Creating Systems Change in Mississippi

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How do you create change? It’s hard to imagine a more important question for community professionals, or for anyone wanting to improve society. Kien Lee and her colleagues at Community Science, a research and development organization near Washington, D.C., have a distinctive approach to change-making; it focuses on larger community systems.

Systems change in communities is challenging: It aims to change the community as a whole. “When others think about change, it’s often on an individual level, one person at a time,” Kien says. “But we look at the total structure and process. We focus more on how groups and organizations relate to each other – since change there will create change for individuals.”

Kien’s recent work in Mississippi provides an example of how systems change can work. With support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, she and Community Science colleagues have begun evaluating a comprehensive long-term project there, which has three primary goals: increase the reading and math scores of third graders; improve health outcomes, especially of babies; and advance the economic well-being of Mississippi residents. Collectively, the three goals seek to address racial equity.

How does a systems change agent work toward these goals? Skillfully, slowly, and steadily. It involves working with the interlocking network of key groups, organizations, and institutions in the community, the decision makers who can make
changes that will percolate down to individuals. You’ve got to see both the forest and the individual trees. And that isn’t easy, Kien readily acknowledges; it takes a variety of skills to do the work. Fortunately, Community Science staff, five of whom are community psychologists, have both the research skills and tested practice skills – in assessment, in planning, in implementation, and in evaluation – to do it.

But the work also involves a set of personal qualities. “You have to be assertive in making recommendations,” Kien points out. “But you also have to be sensitive, and to know when to hold back, because it may not be the right time to speak. We need to be sensitive to the uniqueness of each leader and community with whom we work. When racial inequities exist, for example, a confrontational approach is not usually useful – people aren’t ready for it. The timing isn’t right. It’s a matter of negotiating between those two poles.”

More than that, Kien believes, community system change usually requires some money, even if not huge amounts. Good collaboration among community stakeholders is needed, and passion is certainly helpful, but some funding is necessary to support and sustain the work over the long haul. Yet funding itself can create new challenges, for one must then align with the funder’s pace – not too slow, and not too fast. The systems change agent must respond to multiple stakeholders, often in different ways.

There’s an even more fundamental reality: Even under the best circumstances, systems change takes time. It calls for the gradual development of trusting relationships, and the gradual education of decision makers, so that they feel comfortable getting on board with the work and acting collaboratively. To its credit, the Kellogg Foundation has been willing to invest the time, as Kien and her colleagues have been engaged now for 1½ years in what is envisioned as a 10-year project. But initial results are promising: There’s evidence that target groups in Mississippi are using their newly-gained evaluation knowledge in practice.
Kien’s work, and the work of Community Science more generally, illustrates that a community psychology and systems-based approach can make a difference in real-world social issues. That’s because all communities have an organizational infrastructure, and “by helping communities take a closer look at their infrastructure, on how they can best serve, we can create change.” It is more complex work, harder work, work that takes more time; but when done well there’s good reason to believe it will yield greater impact in the long run.

Kien Lee, who is a co-founder, Principal Associate, and Vice President of Community Science, is the 2013 recipient of the SCRA (American Psychological Association, Division 27) award for Distinguished Contributions to Community Psychology.

This is one of a series of bulletins highlighting the use of community psychology in practice. Comments, suggestions, and questions are welcome. Please direct them to Bill Berkowitz at Bill_Berkowitz@uml.edu.