Strengthening Social Capital: Examples

Communities can improve their social capital by strengthening their residents trust and engagement within three types of networks: bonding, bridging and linking. Here are some examples of efforts to strengthen each type of network.

Strengthening Bonding Networks

*Bonding networks are made of close ties, usually with family, friends and neighbors. These connections provide security and help people get by in times of need.*

**New York Mills community garden**
A local team recognized that those who are struggling to make ends meet are feeling the pinch of increased prices at the grocery store and gas pumps. A new community garden was formed that benefits gardeners (fun hobby), would-be-gardeners (new skill) and those needing to stretch a dollar (reduced grocery bill). Plots are offered free on a first come basis to civic groups, church groups or service groups wanting to challenge their green thumb skills and provide for the needy. The project offers neighbors the opportunity to come together out of a common love of gardening as well as a common interest in food security.

**Social capital learning circles**
Learning circles are made up of people who meet on a regular basis in neighborhood groups to gain information and share wisdom to improve their lives. Extension’s “community glue” program has not only provided a topic for members of community learning circles to learn, but it has been a topic that honors the concept of why those groups exist. *Social Capital: The Glue That Holds Communities Together*, has been used by more than 200 groups (2100+ members) to learn about and set personal goals for strengthening their community, starting with the very personal actions they take to reach out and help neighbors.

Strengthening Bridging Networks

*Bridging networks are made of weaker ties, usually among people with different backgrounds, or people engaged in different occupations or organizations. These connections help people get ahead and gain opportunities.*

**Marshall Integrative Leadership Program**
The community of Marshall, located in southwestern Minnesota, has become much more diverse in recent years. The new community members often have great difficulty engaging with and leading the various civic and community organizations that exist to serve and strengthen the community. A local design team was created to bring together leaders of the many ethnic groups and civic organizations in the community in order to build an effective community leadership development program. Members of the design team meet bi-monthly to network, share community experiences and stories to develop a leadership program focused on increasing engagement and leadership skills. As a result of the program, people representing diverse sectors of the community will have more opportunities to meet and work together on common concerns.

**Helping to Unify Bagley**
The community of Bagley doesn’t lack for active civic organizations; yet a leadership analysis showed that “one hand didn’t know what the other was doing.” Now, thanks to an initiative by their H.U.B. (Helping to Unify Bagley) to build bridges between the groups, they are working together to address the needs of the community. Organizations complete bio
sheets, have information posted on the community website, and their leaders gather every other month for breakfast at a local restaurant to share ideas and make plans for working together to provide education, build projects, and support each other. This new bridging network fills a void and creates strong potential for new community initiatives.

Thursday’s Table in Northfield
Thursday’s Table is a new community-wide initiative serving meals to 300-400 people weekly. Guests at Thursday’s Table are volunteers, their families and friends, those in transition and those in need of companionship. The environment is a welcoming one, where no distinction is made or seen between those preparing the meals and those in need. This is a unique setting where community action center staff and board members, benefactors, and families struggling to make ends meet form relationships that increase opportunities for all community members to meet their social and physical needs.

Strengthening Linking Networks
Linking networks are based on connections between community residents and community leaders or institutions. These connections help people access resources and bring about change.

Owatonna’s new immigrant populations and health care
The community of Owatonna has experienced a significant increase in immigrant populations from Mexico and Somalia. In order to build linkages between the health care systems in Owatonna and each of the new populations, questions about health care were generated by the new populations and submitted to a University of Minnesota Extension Educator. The educator then facilitated dialogues between the health care providers and the Mexican and Somali populations. These forums built understanding and trust across all three populations and clarified best practices for getting and giving culturally sensitive health care. One specific result of the forums was production of emergency question cards in English and either Spanish or Somali for first responders to carry with them so they can point to the question and get the appropriate answer if there is not a translator available.

Employers, community colleges and the Latino population
How does an institution reach out to find opportunities? The Rural Community College Initiative partnered with Rochester Community and Technical College, a University of Minnesota Extension Educator and Plainview, a small rural community. After conducting focus groups with a diverse population in Plainview, it was discovered that the Latino/a population was looking for an opportunity to increase their job skills to meet the needs of the employers. Through this process, the employers, the Latino/a population linked with the community college to offer training that would benefit all three segments. Each group was able to build relationships and learn how to make connections to meet their needs.

Community residents and the school district
The MACCRAY School District, serving the southwest Minnesota communities of Maynard, Clara City and Raymond, is challenged with decreasing enrollment and increasing operations cost. In response to this challenge, the district leadership embarked on a community strategic planning process. A group of parents, staff, and community members from all three communities began to meet monthly to critically think about the school district’s future. As a result of the process, community members have become more engaged with school district governance, helped identify future options and implications, and ways they can contribute to these options through their own volunteer efforts, such as service on the school board and contributing to a school fund raiser.