listening process in five major "Listening Projects." The listening built on our history and strengths and has had major impact throughout the organization. It's not a one-time process, nor is it representative governance. *It is an ongoing connection to community, an overall organizational approach to planning and reflection, and it gives credibility to Hope's work in and outside the community.*

This report describes the formal Community Listening process we have developed. It also explains how deeply the ways we use listening, connection and partnership in all our daily work affect our overall approach.

HOW FORMAL COMMUNITY LISTENING PROJECTS ARE ORGANIZED

Go To Where The People Are

As anyone who has organized at a community level knows, the first and maybe greatest challenge is getting people in the room. If we put up signs or passed out flyers about community dialogues, we knew from experience that hardly anyone would show up. People's lives are busy, and they tend to respond best when they have a relationship. Of course we held sessions with our own tenants, but our purpose was to reach out to the broader community as well.

Because we wanted to organize group dialogues where people could learn from each other, we began meeting with other organizations where people from the community gather. We learned that not all organizations brought people together, but that many "served" people individually. We also learned that many of those organizations who do bring people together were eager to help make Community Listening happen. They wanted to hear what people had to say, they believed that people's voices should be heard, and they thought people would want to be involved.

The organizations who agreed to host Listening sessions became informal partners in the process. Over the years our partners have included community, social service and housing groups, churches, shelters, schools, parenting programs, cultural programs, ESL and other educational programs, and teen and youth programs. Through these partnerships we have reached diverse people representing the many cultures in the community: renters, single parents, homeless people, the very old and the youth, people working multiple jobs and those unable to work, natural-born Americans and immigrants.

This approach gets diverse people to the table because of its relational organizing: people participate more when they are asked by others they trust. They come together to talk in groups, meeting their neighbors and breaking down the barriers and stereotypes between them. And what emerges from their dialogue is far richer than the answers we might have gotten from them individually.

What Happens: The Power of Dialogue

During our Listening sessions, the depth and connection that people experience is the product of intentional planning. Each session lasts at least an hour and a half. We treat each meeting as a valuable experience in itself. We prepare beforehand by meeting with the organizers and the host organization, and work to set up welcoming spaces which will support dialogue.

During the session, we take notes in a large, visible place in the room to allow for correction and comment. And since trust is critical to the integrity and process of Community Listening, we are honest with people about the long-term nature of community change, and we never make promises we can't keep. People understand that we won't be able to act on all the issues they raise, and instead we invite (or we say "agitate") them to be a part of our larger public effort to make a difference.

Once we organize people for a Listening Session, we support them to "go deep;" that is, that they share their hopes, dreams, fears, opinions, ideas and values about life in the community. We are not seeking answers but rather asking people to share experiences and raise questions by telling stories and reflecting on their lives and their visions for the future.

We do carefully prepare an agenda that often starts with a discussion about some aspect of community. Many people tell us about their negative experience of community meetings that are often held in a crisis where anger is the focus, or the meeting is run in a way that excludes many people. We want people to have a chance to be reflective. We intentionally raise challenging issues, but we don't let the sessions become another discussion focused only on problems. If Hope staff doesn't facilitate the sessions, we carefully train facilitators. Respect in the room and opportunity for input from everyone present are central in the process. We always do good introductions of everyone in the room – helping to build some trust. And we always tell people about Hope Community, why Hope is doing Listening and what will happen after the discussion. Almost without exception people have been willing to engage and participate in the session, even when they don't really understand what it is about until they get to the session. Always people tell us that this needs to happen more in communities.

FIVE COMMUNITY LISTENING PROJECTS

Over the past eleven years, we have conducted five Community Listening Projects. In each project, we organized anywhere between 18 and 30-plus small dialogues, in which we met with 240-360 youth and adult participants in each project. We've held sessions in multiple languages and at various sites, and the people we've met with ranged in age and culture.

