

CONNECTIONS

An Annual Journal of the Kettering Foundation | 2021

To Work Together, Learn Together

By David Mathews p. 2

Libraries as Islands of Trust

By Ellen Knutson p. 30

**Getting to We: Bridging the Gap
between Communities and Local
Law Enforcement Agencies
in Virginia**

By Brian N. Williams p. 53



THE PUBLIC AND INSTITUTIONS:
Fractured or United?

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's website at www.kettering.org.

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CONTENTS

- 2 **To Work Together, Learn Together**
David Mathews
- 11 **Citizen Space and the Power of Associations:
An Interview with John McKnight**
Scott London
- 17 **How Participatory Journalism Created
Collaborations between Law Enforcement,
Assault Survivors, and Community
Advocates**
Sammy Caiola with jesikah maria ross
- 25 **Community Building in an Old-Fashioned Way**
Maura Casey
- 30 **Libraries as Islands of Trust**
Ellen Knutson
- 38 **Rural Life: What Keeps People from
Getting Involved?**
Lorie Higgins
- 46 **Redefining Public Safety:
Professionals and the Public**
Valerie Lemmie
- 53 **Getting to We: Bridging the Gap
between Communities and Local Law
Enforcement Agencies in Virginia**
Brian N. Williams
- 59 **Democracy Is a Snowball Rolling Down a Hill:
The 2021 Kettering Multinational Symposium**
Wendy Willis
- 66 **Catalyzing Change: Unleashing the Potential
of Communities**
Richard C. Harwood



Rural Life: What Keeps People from Getting Involved?

By Lorie Higgins

As a community development practitioner and extension specialist for the University of Idaho, I have participated in a statewide effort to assist rural communities with a broad range of challenges since 2003. The Idaho Community Review has been a signature program of the Idaho Rural Partnership since 1999. A Community Review (CR) is an assessment and strategic planning process designed for towns of 10,000 people or fewer. A CR is tailored to the local community and codeveloped with local leaders, business owners, and residents who have access to a wide range of community development practitioners to assist them as

they identify local priorities and the resources to achieve them.

