

# CONNECTIONS

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Exploring the  
Relationship between  
**THE PUBLIC  
AND GOVERNMENT**

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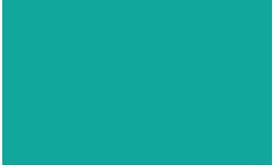
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# When Communities Embrace Shared Responsibility

By Richard C. Harwood

If there were any doubt about the condition of the community, the high school students in Winchester, Kentucky, left little room for ambiguity. They felt abandoned. They feared being unprepared for their futures—despite attending an award-winning school. Many were being raised by absent parents, some of whom were paying more attention to their drug addictions than to their children. Kids lacked activities, and, out of boredom, some were turning their pent-up energies to drug and alcohol abuse themselves.

When asked for a town motto, their answers came swiftly. “Get Out!” and “Run While You Can!” These youth felt the community had lost

faith in them and had no place for them. The youth had lost faith in their community.

This is, in part, what I found in Winchester, where Eastern Appalachia meets the Bluegrass region. The some 38,000 people who live in the local area face many challenges. The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation has partnered with The Greater Clark Foundation, which is working to build a more vibrant and resilient Clark County, where Winchester is located. We’ll work with the community over a number of years to help develop leaders, organizations, networks, and a can-do spirit that can spark tangible improvements for the people who live there. Our work began with a report called *Waving the Community’s Flag: Winchester and Clark County’s Moment*, based on conversations with residents and leaders.

Every community has its challenges. Community members may fear that young people will move away to find opportunities elsewhere or that their community is beset by gun violence or teen pregnancy or inadequate public schools. Maybe their challenges have to do with racial inequities, racism, barriers to inclusiveness, or the loneliness of shut-in seniors. In most communities, many of these issues often overlap.



What are we to do? How can we come together to take action as a community? How can we do this in a way that we productively and positively shape our shared lives? We must make room for the people we'll need to do this. Every person in the community can help. We must bring people together in more effective ways that take advantage of all the resources and talents and gifts a community has.

## WE NEED EACH OTHER

I see opportunity before us, but we must purposefully claim it if we are to effectively address the kinds of issues Winchester and other communities face. There are two intertwined parts to this opportunity:

### 1. A deep yearning among people to be part of something larger than themselves.

Amid all the noise and confusion, people want to be seen and heard. They seek to restore a sense of dig-

nity and decency in their lives and communities. We long to build things together and want to be more connected and engaged. In many respects, people feel they have been robbed of control over their lives, and they want it back.

### 2. Solutions to many of our current challenges require marshaling our shared resources.

Children feeling abandoned, the opioid crisis, inadequate public schools, and the like beg for a collective response. No single organization, no one leader, nor group of citizens can tackle these problems on their own. We need each other.

Here, then, is the opportunity that I see. Acting on one of these factors on its own is not enough. Rather, our task is to actively combine these two elements in an approach of “shared responsibility.” I believe we can—we must—bring together the resources of our communities in ways that enable us to solve

problems and harness people's yearning for genuine engagement.

At the heart of this idea is a critical experience I've had over and over again when working with communities. Too often, we take action on our concerns in ways that are delegated to and driven by just a handful of institutions and groups. Even when we enlist the help of others, we still tap only just a fraction of the potential of communities. If I had to make a guess, I'd say we're leaving on the table 85 percent or more of our available resources. What's more, so many of those resources involve the time and energy and innate capabilities of individuals and small groups in communities. We are forfeiting the golden opportunity for a community to work together, create together, and achieve together.

I believe we need to take a shared-responsibility approach. By this, I mean we need to bring together both big and small actions, in mutually reinforcing ways, to tackle our common problems. Everyone must play a part, and we must make sure that every person and every group feels they are invited to join in.

Shared responsibility can get us on a more hopeful path that leverages our collective energies. On this path,



we can grow our civic confidence and belief in ourselves.

### ACTING IN COMPLEMENTARY WAYS

In the years ahead, Winchester will need to marshal its resources, from all directions and from people and groups of all sorts, to help children and the community thrive. In doing so, they will need to work together to generate answers and actions to such questions as:

- Who can mentor, support, and love the children of this community when their parents and families are often absent or unable to do so? And who can support the parents and families to help them step forward?
- What social networks—meaning family, church, and neighbors, among others—can provide the necessary support to help people



move and stay off drugs and then to get on their feet and be self-sufficient? Drug treatment alone will not be enough to give people a real chance.

- What assets do different organizations and groups within the community have to help educate children beyond what the schools themselves can do?
- How might residents and organizations come together—in ways they could not achieve on their own—to get young mothers and families off to a good, healthy start?
- How can the community tackle issues such as obesity and unhealthy eating habits—and actually reach people where they live, in ways that matter to them, through messengers they trust?

Not all these steps can or even should be taken all at once. It takes time to build trust and forge relationships and for new actions to emerge. New people will come to the work when they are ready—not simply when a new project is announced. Strategically, we must start our efforts focused on those things that are actionable, doable, and achievable.

