

Book Review

Allen-Meares, P. G., Shanks, T. R., Gant, L. M., Hollingsworth, L. D., & Miller, P. L. (2017). *A twenty-first century approach to community change: Partnering to improve life outcomes for youth and families in under-served neighborhoods*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Reviewed by Charles Garvin, Ph.D., CSW

Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics, Volume 15, Number 1 (2018)
Copyright 2018, ASWB

This text may be freely shared among individuals, but it may not be republished in any medium without express written consent from the authors and advance notification of ASWB.

This book contains a detailed description and evaluation of a project titled “Good Neighborhoods” that was conducted by the Skillman Foundation of Michigan in close collaboration with the University of Michigan School of Social Work. A unit was created in the school to provide technical assistance to the project and was aptly titled The University of Michigan School of Social Work Technical Assistance Center.

The authors of the book who were part of the technical assistance team were associated with the school of social work. The first author, Paula Allen-Meares, had been the dean of the school before she took employment at the University of Illinois at Chicago. All have extensive experience in developing and evaluating projects and most taught about this in courses at the school. They are all known for their expertise in areas relevant to this book.

The project focused on economically and socially depressed neighborhoods of the city of Detroit. As the authors state, Detroit is a city “increasingly identified with and characterized by rapid housing foreclosures, high urban crime and unemployment rates, low high school graduation rates, high infant mortality rates, and high levels of illegal drug and alcohol abuse” (p. 227). The major focus of the project was on youth in terms of working with and on behalf of them for such ends as remaining in school, having good learning practices, preparing for employment, obtaining a job, and recovering from substance abuse. The youth were also to be

involved in developing these programs so youth leadership training was important.

The Skillman Foundation developed projects in six neighborhoods of Detroit and although there was collaboration among these separate projects, the university team and the foundation worked with each separately in terms of citizen participation, governing structures, institutional creation and development, and collection of evaluation data. These were Brightmoor, Chadsey/Condon, Cody Rouge, Northend Central, Osborn, and Southwest Detroit neighborhoods. The Skillman Foundation, whose staff were very active in planning and conducting the program, financed the activities with both large and small grants.

In the chapters of this book, each written by one or more of the book’s authors, the project is described and evaluative data provided. The first chapter provides overall information about the project. Subsequent chapters deal with the history of Detroit and its decline as a major city, community development as a “distinct” model of community practice, demographic and other information about each of the six neighborhoods, theories of change, the planning phase of the project, the nature of support to the existing and emerging institutions, maintaining change, design of governance structures, the use of social work and other kinds of interns, measurable results, and lessons learned from the work.

Book review: *A twenty-first century approach to community change*

The book has high relevance for social work values and ethics. It clearly demonstrates values associated with processes of empowerment, concerns for social justice, tasks to overcome poverty, the deprivation of good role models and opportunities for youth, and a supportive and healthy community.

The book has a wealth of data about the project such as the number of meetings and persons involved, changes in social indicators such as arrests, employment, income, and adequate housing. One indicator especially relevant to Detroit is the number of dangerous, deserted and dilapidated dwellings that were torn down thus creating space for new construction, community gardens, and play spaces.

The project reminds me of my experiences with the Model Cities program of several decades ago. Major differences, of course, exist such as the national scope of model cities and the emphasis in model cities of the creation of new and necessary human services. Another similarity was the creation of neighborhood governing boards, resident

involvement, and substantial funding. The project in the book had a greater emphasis on expanding the range of neighborhood involvement and empowerment.

One major limitation of this book for training and teaching purposes is the lack of qualitative information. We may learn how many neighborhood meetings were held, how many people came and how many institutions were created, but there is scant information on the content of meetings (except for agendas), the kinds of things neighbors said to one another, whether and how conflicts emerged and how they were handled, what residents said to authorities and the effects of these dialogues, and the experience of organizers in the communities. This would have made a much longer book but one more suitable as a text in community organization courses rather than courses in evaluation although both are essential to understanding this important and I hope replicated project.