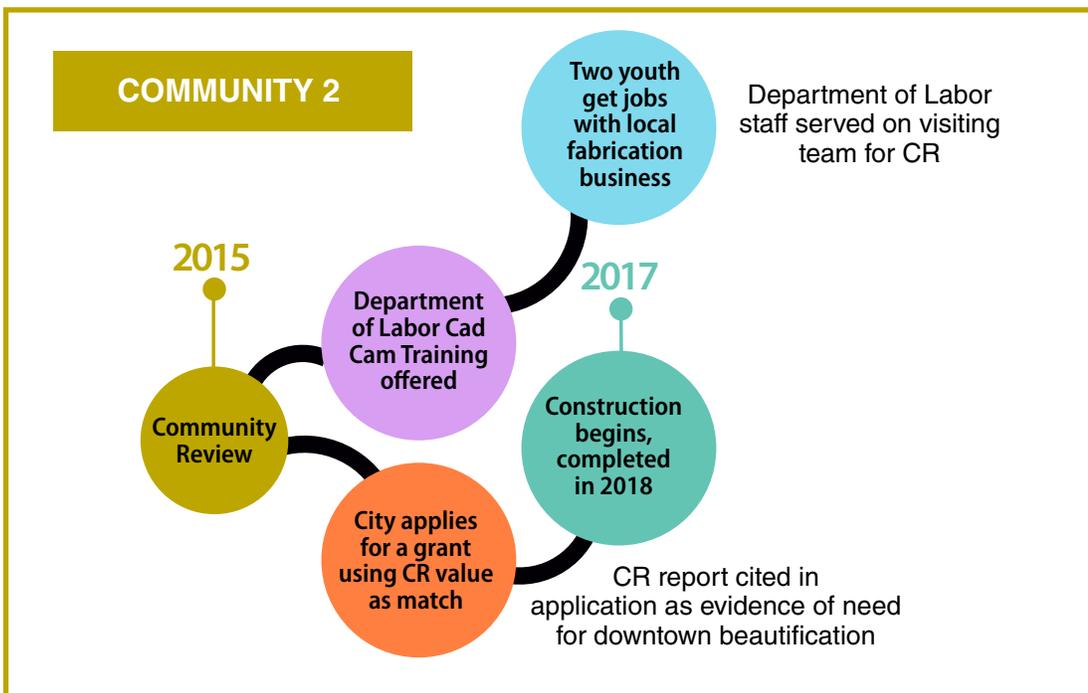
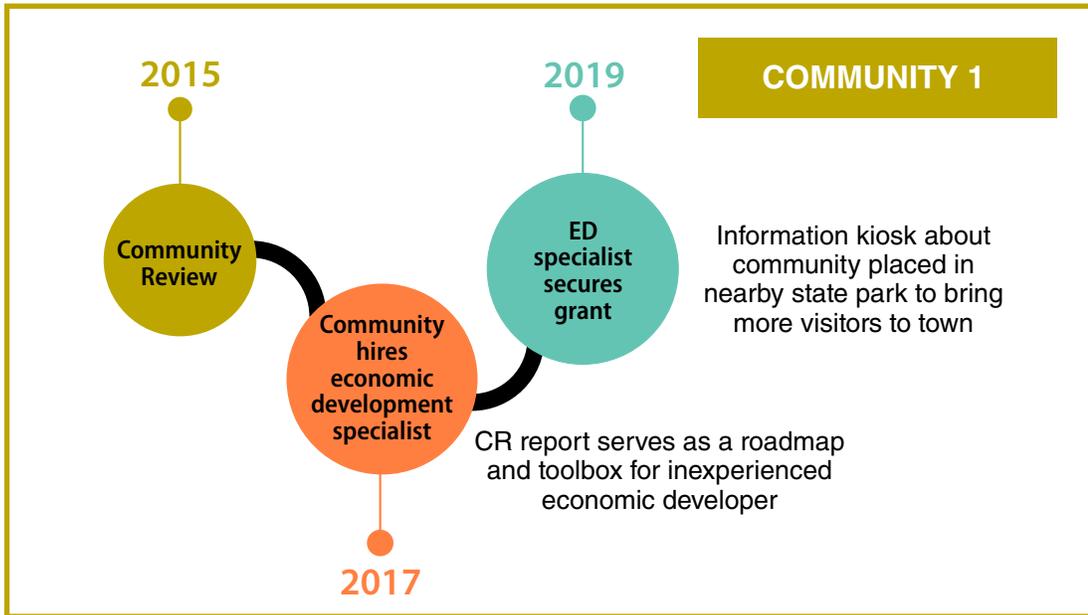
For a CR to be successful, there must be a cadre of community members, including formal and informal leaders, who volunteer to pick up where the CR visiting team leaves off. Too often, we have found that when it is time to implement ideas generated by the community, few are willing to lead in any way. This engagement challenge was, in part, the catalyst for bringing together community assessment delivery organizations and their university extension partners from Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana to form the Western Community Assessment Network (WeCAN) in 2017. Its objectives include learning together in order to improve CR outcomes and finding solutions to this and other challenges encountered in our community assessment work.

One of WeCAN's initial efforts involved conducting Ripple Effects Mapping, a group storytelling approach to evaluating impacts of programs and initiatives on people and communities. In some communities, what began with a small group of leaders was later expanded because these leaders were organized and knew how to access resources to be successful; trust was established. In other communities, an initial lack of participation meant the CR report

sat on a shelf for some time before someone had a reason to dust it off and use it. The following ripples with timelines illustrate trajectories of

change that varied greatly across the communities we mapped.

