

# Intergenerational Engagement in the Child Welfare System

Implications and Opportunities for  
Policy and System Reform

**David Hopping, PhD**

*2010 Katherine and Arthur Sehlin Lecture*  
Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare  
University of Minnesota



November 9, 2010

This presentation introduces a new model for providing services to vulnerable populations, one which leverages the power of intentional intergenerational community living. This model is based on Hope Meadows, a small-town neighborhood where neglected and abused children who have been removed from their biological parents for their safety, find caring adoptive parents and a permanent home, as well as grandparents, playmates and an entire neighborhood designed to help them grow up in a nurturing environment.

Hope Meadows is intergenerational by design. Older adult residents live alongside adoptive families and serve as “honorary grandparents,” agreeing to volunteer at least six hours per week – in turn they receive reduced rent on spacious three-bedroom apartments. The seniors are integral to the children's healing and development, and the children provide meaning and purpose in the daily lives of the seniors.

Hope Meadows was established in 1994 by Generations of Hope, a nonprofit organization, utilizing housing on a decommissioned Air Force base in Rantoul, Illinois.

In 2006, Generations of Hope Development Corporation (GHDC) was established, with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, to develop similar communities across the country and to explore the application of the Hope Meadows model to a range of social problems, including teen mothers and their children, teens aging out of foster care, and disconnected young adults exiting drug rehabilitation and/or the criminal justice system.

The broader goal of these efforts is to shift the way communities address social challenges, from an over-reliance on fragmented social service systems to a holistic response that relies on the strengths of community members and the capacity of people to care for one another.



Brenda Krause Eheart and Martha Baumann Power studied families who adopted children from foster care in the late 1980's in Illinois. Brenda was a child development researcher and Marty a sociologist; both were at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Brenda's daughter was the same age as many of these children.

- A "turning point": The adoptive family of one nine-year-old boy eventually went to court to terminate the adoption, sending the child back into foster care – the child subsequently became suicidal. *Brenda*: "I kept thinking, ***these could be my kids...***"
- Brenda often used this quotation from John Dewey in early talks and publications to set a basic philosophical tone.

SAFETY, PERMANENCY, WELLBEING – The current watchwords of Child Welfare, and particularly of child-protection services and the foster care system. They represent a social and professional consensus on the goals of intervention and are enshrined in federal and state law and policy. SAFETY received renewed emphasis in the 1960's when the discovery by physician Henry Kempe of the "battered child syndrome" first got society agitated enough to start removing kids from dangerous homes in real earnest. The ranks of foster care were swollen to over half a million in the US within a decade, and kids inevitably began churning through multiple foster-care placements, prompting an emphasis in the late 70's and early 80's on PERMANENCY.



Since the mid-90's attention has turned to a more comprehensive concern for the WELLBEING of foster children, usually understood in concrete measurable terms like access to health care and graduating from high school.

As I reflected on what I personally would want for my own son, I began to list other dimensions that were not well captured by the catchall term “wellbeing”. The point however is that it is clearly not appropriate to delegate these other aspirations to agents of the State – even if they could meet the challenge, which they can't. It's not their job nor should it be.

In order to get any real traction on our goals, we need to offer program designers and practitioners some entirely **new kinds** of resource to work with, more “space” if you will, opening up in a couple of dimensions.

The first dimension in which conventional programming has been hampered so far is in the **range of networks** it can tap. Most professional interventions are targeted at individuals anyway and many are conducted within the framework of a one-on-one fifty-minute hour. Foster kids especially have extremely **truncated social networks**, as do many aging adults, especially as friends and relatives pass away. And of course the families who adopt from foster care need all the support they can get, which is more than the average modern family typically has available.

## extended social network



*“A collection of housing becomes an extended family neighborhood with a shared purpose: supporting one another through the challenges of growing up, growing old, and growing together.”*

- W. K. Kellogg Foundation

So, what if we could shoot for a basic threshold of about 150 close acquaintanceships with a **high density of routine interaction**, coupled with a selectivity bias that ensures a common commitment to some core values – commitments that can serve to cut across the usual boundaries of affiliation and association – but without building some new institutional edifice.

