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Jill Kinney

Margaret Trent

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# Walking Our Talk in the Neighborhoods: Building Professional/Natural Helper Partnerships

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Jill Kinney and Margaret Trent

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## *The Need to Rethink Human Services*

*The early 2000s are difficult times in human services. Both workers and recipients are dissatisfied with the processes and outcomes of many of the models used to deliver services. Programs are too expensive. They do not seem culturally relevant. They focus upon individual problems and are categorically driven, rather than responding to family needs. All too often, they cannot document that they achieve the results they claim. Taxpayers are frustrated. Human service workers are discouraged. Sometimes, workers feel overwhelmed by the problems they face.*

*At the same time, we have an emerging consensus on promising directions to do better. These include such concepts as "neighborhood transformation," and "enhancing capacity." New principles of effective practice have been described: building on strengths, taking a holistic approach, individual tailoring, decision-making partnerships, setting short-term specific goals, and emphasizing certain worker characteristics, such as capacity and congruence. Moreover, there is a growing research base that these practice principles are more than "buzzwords" and, in fact, produce better results.*

*Incorporating these principles into practice, however, has implications to how we organize our work. It requires rethinking the role of professionals and capitalizing upon the existing strengths of neighborhood residents to become involved in self-help, mutual aid, and mutual support. Pioneers like Frank Riessman have been operationalizing these concepts for decades, but most of us are struggling to figure out how to bring them alive in our work.*

*This article describes our efforts in Tacoma, Washington, to establish professional and natural helper partnerships to work with families involved in the child protective service system. It uses our experiences to describe the ways that natural helpers and professionals can help one another in getting better results for families.*

### **The Beginnings of Our Natural Helper and Professional Partnership**

In the 1970s, the Homebuilders model developed as a new response to families in crisis, a well-defined family preservation program serving families at imminent risk of placement of a child into out-of-home care. Building upon family strengths, taking a hands-on problem-solving approach to “do what it takes” to remove the risk in the family without removing the child, and being there when a family needed support are hallmarks of the Homebuilders’ model.

*Natural helpers; and that they, and professionals need to take the time and make the commitment to find, value, and learn from each other if they are to establish partnerships.*

Homebuilders had substantial success with families that traditional child welfare services systems have given up on or failed to reach, because it incorporated the principles of working with families described above. Four weeks of Homebuilders’ professional involvement often could achieve successes that months or even years of counseling, supervision, or other interventions failed to produce—in many instances because Homebuilders started from where the family was and validated the family’s own views and hopes. Still, Homebuilders could not, and never was designed to, address all family needs. Specifically, Homebuilders’ workers were not substitutes for friends and support systems that all families need to thrive, although it could help the family make re-connections or reach closure on important issues.

In the late 1980s, the context for family preservation work changed, as more and more families referred to Child Protective Services involved parental addiction to crack cocaine. The powerful addictive character of crack cocaine placed new challenges on working with families. Experiences practicing within a very disinvested neighborhood showed the need to pay much more attention to addressing the environment around the family, if any personal family gains provided through Homebuilders or other family services were to be sustained. The four-to six-week Homebuilders’ time frame was not suited to the longer term needs of families living in often hostile environments, unless substantial supplemental and follow-up resources were available. Financial resources to pay for these services were not forthcoming.

At the same time, several friends living on the East Side of Tacoma, Washington, in the largest housing development west of the Mississippi were helping one another and other neighbors, with no time limits. When we (Jill Kinney, psychologist, long involved with Homebuilders and Family Preservation Services,) and Margaret Trent (Chair of the Resident Management Council) met, we recognized each other as co-conspirators to



come up with better ways of helping families. We talked in each others' kitchens for months, with each other and each of our family and friends, about how social services were not really helping families as much as we would like. As we talked, a cohesive group formed. We realized that talking about how things should be was much more difficult than talking about what is wrong with the way things are.

We realized that every neighborhood has natural helpers; and that they, and professionals need to take the time and make the commitment to find, value, and learn from one another if they are to establish partnerships.

These conversations and this sharing of information and both professional and experiential expertise led to developing a new practice model involving a partnership of natural helper and professional, a team that builds upon both experiential and professional expertise. People Helping People received funding from several foundations and from the Washington State Division of Child and Family Services to serve families in the Hilltop and Eastside neighborhoods of Tacoma who were directly or indirectly referred from child protective services.