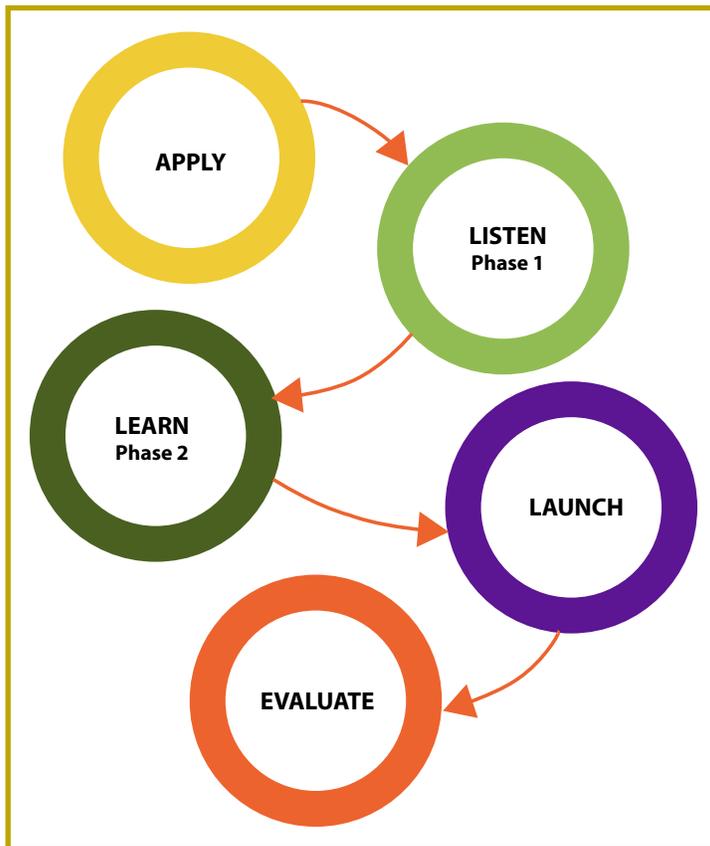
WeCAN revamped the existing CR process (now called Listen, Phase



1) by adding action planning (Learn, Phase 2) and a defined Launch phase that involves both mini-grants for projects and a coach to assist with forming and supporting diverse teams of residents. The WeCAN website (communityreview.org) includes an interactive map (that contains links to all assessment reports conducted since 1999 for each of the three states), a resource directory, and support for the peer learning networks we host in each state. The research component of our work

involves systematically documenting observations made during CRs, evaluating CR impact using Ripple Effects Mapping, and administering a community satisfaction survey. Conducted prior to the Listen phase, the survey includes several questions designed to delve into community involvement dynamics.

Observational and survey data shed new light on why more people are not involved in CR implementation or are otherwise engaged as leaders or volunteers in their communities.



OBSERVATIONAL DATA

A few years before the formation of WeCAN, the Cooperative Extension system in Idaho attempted to support communities that had participated in CRs by offering to facilitate a community engagement and action-planning process. Three communities took us up on the offer. These communities had completed additional projects, had new leaders, and more community input into ongoing efforts—but it became clear that the messy business of democratizing community decision-making and change was not a high priority for many established community leaders. In fact, it was one of the last things they would do to improve their community.

Reasons for turning down the additional assistance included things such as, “We don’t want to have more meetings.” How could community beautification, new community events, or historic tours happen without people meeting together? That question was answered by other community leaders—typically city officials—who were up front about how they preferred to divide the labor among existing municipal departments and organizations with whom they were already working (e.g., chambers of commerce). We discovered that it is common for established leaders to act as gatekeepers and control who participates in community change efforts.

This learning experience, combined with our observation that only about half of the communities participating in reviews successfully implemented CR-identified projects, is why action planning was built into the CR process redesign. We found that the addition of action planning certainly helps with the issue of constraining participation in projects, but it is not necessarily sufficient for creating leaderful communities.

An anecdote from a community meeting illustrates a common barrier. One of the first communities to go through the redesigned process was well into the action-planning session,



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and it was going well. The home team did a great job of recruiting people to participate, and each of the four project teams had at least eight citizens ready to roll up their sleeves and get to work. During the open brainstorming part of the session, one of the participants, who was new to involvement in the community, offered a suggestion. The longtime leader in the group said, “Why would we want to do that? We’re not going to do that.” I reminded the group that brainstorming was not a time to judge or eliminate ideas. We moved on through the process, but I wondered how the person whose idea had been rejected felt, and whether it prevented her from continuing to participate after we left the commu-

nity. Then I wondered how often this happens during meetings and planning efforts in rural communities.