The key is to get early wins in order to build a new, promising trajectory, with growing momentum and ever-expanding civic confidence.

## MAKING OUR WAY FORWARD

My hope is that the idea of shared responsibility becomes a way to seize the opportunity before us, to tap into people's yearning to be part of something larger than themselves, and to marshal a community's resources to address shared challenges.

Shared responsibility is not some new model that must be implemented with rigid fidelity. We already have such models that too often strait-jacket communities, siphoning off our attention to implement the model rather than focusing on the community itself. The approach of shared responsibility can be incorporated into many existing efforts.



**People in communities want to be builders, shapers, contributors, and partners. We must be cocreators of our own lives and communities. This means how the work gets done is as important as what gets done.**

The starting point must always be what's best for the members of the community and not the professional processes we get so entangled in. Being focused on what is best for the community may sound obvious. But we all know that we get lost in our professional approaches.

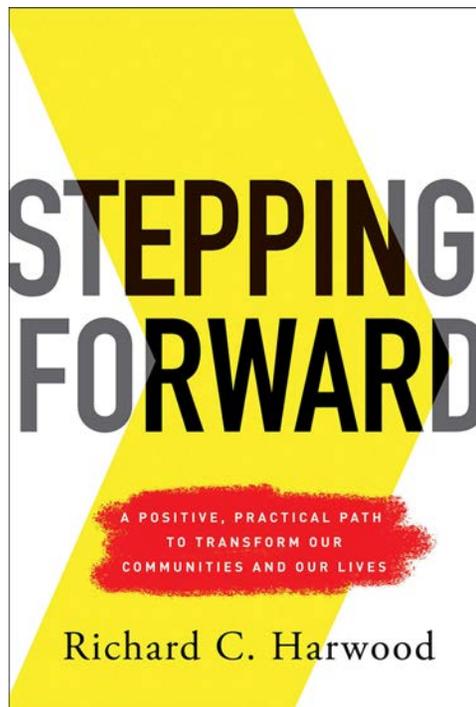
People in communities want to be builders, shapers, contributors, and partners. We must be cocreators of our own lives and communities. This means how the work gets done is as important as what gets done. We must imagine and construct actions that pull unlikely people and groups together, often across dividing lines, often in ways not thought of before, and often with results that not only solve problems but also help com-

munities thrive. Shared responsibility is about a whole host of groups and people having a genuine place in the community. There is a place for everyone—from large institutions to small ones, from citizens to clergy, from nonprofits to business. Everyone means everyone.

To effectively marshal a community's resources requires leaders and organizations to recognize and value these abundant resources and how they fit in relationship to them. As such, we must see ourselves and others as part of a larger alchemy called community. We must not simply ask, "What is our role?" The better question is, "Where do we fit in the larger community, given who else is here?"

Shared responsibility, as I see it, will take different forms. Sometimes it might be led by an organization reaching out to the larger community. Other times it might start with an ad hoc group and grow into the larger community. It can launch with a government agency and then fan out to include others. It might take place just in a small neighborhood and never spread beyond.

Shared responsibility isn't about seeking to "fix" everything all at once, as if that were possible. Instead, it is about how we tap into our innate capabilities and forge new ways to work together to take shared ownership of our lives and communities.



The truth is that all of these things—in their own ways, at the right times, in the right combinations—are called for if people are to reclaim a sense of belief and can-do spirit and if communities are to solve pressing problems.

Here I ask you to consider Abraham's tent in the Bible. He insisted that all four sides of his tent remain open at all times. All four sides! Anyone who wished to come in could do so, from any direction, when they were good and ready. They could contribute what they could. The stranger, especially, was welcomed, even those who were thought not to have much to offer—at least at first.

In our communities, to advance shared responsibility, we need to become tent-pitchers. We need to envision in our minds—and make real through our actions—how we can pitch a tent into which anyone can come. How can we honor the gifts and talents and resources of all groups, organizations, and individuals? How can we enable people to come when they are ready? How can we create a signal to those who might be resisting change that we will be here waiting for them and will welcome them when the time is right? We become creators when we pitch a new tent and leave all the sides open.

This is happening in Clark County. Since our work began there, dif-

ferent ad hoc groups of citizens, government agencies, nonprofits, and faith groups, among others, are coming together to forge new shared-responsibility approaches to combat what had been seemingly intractable challenges of family breakdown, drug addiction, divisions sowed by race, religious denominations and where people live, and kids who felt left behind. Real progress is being made.

There is something basic—radical—at the core of shared responsibility: It is relational. Shared responsibility is rooted in a covenant of sorts—an agreement between and among people that reflects a common purpose, infused by shared obligations, undertaken entirely by one's own will. Like all covenants, it calls us to be part of something larger than ourselves, in service to something that includes, yet transcends, ourselves. ■



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*This article is adapted from Stepping Forward: A Positive, Practical Path to Transform Our Communities and Our Lives (Greenleaf Book Group, 2019) by Richard C. Harwood. He is the president and founder of The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization located in Bethesda, Maryland. He can be reached at rharwood@theharwoodinstitute.org.*