Under People Helping People, a professional and natural helper pair conduct initial visits with families to conduct an assessment, clarify the needs and wants of the family, and how these relate to those of the child protective service system. After this initial visit, which occurs within 48 hours of referral, a primary mentor or coach is assigned—either a professional or a natural helper. Natural helpers are not volunteers, but are paid for their work and recognized for their skill and expertise.

Our professional and natural helper teams drew upon each others' assets in this work with families, often developing solutions that worked but that fell far outside conventional professional practice lines. These teams almost always responded in a way that was more connected with people's day-to-day lives and therefore more effective than professional practice alone. This new practice also required a profound shift in the way each of us saw ourselves and sought out help when we needed it.

As we have worked together, we have deepened our own understanding of why this partnering is so essential to success, particularly in working in disinvested neighborhoods and communities. The following are our reflections on the importance of developing new services and practice based upon such partnerships, some examples of how these partnerships can work, and some reflections on the importance of taking the time to bridge the distance between these two worlds.

*Current practices place unnecessary constraints on roles, making both professional and natural helpers less effective than possible.*

### **What We've Learned—Tools We Can Share**

#### **Limitations of the Current Professional and Bureaucratic Model and Rationale for Forming Natural Helper/Professional Partnerships**

Professionals and bureaucrats alone have not been able to solve problems facing our families. We must include more people, more skills, and more resolve at more levels if we are going to make the difference we would like. We also must include more people in ways that do not segment them into separate and fragmented roles. This requires building new relationships between professionals and natural helpers. People Helping People is a conscious strategy to involve more people and to build upon the strengths that already exist in the neighborhoods, fashioning new partnerships that do not artificially separate the help that professionals and natural helpers offer.

As we worked together, and began to gain the credibility to work "The System," the problems we had discussed in our kitchens were manifest in our environment. We struggled to cope with many practices and biases.

**Dangers of an over-reliance upon professional help.** Over-reliance on professional helpers and formal agency and system solutions can fail to create strategies that are fully relevant to and congruent with the needs of the specific neighborhoods, because those in charge lack information and understanding.

This over-reliance is too expensive. Professionals' salaries are higher than we can afford, if an adequate amount of help is provided. Dollars that are spent for professionals usually end up increasing the financial stability of people and organizations outside the community, rather than adding to local economic development.

Over-reliance on professionals can send the message to community people that they cannot help themselves and must be rescued, thus attacking rather than enhancing their sense of self-efficacy. It can give people in the community implicit permission to wait until the professional provides the service, or until there is money for the professional. The strategy also can create the belief that if help is successful, it is because the professional is good, and if the help doesn't work, it is because the recipient is inadequate, further demeaning the sense of self-efficacy of the recipient.



**Dangers of separating natural helper and professional roles.** Current practices place unnecessary constraints on roles, making both professionals and natural helpers less effective than possible. We usually think of professionals as addressing intrapsychic problems. Neighborhood workers have been assigned to “prevention,” or problems that are not too severe. They are thought of as appropriate for concrete issues, like building speed bumps or getting street lights installed, or getting drug houses closed. Agency staff also have had limited roles. If an individual is out of control, professionals are called. If family problems go beyond the norm, they are referred for help. Professionals have dealt with intra and interpersonal problems. Community workers and residents have dealt with community problems.

In fact, all the problems are interrelated. Residents and community workers and agency staff all have different perspectives on both the causes and resolutions for difficulties.

Professional efforts to solve intrapsychic problems often are hampered by inconveniences, such as poverty and homelessness. Lay people often counsel one another on everything from marital problems and child rearing to thoughts of suicide. Just as we currently learn about the irrevocable linkages between physical and mental health, we need to come to terms with the facts that the distinctions we make about prevention and intervention are artificial. The distinctions we make about concrete services and psychological services also are artificial. And, the distinctions about what types of help require graduate degrees and which can be done by friends and neighbors, are, in many cases, arbitrary.

We all will be more effective if we can share our perspectives and expertise to develop new strategies that will be far more creative than any we could develop solely within our own frameworks.

*We will all be more effective if we can share our perspectives and expertise to develop new strategies that will be far more creative than any we could develop solely within our own frameworks.*

### **Reasons We Need Natural Helpers**

As our work proceeded, the reasons for involving natural helpers as an essential part of our work became even more clear. It also became clearer that natural helpers could help professionals become more effective.