The first Listening Project began soon after we closed the original shelter and hospitality house. Early on, our work had focused on the crisis of homelessness. When we wanted to begin connecting with people around a long-term future, we talked with people about jobs and education. Later, as our revitalization role in the community grew, our Listening became more directly connected to community development. This set the stage for doing four more Projects over the next ten years, and generated countless ideas for more.

Listening Project #1: Jobs and Education

In 1997, we brought together over **365 adults** in more than **30 listening** sessions to discuss people's experiences with and dreams for education and jobs. Three-quarters of the participants were people of

color and of those, 78% earned less than \$20,000/year (more than half made under \$10,000). People traded stories about the significant barriers to getting livable wage jobs and/or attending school. We heard about the lack of transportation, time pressures, cultural and language barriers, the pressures of balancing work and parenting with very low incomes, and having to move often to find affordable and decent housing.

Several key themes emerged as the project unfolded. Most people were marginalized from mainstream education, and were intimidated by institutions and how to find information they needed. They were challenged by dealing with racism and other stereotypes, and by having limited networks. They had dreams but didn't know how to take the steps that would help get them there. People were open about their experiences and willing, even excited, to talk and meet together. People were also surprised that Hope staff and their other neighbors wanted to listen to them, and at the support they found in the sessions.

- “You don’t always have someone to ask that has been through it. You can’t trust the information people give you.”
- “You need to be with others to build strength together.”

This first Listening Project deepened our relationships throughout the community, and what we learned from it still shapes our community-based education work today.

The next two Listening Projects organized from 1999 to 2001 came at a time when Hope was planning for major housing development. Significant discussion centered on urban community issues including the perceived lack of investment in inner-city communities, the negative stereotypes of the community and yet its major strengths and possibilities, the challenges and opportunities of multi-cultural communities, and the widespread fear of gentrification. Hope’s commitment to affordable housing and the critical importance of fostering the renewal of a healthy multicultural community was overwhelmingly affirmed.

Listening Project #2: Concepts of Community

In 1999-2000 we again organized more than **300 residents** in over **30 sessions** in a project which focused on the meanings, struggles and aspirations that people attach to larger ideas about neighborhood and community. This time people talked and learned from one other about what community meant to them. They brought up what they would change and what they would hold onto. They told stories about the experience of community in their lives. They identified the importance of public spaces like our Listening sessions so they could hear and challenge each other to make the changes they wished for, happen. People also described the broad range of communities in which they were involved (cultural, religious, etc., not just narrow geographic community), and they talked about being at once overextended and disconnected from others, a frustrating contradiction for many.

- “Community is destroyed if there are no gathering places.”
- “Being a part of so many communities can be hard.”
- “There are layers of communities—communities within communities.”

- “Communities are like overlapping circles.”
- “Community is people coming together and making a better life...”

Listening Project #3: Peavey Park

Peavey Park is a central fixture in the neighborhood, and therefore a major component of Hope’s plan for neighborhood renewal. An inner city park, Peavey is two blocks from the Hope campus and has struggled for years with drug dealing, violence and other illegal or antisocial behaviors. Of course its use by families and children had dropped off as a result, but through Community Listening we came up with a plan to address these concerns. Between 2000-2001 almost 200 residents participated in 18 sessions in which they talked about what they saw in the park and in the surrounding community, what they believed outsiders saw, and what they wished to see as people living nearby a potentially rich, green space.

The principles that emerged from these dialogues were later used by a group of community residents who worked with an architect to create a Master Plan for the park. The group held many meetings with park stakeholders and park board members. Finally the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board approved the plan as the park’s official Master Plan. Incorporating Community Listening as a strategy for planning with a city entity marked a big shift in business as usual for the MPRB, and an important accomplishment for Hope.

The residents involved in this project were eloquent about why they participated, what it meant to them, and what difference it made to be involved together in the public life of the community. One person talked about how

- “This was a way for us to meet each other, spark interest, and generate involvement. This kind of activity is one of the best ways to keep the city alive.”