This was the point when I started thinking we needed a bridge between the listening and action-planning phases that could help established leaders learn how to make space for new leaders in the community. We have emphasized the need for broad-based participation in planning and implementation by pointing out that many of the projects require support by those outside local government, chambers of commerce, and other formal community institutions, but the dynamics of ideation and decision-making often default to traditional lines of authority.

Data from standardized community surveys, completed as part of the redesigned CR process, reinforces our observations and helps us to better understand the dynamics from the perspectives of residents who could potentially be recruited to help plan and implement projects.

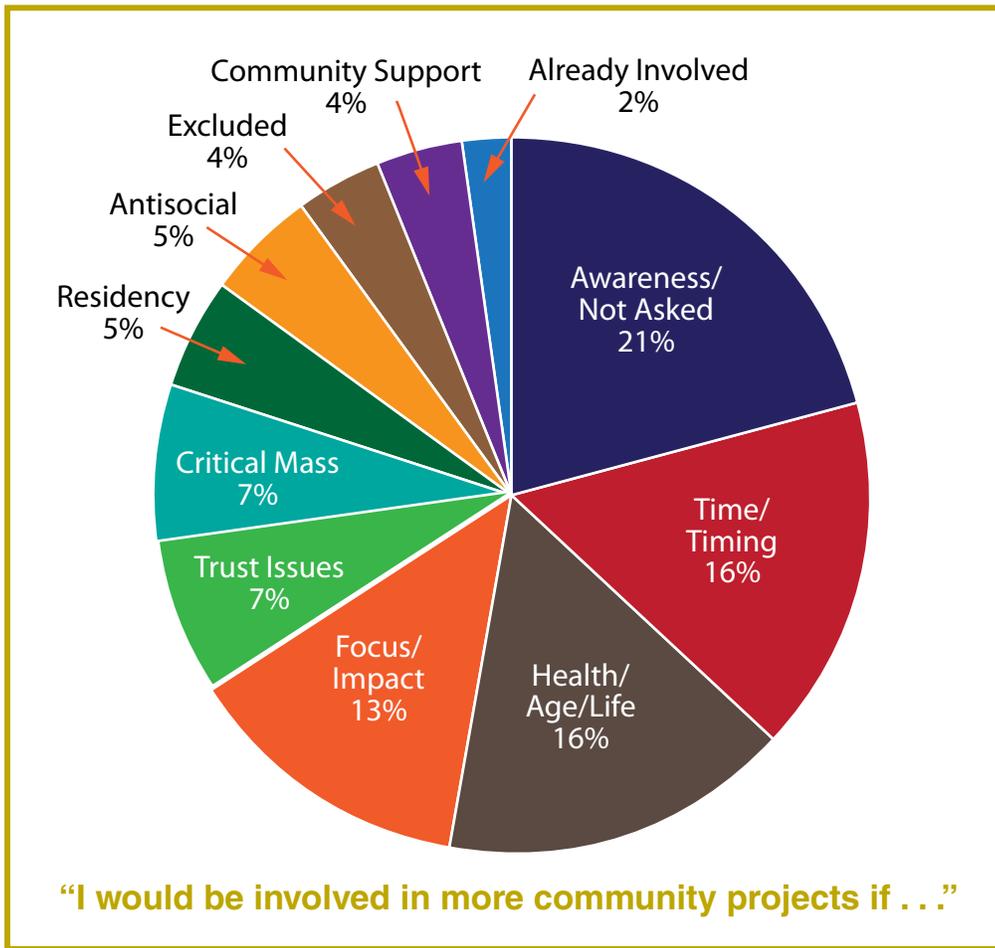
SURVEY DATA

From March 2018 through May 2021, 13 surveys were conducted in rural communities that participated in CRs across Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming. The populations of these communities ranged from 300 to 12,000, but survey samples typically encompassed the city zip code, which

tripled or quadrupled the sample size in a few cases. For most communities, surveys went to every household, but in the three communities with populations over 5,000, representative samples were used. There were 2,725 surveys completed, and 1,739 responded to the following fill-in-the-blank question: “I would be more involved in community projects if . . .” Often, respondents gave more than one reason for not being involved in their answers (e.g., “I’m too old and in poor health”), which is why we have 1,961 coded items.