The human services “system” and our community need natural helpers, because natural helpers know things most professionals don’t know about helping, because they can help

professionals to learn to do better, and because, with natural helper support, they also can achieve more than they can without it.

### **Strengths of Natural Helpers**

Natural helpers understand their neighborhoods. They usually understand their own culture and generally more about other cultures in the neighborhood than people who don't live there. They usually are more committed to resolving the issues, because the challenges affect them personally. They usually have more trust and status within the neighborhood than most outsiders do.

Natural helpers are more likely to hear about problems before they become so severe that intensive intervention is the only option. They are more likely to be available 24 hours a day to those they support. This can decrease the possibility of people being harmed. They are in a better position than professionals to provide ongoing long-term support.

They may provide successful role models. If they are paid for their work; it will help the economic status of the neighborhood.

They have different and necessary skills for helping. They often are more familiar with the intricacies of public bureaucracies than many professionals, because their personal welfare often has depended upon this understanding. They know which strategies work and which do not within their neighborhoods. They often know the needs of the community. They have mastered the ability to function in conditions that are physically and emotionally scary to professionals, sometimes to the degree that professionals refuse to enter, sometimes to the degree that they cannot function well.

Natural helpers are more likely to provide support in the recipient's environment. They can support families who have been or would be unable or unwilling to receive services in more traditional settings. This allows for more effective and comprehensive monitoring regarding child safety. It is more likely to include all family members and possibly members of their support networks. Observation of participants in their natural environment allows for a more accurate and complete assessment. Family members, caseworkers, and other service providers know that helpers have the opportunity for first-hand observation of family situations, problems, and progress on goals. This can serve to increase their credibility. The helper has ongoing opportunities to model the use of new skills in real situations and eliminates the need for transfer of learning from one setting, such as an office, to another such as a home.



## **Common Activities of Natural Helpers**

As policy makers begin considering a shift to neighborhood transformation from office-based talk therapy, we easily can present the idea of natural helpers, or indigenous workers as new ideas. In fact, people have been helping one another since people existed, before college degrees existed, before licensing boards existed. Throughout time, even people with few resources have reached out to one another. And helped. Table One shows a list of common natural helper activities going on in most of our communities now, usually off the radar screen, and separate from the formal helping system.

### **Table One. What Natural Helpers Can Provide**

Natural helpers can provide many types of help. Arbitrarily, we have categorized this helping into five areas: skill building, emotional support, community leadership and networking, resource acquisition, and concrete help.

Some natural helpers (and some professionals) have assets in all five areas, but people who are strong in only one or two areas still can make important contributions. These examples are presented to help people think outside the box of traditional service delivery and to recognize the wealth of resources that can be drawn upon to help families help themselves.

#### **Examples of Skill Building**

- Helping others recognize their strengths, see a future, and set and reach measurable goals
- Helping others keep family members safe
- Helping others strengthen relationships with others
- Helping others learn to get and keep goods and services: transportation, housing, legal assistance, child care/babysitting, employment, food and clothing, financial aid, furniture and household goods, medical and dental services, toys, recreational equipment, and recreational opportunities
- Serving as a role model
- Helping others exercise the rights and responsibilities
- Teaching professionals how better to help

#### **Examples of Providing Emotional Support**

- Listening, being available, spending time
- Providing positive regard, without judgment
- Avoiding gossip and manipulation
- Addressing issues of isolation by going bridges and confidants



### **Examples of Community Leadership and Networking**

- Organizing activities that help families form positive relationships with one another and meet interests and needs: support groups, arts and crafts classes, tutoring sessions, GED study sessions, etc.
- Setting up skill and resource exchanges that draw upon one another's resource: child care cooperatives, peer-to-peer volunteering, time dollar banks
- Acting as a role model for professionals on how to engage and work with residents, hold meetings and training sessions, make themselves accessible in comfortable settings for families
- Helping residents organize community activities: weekly storytelling, plays by local artists, celebrations and cultural events, job fairs, neighborhood watch programs, self-defense classes, community awareness days, etc.
- Serving on community coalitions and activities and speaking for family and neighborhood needs

### **Resource Acquisition**

- Providing information about where to find transportation and housing
- Providing help in dealing with landlords, installment sellers, and loan sharks
- Providing help in getting good deals on items: trading-junk dealers, hock shops, informal food and clothing banks, etc.