Another described how in the process,

- “We recognized that we all had the same goal in mind. And we came to understand more about how we are all connected to each other.”

Because our Listening process allows for sharing common values, people develop and exercise their personal and collective power as a result. This became particularly clear in the Peavey Park project. As one resident put it,

- “We achieved a position of power.”

And as another boldly stated,

“This neighborhood wanted something, and it came to the table with a vision and follow through rather than just a list of wishes with an expectation that the MPRB would fulfill.”

The next two listening projects followed a period of significant physical rehabilitation, and built on Hope’s growing sense from the people living here of their relationships to the community and to each others. We heard from adults and some youth between 2003-4, and exclusively from youth in 2007-8

Listening Project #4: Community Conversations

In every Listening Project to date, the concept and role of community and its creation had been pivotal. In the fourth Listening Project, our organizers focused on the specifics of the area around Hope. Between 2003-2004 almost **250 residents** participated in **22 listening sessions** and shared why they live here and what they think of its leadership, its assets, and its challenges. They also talked about their hopes for its future and theirs within it. What flowed from the conversations built upon our previous Listening work and helped shape Hope's 2006 strategic planning process.

In the fourth project, people discussed the importance of Listening and of the space in which that happens as the basis for building relationships with others living nearby. As one resident put it,

- "This (listening) is useful. It's very important. I thought I was the only one who felt this way – now I know I'm not alone."

And another,

- "(W)e have seen that we have all these problems, and we can't stop talking. Because we have so much to say. We need a place where we can gather and keep talking, come together."

Finally, in this project, as in all the others, optimism was a strong thread:

- "I have hope for the community – we need to continue this discussion."

Listening Project #5: Youth

In 2007, Hope's youth and teen organizer began a Project reaching out to teens and young adults in the areas surrounding the organization. Chaka Mkali began the Project by building relationships with staff and/or leaders at youth organizations or at organizations where youth gather. Several organizations agreed to participate by bringing together a group of teens and young adults for listening sessions. Young leaders connected to Hope and attended 8 listening sessions with Chaka.

As the Listening Project moved forward, Hope also formed a youth and young adult leadership group, now called SPEAC (Sustainable Progress through Engaging Active Citizens). The youth leaders involved in that group took on the Listening Project, and the last 12 sessions were arranged and led by teens and young adults. Members of SPEAC also produced a separate report about the whole Listening Project. In total between 2007-2008, the group held **20 listening sessions** with approximately **200 youth**.

All in all, they found nine themes in what they heard from the youth. They are:

1. Who's/Whose Community?: Youth expressed need to connect with others living in their community;
2. Going Beyond the Ghetto: Shifting Voices: Many youth are angry about the state of their community and feel they aren't often listened to as a possible source for solutions;
3. Acting Like Robots: Youth feel isolated and challenged by life circumstances, but expressed that with the right support, they know they can contribute to common goals and public work;
4. We're Following Failed Strategies: Youth feel divided by stereotypes, racism, classism, and sexism, but have dreams of changing their communities;

5. Recognition, Accountability, & Expression: Feeling Accepted: Young people want to be understood, accepted and held accountable by peers and leaders in their community;
6. Public Spaces: Young people think about public spaces as part of the definition of community, as a way to contribute to community, and as places to go when not at school or work;
7. Dreams: Freedom, equality, democracy, responsibility, financial security, globalism, living by example;
8. Role Models: Artists, rappers, visionaries, mentors, family members, teachers, peacemakers, friends;
9. Changing the System of Creating Powerlessness: Many young people feel powerful, but think that systems and people sometimes try to make them feel powerless.

COMMUNITY LISTENING AFFECTS HOPE'S PROCESS

Although Hope's five Listening Projects have been the most visible markers of our commitment to the values of deep and respectful connection and accountability, the significance of Community Listening to our overall work affects our entire organization. The concepts of Listening and relating are practiced daily at all levels of staff, formally and informally, in group settings, and in one-on-one meetings.