Less than five percent of respondents said they just don’t want to be involved, but the rest of the respondents identified a range of barriers. Those who said they do not have time to participate accounted for only about 17 percent of responses to the “if” question. Another 18 percent said they are too old and/or physically unable to participate. Another six percent said they either live or work out of town and are unlikely to participate even if other barriers are addressed.

The types of responses coded under Focus/Impact suggest that many residents do not feel they have attractive opportunities. For example, quite a few suggested that many of the opportunities of which they are aware have to do with supporting local businesses (e.g., tourist events),



but that they would prefer to work on things that benefit the community more broadly. For example, one person said they would be more involved if opportunities “were actually needed for the town, not just a small group.” Other frequent Focus comments expressed a desire to be involved with projects that benefit kids, seniors, veterans, and the environment.

Trust Issues primarily have to do with whether people feel their time will be valued and appreciated, but they are also about concerns that

differences in values among residents means outcomes will not be optimal. In rural communities, newcomers and longtime residents often have different views and perspectives on whether change is even needed. A frequent concern is that good ideas are rejected by established leaders who are resistant to change, or “closed-minded.”

One Trust Issue that holds some people back from participating is lack of good organization. The following examples point to some ideas for those who recruit volunteers



At the interactional level in communities, we now better understand the types of interpersonal and perceptual dynamics contributing to the reluctance to be involved in positive community change activities.

and lead projects:

“They were fun and if they were well-organized and everyone chipped in.”

“I understood the amount of time expected.”

“It meant I wasn’t automatically in charge, or it seems like a lifetime commitment.”

Other ways in which people would like to be supported as volunteers include offering/organizing childcare, more marketing and communication, meeting consistently and on time, and being appreciated for their efforts.

Related to both Trust Issues and Awareness, responses coded under Inclusive Leadership suggest a

common feeling: that a few people are in control of what happens in the community and are selective when inviting participation, micromanage volunteers, or only want volunteers who do not have differing opinions about collective efforts:

“There was a sense of inclusion.”

“I knew the same few people wouldn’t be in charge.”

“You were accepted even if you are not a member of chamber or friend of city hall.”

“I was asked! Only the same few are asked to help.”

Other comments frequently suggested there is sometimes a belief that formal leaders also discourage broad-based input, and that there simply is not enough community support or interest to effectively implement community projects:

“Government or community leaders cared what people think.”

“City leaders endorsed, encouraged, and financially supported existing groups.”

“There is not much emphasis placed on community involvement here.”

“It’s hard duty when others don’t care.”

Critical Mass comments tended to be about the sense that there are not enough people—especially younger people—willing to help to pull off a successful project:

“There were people under 50 years old on anything.”

“More people got involved.”

“It piques the interest of the younger crowd.”

Just as many people who felt there aren't enough people willing to step up said that there is a need for more community initiatives and organizations that might appeal to more residents and encourage their involvement. The sense is that not all celebrations and fundraisers are of interest to all residents. If there were more of a variety of activities from which to choose, respondents would be more willing to help out.

CONCLUSION

At the interactional level in communities, we now better understand the types of interpersonal and perceptual dynamics contributing to the reluctance to be involved in positive community change activities. From the potential volunteer's perspective, stepping up can be fraught. Some do not see any space for themselves in the community development field, either because there are perceived gatekeepers determining who can participate, or the activities that can be undertaken and roles of volunteers prevent participation.

If we set aside several groups of respondents (those who live or work out of town, those who do not want

to be involved, those who feel their health and/or age preclude their participation, and those who do not feel they have the time to spare), about 60 percent of the remaining group—roughly 700 people—might get involved if barriers to participation were reduced. Across 13 small Western communities, 700 additional forces for community development would be an enormous game changer. This suggests that communicating opportunities, expanding the field of community development efforts, fostering a culture of community involvement, expanding the local leadership base—as well as the good care and feeding of volunteers and setting aside political and other divisions—would increase levels of participation in these communities.

As WeCAN continues to tweak the CR process and launch new efforts to assist rural communities in achieving their community development goals, we will engage local community leaders and potential leaders in conversations about our findings and assist them with strategies for addressing barriers to community involvement. ■

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