### **Concrete Help**

- Babysitting
- Fixing things
- Cleaning up junk
- Braiding hair
- Gardening

*Professionals also would benefit from trying to understand the cultural context.*

### **Ways Natural Helpers Can Help Professionals**

Some natural helpers wish to work more closely with professionals. At the same time, they would like to raise the professionals' awareness regarding the best ways to be helpful. The following are some of their ideas.

Professionals need to keep thinking about communication, cooperation, and service to people in the community. They need to build long-term positive relationships with kids and families if they are going to have a positive impact in the larger neighborhood. To

build these relationships, they will need to value the gifts and resources that community members have and think of ways to encourage, support, recognize, and utilize them.

Being genuine and earnest is worth a lot. Professionals' good intentions can go a long way. They need to remember, though, that it will take time to develop those relationships. They can't assume that once they have made a few relationships that they don't need to maintain those relationships. Professionals would be better off if they did not talk about other people in the community.

It would really help if professionals would stop putting themselves above other people, and work on building connections between/among us all. They need to realize the context for all our behavior, and really be present with us. If they get invited to peoples' homes, they should go.

Professionals need to do more of looking at an individual or family within the larger context of other people and the physical community. (Some families move around but may still retain connections within the community so it is important to realize that they still may be considered part of the community.) If they are helping a family, they should seek suggestions from the family about who else might help the family.

Professionals also would benefit from trying to understand the cultural context and try to use that information to make culturally appropriate suggestions when they offer advice. They can't assume that one way of doing things will work for everyone. Also, things change all the time. No one can let their perceptions of the community and individuals within it freeze in time. The situation changes and people change as well.

People in the community often need "translators" of how formal society systems work—schools, child protective services, and courts. Professionals can try to function as a translator. This may mean having to learn for themselves how things work, keeping in mind that even larger systems have variations that need to be understood and explained.

When trying to become familiar with a neighborhood or community, professionals should get to know "bridge people." Bridge people are individuals who can introduce a new professional helper to those key members of the neighborhood who have substantial influence with other community members. They often are not easy to recognize. You could start identifying bridge people by asking local church people, grocery store people, neighborhood centers, food banks, and community resident groups. Respect the relationship you have with the bridge person. Also, don't take one person's view of the community/family/individual as necessarily the single and absolute truth.



Professionals need to recognize that the families/individuals we work with are key informants who can educate us. We should remember to be careful about asking too much information on certain issues for their safety or your safety (gangs or drug selling, for example).

Professionals shouldn't assume that they have to, or that it is wise, to do all the work of community development in a neighborhood. Professionals should share resources with others to build a sense of positive partnership and to have a larger effect on the community. They should recognize others who have made a contribution to their success. They should acknowledge their input and let people know that they consider themselves a part of the larger group. They shouldn't let their own individual or agency group vision interfere with the needs of the larger group/community.

*Professionals need to view their role as a partner with, rather than supervisor of, natural helpers to be effective.*

### **Reasons We Still Need Professionals**

Advocates for neighborhood transformation calling for increased reliance upon natural helpers often are misinterpreted as saying that professionals are not necessary. In fact, professionals are needed in many capacities, bringing strengths that can help natural helpers become more effective. Still, this represents a major role change from how professionals are traditionally viewed and often view themselves. Professionals need to view their role as a partner with, rather than supervisor of, natural helpers to be effective.

### **Strengths of Professional**

Although some of the things professionals do could be done (and, indeed, are being done) by natural helpers, many of their skills are invaluable in the change process. They are as relevant for neighborhood transformation as they might have been for the fifty-minute hour. Some that are particularly valued by natural helpers include the following:

**Conceptualizing Issues.** Professionals have some conceptual frameworks that can help us and others to understand and address issues. Professionals have detailed knowledge of different frameworks by which to assess and help resolve individual and family issues. Helpers can benefit from these frameworks in terms of organizing potentially overwhelming information and in setting and monitoring goals.

**Training and Problem Solving.** Professionals know lots of ways to solve problems. Some are relevant for natural helpers and neighborhoods; some are not. Over time, it becomes easier to tell which methods professionals know will be relevant to natural helpers, and which are not. Professionals can educate natural helpers to assume more responsibilities, such as training, mentoring, and direct helping, than they are already providing. They can help natural helpers learn to provide training. This training and problem solving help also can help professionals learn new tools, which they can, in turn, conceptualize for others.

