

Beacons: Building Community by Engaging All in Service



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“What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility: a recognition on the part of every American that we have duties to ourselves, our nation and the world...firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character than giving our all to a difficult task. This is the price and promise of citizenship.” -- President Barack Obama, Inaugural Address, January 20, 2009

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The vision of service expressed by the President could be transformative for individuals, communities, and the nation. Getting it done will require a lot of hard work and sound infrastructure on which to mount local efforts.

The Beacon Centers, initiated by New York City in 1991, offer such an infrastructure and have years of experience engaging all members of their communities. Among the first citywide after-school initiatives, today, more than 135 Beacons in six cities serve 200,000 children, youth, family members and other community residents annually. The expansion of citywide after-school initiatives since that time occurred in part because of the early example of the Beacons. But Beacons took a different tack than that of many earlier efforts. And that is why they remain a powerful vehicle for local service efforts.



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Developed at a time when urban communities had few resources to offer their young people, when crime and other ills were rampant, Beacons sought to increase the ability of communities to meet the needs and build on the strengths of their residents.

Throughout each city, Beacons offer local organizations and individuals opportunities to create programs that help them to build the organizational capacity to provide services that did not exist before.

What does the Beacon approach look like?

- **Community Organizing:** In Minneapolis and in New York's Washington Heights, young people and adults partner to plan an annual citywide leadership training retreat where, together, they identify issues, develop action projects, and address them directly.
- **Technology Support:** In San Francisco's Sunset District, middle school students use technology skills learned in their Beacon to repair computers and create original music using industry standard professional equipment and software. High school youth created and staff a website with national readership, bamboozled.org, nominated for a Webby award in 2003.
- **Teaching:** In Brooklyn, NY, high school students conduct after-school classes for middle school youth in which they teach about themes such as the Holocaust, the Solar System and others.



- **Culture Preservation:** Adults in the Canarsie Section of Brooklyn Peter Kleinbard established a Beacon to preserve their West Indian heritage. They developed activities and projects such as a steel band to engage young people. Today, they operate two Beacons serving several thousand children, youth and adults.
- **Violence Prevention:** In San Francisco, Beacon staff and older youth intervene rapidly to prevent tensions between youth groups from erupting into larger problems, and provide counseling to young people who become disconnected from their family members and peers.
- **Neighborhood Revitalization:** In Sunset Park, Brooklyn, the neighborhood school yard, previously a dangerous spot after school where gangs gathered, has been transformed. People representing the entire kaleidoscope of ethnicities gather to play and work together within and across ethnic lines. This effort was organized by the Beacon director who, with local parents and youth, engaged the police, the school, and the gangs themselves to create this unique resource.

Today, when our nation's economic crisis affects every family, communities require the all-hands-on-deck approach advanced by the Beacons. At a time of reduced resources, we must build on the desire of young people and adults to make a difference. By giving to others, young people enhance their own development. Preparation for adulthood requires the opportunity and the lessons from giving as well as receiving services. For all, citizenship in a democracy is not passive, but is renewed by opportunities to act.

Today, the challenge to undertake a strategy focused on community strengths again stands before us. Community building takes time. It requires flexible rather than targeted funding, allowing local organizations to make decisions about how resources are used. Yet the results are compelling. Among the Beacon cities, small neighborhood organizations have grown to provide multiple services. Young people grow up in Beacons which prepare them to take on increasingly responsible roles, advancing from participant to leader and, often, to staffer as they mature. Several participants now direct the Beacons they attended as children, and many have become adults raising their own families in the neighborhood, their own children now playing and studying in their Beacon.

To support this work, intermediaries have been established or expanded in each city where Beacons have been adapted. They play an important role, articulating and preserving the Beacon vision while adapting to meet emerging community needs. They help to develop new programs and provide training and coaching to sites. They bring to the "localness" of the community effort a national perspective about good practice.

Local government plays a critical role, not only in providing stable funding for Beacon efforts, but also in its support for youth and community development as a powerful methodology. In New York City, the Department of Youth and Community Development has long recognized the value of the Beacons infrastructure as well as its role as a stabilizing force in communities through good times and bad. Most recently, the City has turned to Beacons to help bolster out-of-school time and other community programming at a time when fiscal constraints might otherwise have eliminated vital services.

Over time, organizations that started as "mom and pop" associations in response to neighborhood needs have grown to offer extensive family and youth-supporting services

including foster care, drop out prevention, summer youth employment, and out-of-school time along side of classes that support parents and other adults in the community such as ESL and GED preparation. In New York City and San Francisco, many of these organizations now advance school reforms. Shaped by youth development principles of high expectations and caring adult relationships and enhanced by their profound commitment to the success of all youth, these organizations have helped to reshape high schools, making them more personalized, and sharply increasing graduation rates. For many of these organizations, the growth of their management capacity and understanding of youth development came about through their work with the Beacon which has become a stimulus for growth and a source of new and extensive neighborhood and citywide services.

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