

Self-help groups Neighbor to Neighbor

Session 8—Constructive action

	Activities	Materials	Time
<p>To get ready Obtain Session 8 leader guide / discussion materials* (one per group member).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greetings and settling in 		10 minutes
<p>You provide</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> large sheets of newsprint or paper, marker individual sheet of paper or 3 x 5 card for each group member, pencils 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduction to session (leader reads out loud) Small group discussion 	<p><i>Constructive action</i>, p. 2</p> <p><i>Community needs</i> (8A)</p>	5 minutes
<p>This session will</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> help group members think about the importance of constructive action in community, state, and national affairs give practice in identifying problems and alternative solutions help people learn how to contact and communicate with public officials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Group discussion (leader reads instructions to group) Individuals read Stretch time and refreshments Structured sharing time 	<p>Leader reads introduction out loud, divides large group into two small groups, and assigns each group a problem to discuss—<i>Recreation and money</i> or <i>Food and money</i>.</p> <p><i>Needs and solutions in our community</i> (8B)</p> <p><i>Make your voice count</i> (8C)</p>	25 minutes
			30 minutes
			10 minutes
			5 minutes
			60 minutes
		<p>Allow all members a chance to speak by using a kitchen timer. Each person sets the timer for approximately 5–10 minutes, depending on the size of the group. Be flexible on occasions when someone may need to take more than his or her share of the time.</p>	
		<p>Respond: What kinds of things am I personally willing and able to do to help meet needs in our community or state? What abilities and resources do I have to contribute? How will I do it? What stands in my way?</p>	
		<p>Approximate total = 2 hours, 25 minutes</p>	

* Also available on the World Wide Web: <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/pubs>

Reviewed by Colleen Jolly, family life specialist, Iowa State University Extension.

... and justice for all

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Additional activity

As an individual or a group write a letter to a public official about a specific issue, using the guidelines given in this session (8C). Ask others to critique it for clarity.

Constructive action

Introduction

Changes in agriculture have affected many areas of Iowa life. Loss of tax revenue has meant that state and local programs have been severely restricted at the same time that federal spending has been cut back. In some cases, community financial institutions, manufacturers, and retail establishments have closed. Families are affected by the loss of access to retail and public services. Changing population trends create new opportunities and challenges.

As business and government sectors consider shifting priorities and needs, they sometimes make policies and take actions that are unpopular with customers, employees, and clientele. This friction may result in damaged community relationships and a sense of discouragement.

Yet, assigning blame and expressing anger are not constructive and do not solve problems. People solve problems through their abilities to discover needs and think creatively about meeting those needs. The sometimes untapped “human” resources are the most valuable resources communities have. You and others can make a difference by working together, developing new ways of looking at problems, and finding solutions. That is constructive action.

Generally you have two opportunities to become involved in constructive action in your community:

1. serving as a volunteer in community problem-solving, and
2. participating in local, state, and national political processes.

The two often overlap and interrelate. Citizen involvement is central to nearly every aspect of community life. If our communities are to function properly and be responsive to our needs and the needs of others who live there, it is essential that we as citizens take an active interest in the affairs of the community.

Active citizens quickly discover that their involvement is good not only for the political system and the community, but also for themselves as individuals. Criticism and anger are not constructive. Involvement is important both for the good of the system and the self-esteem and self-worth of the individual.

Citizens can find personal satisfaction in making a contribution on issues that are of concern in their community, state, nation, and world. They also find they can be more effective when they join with others who share their concerns. In addition, they become aware of choices available to decision-makers and realize that not everyone shares their viewpoint.

Community needs

Activity 8A

Introduction

Sometimes people confuse an actual “need” with one particular way of meeting the need. When one town’s only grocery store closed, townspeople thought their “need” was to get another grocer to open a store. When no other grocer seemed interested in establishing a store, people got discouraged. However, when they realized their real need was not another grocer, but rather, a source of groceries, they explored other possibilities. These included a food-buying cooperative, a cooperatively-run store, and donated time for all the activities involved in operating it. They have gained not only a source of groceries, but a new community spirit as well.

The purpose of the following exercise is to gain experience in identifying needs and alternative ways of meeting them. Divide into two groups. Assign each group one of the two problems. Within your groups, address the following questions. If you get stuck, use the possible solutions listed below the problem.

Questions

1. What is the real need?
2. Brainstorm as many possible solutions to the problem as you can.
3. What resources are available? (time, organizational ability, talents, etc.)
4. Which solutions seem most promising?
5. What are some added benefits that might come with each of these solutions?

Problem 1: Recreation and money

Many families in the community feel the need to meet with others for support and fun. But money is limited for activities and for paying babysitters.

Possible solutions

Begin a game night with other families.
Start a play-reading group (just for fun).
Do a service project for school, church, or community organizations.
Start new self-help groups.
Start a baby-sitting cooperative.

Problem 2: Food and money

Families in the community need to save money on food. But growing so many different types of produce takes a great deal of time. They also would like additional income.

Possible solutions

Start a garden exchange.
Trade garden produce or meat for mending, sewing, or other produce.
Look into starting a farmer’s market for fruits, vegetables, and baked goods.
Organize a bed and breakfast, or “weekends on a farm” for city people.

Group discussion of needs and solutions in our community **Activity 8B**

Instructions

Now let's look at our community. The purpose of this part of the session is to identify needs in our community and some possible solutions. The needs may deal with economic conditions families face, such as how to obtain food, clothing, and home repairs when money is limited. They may deal with people's needs to interact, or their needs for recreation to relieve stress. Or they may deal with the unavailability of services in the community.