**Mentoring and Identification of Strengths.** Professionals can help natural helpers to become aware of just how much they do know and can encourage them to follow through on their own beliefs. Professionals can help natural helpers to learn to provide training and work with them to adapt existing materials and develop new ones. They can help natural helpers and others learn to develop, fund, operate, and evaluate their own strategies.

**Evaluation.** Professionals often have been trained to specify outcomes and to collect and analyze information. They have a systematic orientation and can understand controlled observation. Although natural helpers sometimes are annoyed with the system's insistence on written documentation, they can usually accept it and continue to do it if they know how it can be used to improve their own practice.

**Fund-Raising and Grants Management.** Professionals usually can write. They know the language most funding sources use. They know people who make decisions about funding. They can help others learn these skills. Some professionals also have experience in budgeting and monitoring both financial and program goals and objectives that are increasingly important in securing funding.

**Advocacy.** Professionals can speak out on behalf of natural helpers. If professionals have spent time in neighborhoods, they sometimes can translate those realities to policy makers and other professionals who have not spent that time.

**Service Delivery.** Professionals can provide services themselves, when necessary. They have professional knowledge to make some diagnoses and meet some clinical needs that natural helpers do not have. Professionals can help natural helpers know when they need the help of a professional to diagnose or treat particular conditions.

**Ways Professionals Might Help Natural Helpers.** Some skills of professionals are hard won through years of study and experience. Some skills commonly thought to be the purview of professionals alone are inaccessible to lay people only because of the



jargon, however. We often talk of professionals' activities in special languages involving terms like borderline personality, resistance, denial, and attention deficit disorder. Not everyone understands these professional languages, and when we think of professionals' activities in broad categories, it is easy for us to become intimidated. We may believe a person must have a special degree and a special language in order to be helpful.

When one looks closely at the specific activities of professionals, it is possible to translate most of those activities into regular English that can be understood by us all. If we look at these activities, we can think about lay people learning many of them, one by one, even if they don't have a particular degree. Some examples of activities that professionals can teach or share with natural helpers, described in regular English, are shown in Table Two.

*When one looks closely at the specific activities of professionals, it is possible to translate most of those activities into regular English that can be understood by us all.*

#### **Table Two. How Professionals Can Help Natural Helpers**

Professionals have a lot of knowledge that natural helpers can use. The following provides some of the practical help that natural helpers (and professionals) need to work effectively with people. These are written in plain languages, not professional jargon. If professionals do not know how to do things, they should seek to learn them.

##### **Conceptualizing helping and understanding different approaches to helping**

- Knowing about different ways to approach problems and provide help—systems approaches, learning approaches, cognitive approaches, environmental approaches, philosophical and spiritual approaches, psychodynamic approaches
- Finding out what hurts and why
- Using these approaches to design supports and solutions to what hurts

##### **Helping, first and foremost, to keep people safe**

- Structuring the situation before the helper arrives
- Structuring the situation when the helper is there
- Structuring the situation between times the helper is there
- Helping people learn to assess the potential for violence (assault, homicide, suicide, child abuse, domestic violence)
- Helping people learn not to trigger each other and to break the chain when triggering starts to occur
- Helping people learn to get help and to safety immediately, when situations start to get out of control

- Child proofing the home

#### **Making contact and engaging the family**

- Meeting people when and where they prefer to be met, are comfortable
- Greeting people in ways that show respect and put them at ease
- Engaging culturally appropriate initial conversations
- Communicating that you understand the meaning as well as the words, and restating when needed so people know you understand
- Responding to people's requests
- Listening without judging
- Affirming people's strengths, successes, and potential

#### **Working with the family to assess the situation**

- Exercise and tools to help people assess their values
- Exercise and tools to help people identify their strengths and resources
- Exercise and tools to help people identify their support systems
- Exercise and tools to help people clarify and prioritize their goals and set realistic objectives
- Ways to tell what happens before a particular problem occurs, that might trigger that problem
- Ways to tell what happens after a particular problem occurs, that might reward or reinforce it
- Helping people to use journals and other devices to tell what is going on

