GENERATIONS *of* HOPE

Assessing the Social Impact of Intentional Neighboring

Intentional neighboring *is a framework designed to enable people, through neighboring, to mitigate the effects of personal and social challenges on their day-to-day lives that threaten their well-being and the social fabric of their communities. It embodies an image of kindness and possibility that reflects how all of us would like to think of ourselves and the kind of community we would like to live in.*

In rushing to establish the longer-term outcomes of an intentional neighboring framework, conventional approaches to evaluation often tend to overlook some of its most important features. What does it look like to live a life of intentional neighboring, and what does living such a life really mean to residents and staff? This information is critical for designing meaningful evaluations, and perhaps more importantly, reflects a valuable outcome in itself.

Evaluation efforts often fail to identify the core elements or essential characteristics of this model, or to confirm their presence. It is easy to assume that a community represents intentional neighboring and move on to addressing outcomes, but this assumption must be validated.

Unpacking the black box

Before trying to ascertain the longer-term outcomes of intentional neighboring, it is important to identify aspects of *daily living* where residents are providing and receiving support from each other. Examples of this support, the foundation of which is caring relationships, can be found in the following stories told by residents of *Hope Meadows* − a neighborhood based on intentional neighboring where most of the children, prior to moving there, had rarely experienced nurturance or compassion.

Mary Ann:

I told Anita [another resident] that before I retired I used to worry a lot about spending my time in an apartment somewhere with nothing to do, just staring at the walls and feeling lonely and useless. Days like today make me feel so thankful that I found out about Hope, and had the courage to move out here. I took CJ [a Hope child] to the Dairy

Queen to celebrate a great year in 4th grade; then we went to hear the man from the Humane Society, and then the party tonight. All weekend I had people worrying about whether I should get my foot looked at, offering to drive me to the doctor's. Steven [a Hope child] came twice a day to walk the dog, and the neighbor ladies invited me to their cookout last night. My cup runneth over.

Eleene:[1]

Eleene… fell down a set of concrete steps… and shattered her shoulder and arm; in the surgery that followed, she was given a new plastic shoulder and a titanium arm shank. Her daughters came to help, and for days after she got home, Eleene lay on the couch, too stiff and in too much pain to get up. Children would come by to check in, including Ben… "Every day," she says, "Ben would come to visit, and he'd stand with the other kids and never say anything. Then one day he said, 'Mrs. C, do you have to spend the rest of your life on that couch?' I said, 'No, I'll get up and be about.' 'Oh,' he said. 'When?' I told him, 'Whenever I can.' So I told my girls, 'If anyone sees Ben coming, you get me up and sitting on a chair!' Well, the next day, here he came, and they got me up. Ben saw me, and he just grinned from ear to ear. You know, I'm up and about now."

Katara (age 16, remembering Elmer)**:**

Grandpa Elmer was very special to me. Whenever I saw his face it brightened my day, and he always said that I brightened his day too. I always knew that Grandpa gave rides to kids that were running late for school. One day I went to his house to ask if he would take me to band. Immediately he dropped what he was doing and took me. When I got home there was a message on the answering machine from him saying that he had enjoyed taking me to band and that he would take me every day…. I always looked forward to hearing him say "Good morning Sunshine," and I also was eager each day to hear what he was going to teach me about for the day. Every day I learned something new like for instance, what a slush pump was and why all fire hydrants are not the same color.

These stories, representing reciprocal acts of care, support, and assistance, where people are expressing gratitude, understanding, concern, and joy, occurred throughout the day and every day, unlike in more traditional neighborhoods where similar acts of kindness are much more sporadic. For this to happen, more is needed than having people living next door to each other. Intentional neighboring, to be realized and ultimately to effect social change, must be designed with values carefully implemented. In what follows we present some initial thoughts on what and how to document this implementation.

[1] Reported by Rob Gurwitt (2002, March/April). Fostering hope. *Mother Jones*.

Essential features of intentional neighboring

Intentional neighboring, with its reliance on ordinary people to form caring relationships with each other, as exemplified by the stories of Mary Ann, Eleene, and Katara, is based on embracing the values of 1) neighboring, 2) engagement of older adults, and 3) reframing the meaning of vulnerability. *The implementation of each of these core elements is the essence of intentional neighboring*.

Obtaining evidence of if and how these values are reflected in the day-to-day life of the community is an essential component in establishing whether the initiative being evaluated represents intentional neighboring, and in establishing both short- and longer-term outcomes.

Value of neighboring. As good neighbors, *residents are surrounding each other daily with a culture of friendship, kindness, helpfulness, and consideration*. To determine if this core value is being put into practice, one might look for:

- evidence of a wealth of caring relationships, of meaningful friendships
- patterns of these relationships among and between the residents (e.g., older adults, those most vulnerable, young parents).

Value of engagement of older adults. Post-midlife adults and those at the end of life are occupying roles and engaging in activities that amplify their standing as older adults. In assessing the implementation of this core value, one might ask:

- Is there evidence of engagement where, as a part of daily living, post-midlife adults and (as the community matures), those at the end of life find themselves making a difference, contributing to the enhancement of the lives of others?
- What constitutes or represents this engagement?
- What percent of the older adults believe they are making a difference in the lives of others?

Value of reframing vulnerability. *People who are facing serious social challenges that make them vulnerable are viewed as assets to the community*. Assessing the implementation of this core aspect of intentional neighboring—expanded understandings, perceptions, and expectations of people society consider "different" or "vulnerable"—is perhaps the most challenging, yet it may be the most important assessment one can make. Specifically, is there a fuller response to vulnerability where vulnerability is not being defined solely by people's needs or deficits?