1-On-1 Community Engagement Meetings

- "We get to know you" vs. "dig in your business...for dirt."

A staple of community engagement work is for our staff to meet constantly with tenants, neighbors, and staff at other community-based organizations. They build relationships with others by Listening to their stories and comments, and by finding common interests and opportunities to "agitate" them to join in Hope's work. Sometimes we meet with people because they've been involved in a Listening Project; sometimes we meet them through a Hope-sponsored event, since hundreds of people each year come to Hope for classes, celebrations, youth and family activities, leadership and organizing opportunities, and community and cultural events. And compared to the social service model in which people are often made passive observers of community life rather than active members in it, our meetings are about making healthy, respectful connections and sharing a common interest in the neighborhood and its future. Ultimately, we believe that our relationships on all levels are at the center of strong community.

Listening as a Planning and Teaching Tool

When we at Hope are trying to figure out a new direction, or decide what action to take, or what to do when we see something changing in the community, our first move is to go out into the neighborhood and talk to people: our tenants, our adult and youth students, our organizational partners around the community. Listening in this way not only helps us stay accountable, but it gives focus to our work and puts our own interpretation of what is happening around us into a larger, neighborhood, reality-based context.

Relational Work by Development Staff

Another way to understand how much Community Listening has influenced the workings of our organization is by looking at how it affects the approach of our staff who aren't immediately involved in the Community Engagement side of our work. Our real estate development staff address the complexity of building, renovating and managing housing units. The development costs are high, the professional knowledge required is significant, and the logistics are complex. The development staff recognize that

without secure, ongoing relationships with stakeholders at all levels of the community, Hope can only take its vision so far. So they look at their collaborations with potential partners, which in addition to residents include developers, funders, and public officials, not as one-time pairings but as the start of building and sustaining a web of relationships whose interconnection will ultimately benefit everyone.

- “Hope has always been resourceful at finding the players and motivating them to get together to start something new.”

Developing Partnerships Through Listening

Community Listening has also helped broaden the impact of our own programming. Through our connections with other community organizations many, many people have become tenants in our housing or participants in our programs. We nurture our relationships with other groups just as we do with all our neighbors because we believe that the more we all know each other, the more possibilities we are building.

The Limits of Community Listening

Community Listening has its limits. Because people come to one Listening session certainly does not mean that they will be involved at Hope over the long-term. There are people who have been involved in leadership groups in the Listening projects and as a result have had much more extensive leadership experience. There are others who connect to Hope as the result of a session. In fact many people do experience only one session. That’s why it is so important that each session is organized to be as productive a discussion as possible. Hope has many other ways to engage people. In spite of those limits, the Listening process is enormously valuable throughout our work.

FINAL WORDS: ACTION, PATIENCE & ACCOUNTABILITY

At Hope Community, we consider Listening to be “**critical action**.” It is critical to our effectiveness as a catalyst for change because it is critical to achieving the tipping point for the long term community renewal we are seeking. It reflects the core of our work which has remained in place for over 30 years, because it emphasizes the importance of people and voice, relation and connection. And it allows us to translate voice into action and better harness the collective power of people for change.

Our vision for redevelopment is far-reaching and complex, and we understand that such a vision will take years to realize. In fact, it will take what we refer to as “**profound patience**.” In the interim, Community Listening is sewing the seeds of a dynamic community. It helps people connect to themselves and to others around them as citizens, a critical first step in developing neighborhood leadership and nurturing their willingness to put down roots. Listening also paves the way for Hope to unite with and learn from the people who live in the neighborhood.

Finally, Community Listening nurtures the values of the public community we are rebuilding while making us a more effective organization. Community Listening makes us more **accountable**, more credible and ultimately more effective, because it allows us to translate the power of 1,500-plus people to visible physical changes and a very real web of social connection and capital. Ultimately, not only is our two-sided approach emphasizing physical and social community development the best and the right thing to do, but the bottom line is that it is working.