#### **Helping to prevent problems from occurring**

- Helping people figure out how they spend their time
- Helping people figure out which times cause them trouble
- Ways to help people think of other ways to spend their time
- Ways to help people to actually avoid doing the other things
- Ways to help people to avoid danger

#### **Helping people to motivate themselves toward positive change**

- Showing people you understand what they are trying to tell you and showing you the words and the feelings and meanings behind them
- Helping people find their strengths and values and ground themselves
- Helping people feel important (treating them with respect, spending time with them, noticing the good things about them)
- Helping people feel more hopeful and more in charge
- Helping people see a positive vision of the future (imagining it, drawing a picture, making a collage, writing a letter)



**Helping people to motivate themselves toward positive change (continued)**

- Helping people see the difference between what they want and where they are headed
- Helping people feel more confident about being able to change (seeing others have problems and struggles too)
- Helping people see that we can feel two ways about change and knowing where they are in terms of wanting to change
- Helping people see why change might be good (noticing why change would help them with their values and goals, rewarding little steps)
- Helping people see why not changing might be bad (noticing how not changing will not help them meet their goals and can produce bad things, providing consequences when they don't try)
- Helping people remember times when they made changes
- Helping people identify people like themselves who have made changes
- Helping people understand the process of change, and that it doesn't usually happen immediately and that there are steps forward and background

**Helping people make changes in specific areas, such as:**

- Parenting
  - Learning to tell what is really happening and who does what to whom
  - Noticing and rewarding kids doing the right thing
  - Knowing when to ignore, distract, reward, and discipline kids for what they do
  - Setting up the house so kids won't get in trouble
  - Getting clear what you expect from kids and what will happen if they do or do not meet expectations
  - Having family meetings
  - Knowing how much supervision kids need
  - Giving kids choices
  - Knowing what to do when kids fight with one another
  - Showing kids how you want them to be
- Managing feelings
  - Helping people figure out how they are feeling and what their feelings are (feeling thermometer, faces chart)
  - Helping people figure out what might be causing it, how thinking can cause feelings, how eating can cause feelings
  - Helping people figure out what to do if they start to get angry (crisis cards, changing thinking, doing something else, solving the problem, calling someone)

- Helping people figure out things that are causing depression and things to do to stop feeling depressed (doing different things, giving credit for small steps, looking at things that made you happy in the past, stop criticizing self)
- Helping people do things to stop being anxious learning not to get anxious in the first place (learning to tolerate being uncomfortable)
- Getting along with other people
  - Helping people learn social skills
  - Helping people learn problem-solving
  - Helping people learn to: be assertive, listen, negotiate, make decisions, say “no”
  - Helping people learn when to take criticism
  - Helping people learn to control impulses
  - Helping people to resist pressures
  - Helping people to accept “no”

#### **Helping people maintain changes they have made**

- Helping people learn to predict when they might slip, and planning to prevent those slips
- Helping people have a plan to get back on track if they do slip
- Considering all the possibilities to prevent slips, including: exercise, nutrition, prayer, meditation, acupuncture

#### **Diagnosing conditions or issues that require specializing care**

- Knowing when to call in a health specialist for medical concern that needs treatment
- Knowing when people are unsafe and in harm’s way for violence and stronger action needs to be taken
- Knowing when to call in a law enforcement person or child protection worker to re-establish order and safety
- Knowing when there is a psychological condition (loss of touch with reality, bizarre behavior that is related to a mental disorder) that requires specialized care
- Knowing when children are being endangered by lack of attention and more forceful attention than the natural helper can provide is needed
- Knowing when something is going on the helper can’t figure out and needs the help of a professional to figure out (diagnose)



*Natural helpers are likely to be particularly suspicious of the motives of professionals at the outset, with some justification, while professionals may believe that their background should make them worthy of trust from the outset.*

### **Developing Natural Helper and Professional Relationships**

We have pointed out many potential, and real, advantages of professionals working with natural helpers. We also need to point out the many challenges in developing these relationships. We learned by doing, by taking and working through a variety of issues and experiences in getting to trust and know each other. We must remind ourselves that neither professionals nor natural helpers are homogenous groups. Each relationship is unique. In developing good relationships, both natural helpers and professionals must overcome skepticism, learn new languages, and be both teachers and learners.

We have found that the following issues are ones that must be addressed to develop these relationships.