Procedure

1. On a sheet of paper or 3x5 card, each person should list all the community needs he or she can think of.
2. Go around the circle of people, each person stating one need. The leader should write it on a large piece of newsprint. Continue going around until no one thinks of any more needs. Do not repeat needs if someone else has already mentioned them.
3. Each person selects the two most important needs and reports those to the leader. The leader places a check mark beside each need that is mentioned. For example, if a certain need was mentioned three times, three check marks would be placed next to it.
4. The leader selects the three needs that have the most check marks and writes each at the top of a fresh sheet of newsprint.
5. The group brainstorms for possible solutions. No idea is too far-fetched. As a group, decide which solutions are feasible, considering the resources available. The leader lists these on paper.
6. Discuss the following questions:
 - Who can do it?
 - What resources are available?
 - When can it be done?
 - How much can be done?
7. Discuss the following questions:
 - How do we wish to proceed?
 - Do we need more information?
 - To whom can we talk?
 - Who else should be interested?
 - Who else can we get involved?

Make your voice count: Communicating with public officials **Activity 8C**

Background

You may have strong feelings about a number of things you would like to see public officials do. You can go beyond anger and frustration and make your voice count constructively.

Elected public officials seldom tire of hearing from their constituents. Your individual opinions carry much more weight than a signature on a petition or a form letter.

You may contact a public official in the same ways you contact anyone:

- by telephone,
- in person, or
- by letter or e-mail.

Local officials are easy to reach. State legislators can be telephoned by calling the Iowa House or Senate from January to April or May when the Legislature is in session. Letters can be written to your legislators at home or in Des Moines. Your legislators also have e-mail addresses. You may meet with them when they are at home or in the State House, but it would be good to notify them of the date and time you will be there. Your U. S. Senators or House Representatives may be contacted through their Washington office or their field offices located throughout the state. Their staff people are available to answer questions and listen to your concerns.

Contacting legislators by e-mail or by phone

If there is a time deadline, an e-mail message or phone call may be the most expedient. Every member of the Iowa Legislature has an e-mail address that he or she checks regularly. A listing can be found on the Web site of the Iowa General Assembly (<http://www.legis.state.ia.us/>). If you prefer to call, the telephone numbers are

- Iowa Senate switchboard, (515) 281-3371
- Iowa House of Representatives switchboard, (515) 281-3221

If you call, summarize the conversation at the end and thank the official for his or her time and interest. After a phone call, a follow-up letter of gratitude is appreciated.

Personal visits

Visits may be made by an individual or a group. It is usually more convenient for everyone to make an appointment ahead of time. When you call, identify yourself and the issue or topic you wish to discuss. Plan to provide the official with a brief summary of your views when you visit. Send a follow-up letter of gratitude.

Make your voice count: Communicating with public officials Activity 8C, continued

Letters

Short letters on a single issue are most effective. Most appreciated are informative letters requesting action on a specific item and thank you letters that express approval of past actions. Remember these guidelines:

- Typed or readable handwritten letters are acceptable.
- Give your name and address and sign your name legibly.
- Use your own stationery, not that of your employer.
- Try to keep the letter to the equivalent of one typewritten page.
- Explain briefly what action you think should be taken and why. Use facts and figures.
- Do not send identical letters to several public officials; individualize each. Put your ideas into your own words.
- Be courteous at all times.

Sample letter

Your address

Date

Name

Salutation

Introduction

Identify yourself.

Give brief reference to your occupation, business, or organization.

Purpose of letter

Tell why you are writing.

If appropriate, refer to the bill by name and number.

Give facts and/or figures to support your position.

Closing

Request a reply indicating his/her position regarding the issue.

Thank the official for his/her consideration of your position.

Complimentary close

Your name

Signature

Make your voice count: Communicating with public officials **Activity 8C, continued**

Addresses, salutations, and closing for letters to various public officials

Local officials

- Mayor

The Honorable (full name)

City or Town Hall

City, State, Zip

Dear Mayor (last name):

Sincerely yours,

Your Name

- Council member

Council Member (full name)

City or Town Hall

City, State, Zip

Dear Mr./Mrs./Ms. (last name):

Sincerely yours,

Your Name

State officials

- Governor

The Honorable (full name)

Governor, State of Iowa

State Capitol Building

Des Moines, IA 50319

Dear Governor (last name):

Respectfully yours,

Your Name

- Senator

The Honorable (full name)

Senate

State Capitol Building

Des Moines, IA 50319

Dear Senator (last name):

Sincerely yours,

Your Name

- Representative

The Honorable (full name)

House of Representatives

State Capitol Building

Des Moines, IA 50319

Dear Representative (last name):

Sincerely yours,

Your Name

If you do not know the name, home address, telephone number, or e-mail address of your state senator and/or state representative, visit the Web site of the Iowa General Assembly (<http://www.legis.state.ia.us/>) or contact your local newspaper or library.

Federal officials

- The President

The President of the United States

The White House

Washington, DC 20500

Dear President (last name):

Respectfully yours,

Your Name

- Senator

The Honorable (full name)

United States Senate

Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator (last name):

Sincerely yours,

Your Name

- Representative

The Honorable (full name)

United States House of Representatives

Washington D.C. 20515

Dear Representative (last name):

Sincerely yours,

Your name

For more information:

- The Whitehouse, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/>
- U.S. House of Representatives, <http://www.house.gov/>
- U.S. Senate, <http://www.senate.gov/>

You may phone the United States Capitol switchboard at (202) 224-3121; an operator will connect you directly with the Senate or House office you request. You can check your telephone book or local newspaper for the phone numbers and addresses of field offices.