One might look for evidence that such residents:

- are being viewed by other residents as friends or even family—as caring and contributing community members

- are viewing themselves as caring and contributing community members
- are happy and engaged?

These and similar questions represent first steps in helping determine the *social impact* of intentional neighboring. If the community being studied does not embody the real meaning and fundamental nature of intentional neighboring, if it is not being successful in incorporating the three core values and purpose of intentional neighboring into its daily life, then (obviously) one cannot attribute commonly suggested outcomes such as graduation rates or health care costs as social impacts of intentional neighboring.

Social impact

We can define the **social impact of intentional neighboring** as the effect on the *well-being* of residents living in communities based on this paradigm, and on the *social fabric* of these communities. Given this definition, it is important that baseline and ongoing data on the key variables of well-being and social fabric be obtained as a means of addressing the questions above—as part of the initial efforts involved in determining social impact.

Well-being—a subjective measure. It is important to remember that well-being is a reflection of how people experience their lives. In communities based on intentional neighboring, a baseline for assessing peoples' perceptions of their well-being can be established as soon as residents move to the community, becoming part of its social fabric. The importance of this assessment is illuminated by the writing of Felicia Huppert and Timothy So of the Well-Being Institute at Cambridge University, who point out that the way people live and experience their lives is fundamentally important. They refer to a high-level of psychological well-being as *flourishing*, which they define as a combination of feeling good and functioning effectively.[2]

Martin Seligman[3], in his book, *Flourishing*, points out that this concept has key measurable elements: **positive emotions, engagement, meaning and purpose, accomplishment,** and **relationships**, with good relationships being the most important. In wanting to assess these elements as they relate to the primary purpose or core elements of intentional neighboring, we have looked to the work of Ed Diener (Joseph R. Smiley Distinguished Professor Emeritus at the University of Illinois) and his colleagues[4] who were instrumental in the development of the highly respected and easily implemented *Flourishing Scale*.

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[2] Huppert, F. A. & So, T. T. C. (2009). *What percentage of people in Europe are flourishing and what characterizes them?* Well-Being Institute, University of Cambridge.

[3] Seligman, M.E.P. (2001). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. New York: Free Press.

[4] Diener, E., Wirtz, D., Tov, W., Kim-Prieto, C., Choi, D., Oishi, S., & Biswas-Diener, R. (2009). *New measures of well-being: Flourishing and positive and negative feelings. Social Indicators Research*, 39, 247-266.

Specifically this instrument looks at:

- Active and meaningful engagement
- Development of supportive relationships
- Contributions to the happiness of others
- Optimism about one's future
- A sense that one's life is "good"
- A sense that one is respected.

In applying this scale to the well-being of residents of communities based on intentional neighboring, these variables can be applied to all residents including those most vulnerable and those who represent older adulthood. Taken collectively and looked at overtime, data from this simple eight-item Likert Scale can help determine if the primary goals of intentional neighboring are actually being realized. There are several other instruments that can be used to assess well-being, but we do like this one because of its proven reliability, ease of use by people of all ages, and *its reflection of the core values of intentional neighboring*.

Social fabric—where relationships are integral. In assessing social impact, it is not enough to look at well-being. One also must assess the social fabric of the intentional neighboring community. And like well-being, relationships, which include having the support of others *and* the need to support others, are integral to this assessment. Social fabric has been referred to as a metaphor for:

> *how well the community members interact amongst themselves. If you consider all the individual members as threads, the "social fabric" is made by having those members interact, thus weaving the threads together. The tighter the weave (the more frequently and positively the members interact with each other), the stronger the fabric is; the looser the weave, the weaker the fabric, and the more likely to tear (have conflicts that pit one group against another), fray (lose members), develop loose threads (criminals), and otherwise suffer.*
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> *Enhancing the social fabric, then, means to provide more and better interactions between members of the community so that they can make more friends, be more involved, be happy, be more willing to help someone when there is a need, and be inspired to keep their village a positive, pleasant place to live.*[5]

There are many ways to assess the social fabric of the community. These include neighborhood satisfaction questionnaires, focus groups, interviews, and ongoing records of demographic data

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[5] http://ell.stackexchange.com/questions/26263/what-does-social-fabric-mean

and engagement. On a more rigorous level, the social fabric can be accessed through ethnographic studies or network analysis. Examples of these methods applied to *Hope Meadows* can be found through our work at Generations of Hope.[6]

Conclusion

In assessing the social impact of intentional neighboring, it is easy to put the cart before the horse—to think about longer-term outcomes such as high school graduation rates, recovery from traumas, and lower health care costs before examining the fundamentals of the intentional neighboring framework.

For these long-term outcome variables—those that carry high costs to society in both dollars and human terms—to not be rendered meaningless, one must first determine if *ordinary people*, (people like Mary Ann, Eleene, Katara, CJ, Ben, and Grandpa Elmer), are *implementing the core elements of intentional neighboring*. Are they, as part of *daily life*, implementing the values of neighboring, engagement of older adults, and reframing of vulnerability? How is this implementation of values being linked to the well-being of residents and the social fabric of the community?

Only by making these determinations can the potential of intentional neighboring, as a new approach to effecting social change, be validated as a promising way to address those current and long-standing social challenges that threaten the well-being of too many people, and the social fabric of too many communities.

[6] Examples include: Eheart, B. & Power, M. (2001). *From despair to care: A journey of the old and the young at Hope Meadows.* Children and Youth Services Review, 23 (9-10), 691-718; Power, M. & Eheart, B. (2000). *From foster care to fostering care: The need for community.* The Sociological Quarterly, 41 (1), 85-102; Hopping, D. (2001). *Building collective capacity: New challenges for management-focused evaluation.* Children and Youth Services Review, 23 (9-10), 781-804.