#### **Meeting One Another**

Although it is possible that professionals may meet natural helpers as clients, it is very rare that they run into each other on equal grounds. They usually do not live in the same neighborhoods, attend the same churches, or participate in the same leisure-time activities. Professionals usually have more doors open to them than natural helpers, and it therefore is important for professionals to seek out and meet natural helpers in the neighborhoods where helpers live.

#### **Recognizing Cultural Differences**

When they do meet, professionals and natural helpers often are doing different dances, and they begin treading on each others' toes immediately. Professionals have a fairly formalized way of greeting each other, making a few neutral comments about the weather or some news event, and then diving into a very linear agenda. Natural helpers do not separate their helping role from themselves as people. They are more likely to either plunge into an informality and warmth that is bewildering to professionals, or to withdraw completely or react aggressively in response to conversations that seem forced, impersonal, and indirect. The key for both natural helper and professional is to suspend disbelief, and seek to be open and flexible.

### **Recognizing Prior Experience and Personal Histories**

Natural helpers and professionals usually begin their relationships with stereotypes about one another. Most have had some prior experiences and all have heard about either hopeless clients or uppity professionals who have done damage to others.

Natural helpers may have had many experiences with the “system” that have been bad. They may react very negatively to “system” requirements and rules and see professionals as supporting those rules, even when the professionals cannot change them. Natural helpers are likely to be particularly suspicious of the motives of the professionals at the outset, with some justification, while the professionals may believe that their background should make them worthy of trust from the outset. These stereotypes can be overcome, but it takes honest discussion about them for this to occur.

### **Understanding the Worries and Fears of Professionals**

In any new activity, anxiety, frustration, and confusion are likely. Some examples of particular triggers professionals may encounter include the following:

- Professionals may not be able to understand the language, or the accent, of some of the phrases used by natural helpers. Differences in greeting behaviors, eye contact, formality, touch, and ways of expressing emotions can produce anxiety or anger when professionals are not aware that many are cultural differences and not meant to cause discomfort.
- Professionals will have to go into neighborhoods, and situations in those neighborhoods, where they do not feel safe. Things can happen while they are there that can frighten them and make them very defensive.
- Some professionals may worry that natural helpers will usurp their roles and endanger their job security. It is hard to feel great about someone who might leave you unemployed. They also may risk credibility with their peers for acting “unprofessionally.”
- Professionals may fear that natural helpers may act in a ways that do harm, instead of helping, and that they will be blamed or must assume the blame for letting it happen.
- Professionals may find that natural helpers do not keep the same schedules and take offense at missed meetings or lateness, not recognizing it as a cultural difference and not an insult. They also may find natural helpers expecting help



as the needs arise and at all hours of the day, even though they have schedules they keep.

- Because they have fewer financial resources, natural helpers have fewer options in emergencies. Cars are more likely to break down, and when they do, professionals are likely to become entangled in and become frustrated by efforts to resolve those situations, which seem simple matters to professionals but are more complex for natural helpers in low-income neighborhoods.

Each of these is also an opportunity for the professional to take a step back, look at the situation, and seek to see it from the natural helper's perspective. This can produce greater understanding of how to partner with the natural helper and how to work with people in the neighborhood, as well as reduce the frustration and anxiety the professional feels.

### **Understanding the Worries and Fears of Natural Helpers**

- Natural helpers also are likely to have their feelings triggered by beginning interactions with professionals. Many of these are the reverse side of the fears and worries professionals have:
- Natural helpers risk interacting with someone who frequently is impossible for them to understand. Professionals' jargon, acronyms, and concepts are not only foreign, but also insulting to those who believe they are used to maintain professional control while professionals have absolutely no idea what it is like to survive under difficult conditions.
- Inadvertently, and sometimes intentionally, professionals shut natural helpers out of decision-making processes. This can be done through lack of eye contact, a raised eyebrow, and polite nods, but no real understanding, when natural helpers speak. It also can be through failure to invite natural helpers to meetings or maintaining control over all administrative actions that then dictate what professionals say can be done.
- Professionals may fail to understand the importance of a personal and long-term commitment to natural helpers and the neighborhoods in which they work. Natural helpers are aware of the importance of relationships, and the preciousness of finding professionals with whom they can relate. Those relationships have meaning beyond "business." If they end when a grant is over, or when someone gets promoted and leaves the work, it can be seen as another betrayal.

- Many natural helpers have had personal experience with state public assistance, child welfare agencies, and housing authorities, either on behalf of themselves or a close friend. They may have felt humiliated and powerless in their interactions. They may see many people in these systems as controlling and hostile. Professionals usually do not view these systems in this way and present the workers in these systems as well-meaning, which may come across as being unsupportive of natural workers and their experiences.

*Walking together, over time, can smooth out some of these tensions, but both natural helpers and professionals must be clear about what they really mean about their relationship.*

### **Reconciling Differences in Expectations and Beliefs**

Even when professionals and natural helpers use the same words, there can be misunderstandings about what they mean. One of the most important words around which misunderstandings and resentments can arise is the word “partner.”

Natural helpers may see the partnership as finally having an equal voice with professionals, with a suspicion that professionals will at some point pull rank. Natural helpers see partnering as making half of the decisions and are likely to test professionals to see if they are really serious.

Professionals, on the other hand, often view it as a partnership when they consider natural helpers in their plans, draw upon them for advice or information, or invite them to some of their meetings and put them on advisory boards. They see partnership with respect to “nonprofessional” issues, but they believe they should call the shots when issues of professional judgment must be made.

Working together, over time, can smooth out some of these tensions, but both natural helpers and professionals must be clear about what they really mean about their relationship. It is particularly damaging for professionals to suggest that they will go farther than they actually are ready to go.

The approaches, and the language related to those approaches, that professionals have learned often are very different from those of natural helpers. Eventually, these differences must be reconciled, if professionals and natural helpers are to work together smoothly.



Table Three provides a contrast between the way some professionals and some natural helpers view the world of helping. Every natural helper and professional partnership will have its differences. The key to success is understanding the difference and changing when a particular approach doesn't make sense or doesn't work. Developing partner relationships between professionals and natural helpers does not come over night. It comes from hard work together, listening to each other, and trying out new approaches. In the end, it produces results that are better than those achieved by either natural helpers or professionals acting alone.

**Table 3. A Comparison of Professional and Natural Helper Approaches to Helping**

Some Professionals	Some Natural Helpers
<i>Types of Help Provided</i>	
Therapy	Support
Evaluation	Education
Treatment	Healing
Counseling	Moral and spiritual guidance
Aftercare	Advocacy
<i>Who Decides What Help Is Provided</i>	
Federal government	Residents
State government	Neighborhoods
Rules and regulations	Communities
Therapist	People agreeing to help
Multi-disciplinary teams	Partnership
<i>How Help Is Provided</i>	
The fifty-minute hour	Kitchen table conversations
Group therapy	Self-help groups
Psych-social evaluations	Problem-solving sessions
Medications	Changing neighborhoods
Conditions	
<i>Who Needs Help</i>	
Dysfunctional people	All of us, at some time
People with diagnoses	People who ask
<i>Where Help Occurs</i>	
In the office	In life, wherever it is happening

## Conclusion

In this article, we have discussed reasons new approaches to social service are necessary and the advantages and challenges of developing natural helper/professional partnerships. We have described the strengths of each and some possible ways partnerships may evolve. In joining together, we believe we have the opportunity to forge new alternatives that will allow us to combine knowledge from many perspectives, creating deeper insights and higher quality of life.

We know many others are traveling similar roads on this journey. We need to share our learnings and insights. We encourage those who have yet to begin to start now, because the current turmoil of our times provides us all with an enormous opportunity to surge ahead together by acknowledging our mutual resources and talents.

**Jill Kinney** is Executive Director of Home, Safe. She can be reached at Home, Safe, 1000 Town Center, #22, Browns, WA, 98422. Her phone number is (206) 849-3645. **Margaret Trent** is a Community Specialist in the Home, Safe agency in Tacoma, Washington.

While listed as co-authors, this is really a collective effort of ourselves, our other partners, and other friends in the field: Kim Apple, Sue Bernstein, Katrina Fogg, Larrie Fogg, David Haapala, Edith Johnson, Robert Johnson, Janice Nittoli, Daniele Price, Keith Roberts, Tasha Steele, Kathy Strand, Edwin Trent, Venessa Trent, Robert Smith, and Ron Vignec. The Annie E. Casey Foundations supported this work, and Charles Bruner and the staff at the Child and Family Policy Center assisted in editing and combining text and materials from several different papers into this article.