An embedded slide show plays next, providing a two-minute window into Hope Meadows. There are two senior voices, one child, and Brenda putting some context to it all. The meaning of the neighborhood to the various residents comes vividly clear, but so does the next dimension of “added space” – that of an open-ended time horizon on the relationships that compose the available network.

The three residents all mention this one way or another in their comments, and it’s implicit in the quotation from Kellogg...

## extended time horizon



*“I’m never going to leave – I’ll just come up here and live with Grandma...”*

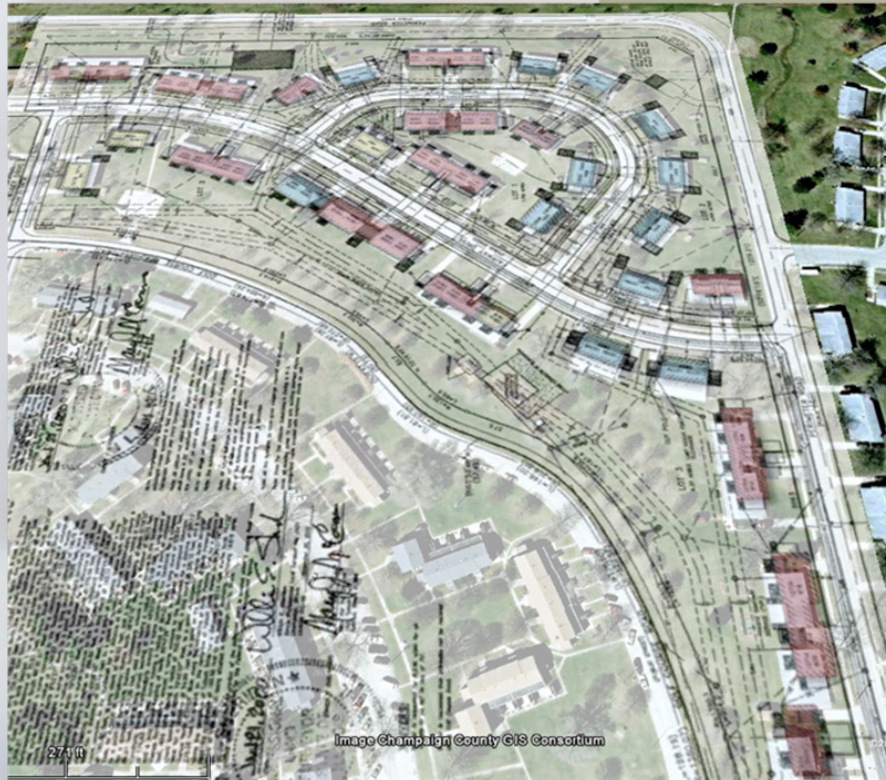


*“I guess I’ll be here until the end...”*



*...growing up, growing old, and growing together...*

The time horizon of relationships at Hope Meadows is unrestricted – providing another key advantage to program designers, who now can address the existential isolation facing foster children and older adults who have become disembedded from networks of family and friends.



At Hope Meadows, 12 families agree to adopt up to four children from the foster care system. Another 42 apartments are designated to be rented to active retirees who want to make a difference in the life of a child and to be engaged community members. Five apartments are reserved for “service households” – these are families that live in the community and volunteer, but are not seniors. At capacity, the neighborhood accommodates approximately 150 residents.

This slide shows the Hope Meadows neighborhood in Rantoul, Illinois. I’ve overlaid the original plat onto a Google Earth view, and color-coded the different units, which are duplexes and four-plexes of former military housing – red for senior apartments and blue for families. This is not a “campus.” The neighborhood is indistinguishable from the adjoining housing and the yards are unfenced and continuous with extensive green space. This emphasis on “normality” is deliberate and extends to all dimensions of the program, which is designed to undermine stigmas of every sort. Over the years as seniors and new families have moved into the neighborhood, they have found it nearly impossible to tell which of the children came to Hope Meadows through foster care, which came with their birth families, and which were previously adopted.

ABC News’ *Nightline* did the first major TV feature of Hope Meadows in October of 1996. Ted Koppel offered some very prescient and incisive commentary, including the quotable but paradoxical notions quoted on the next slide.

### Eroding the silos

“It starts with a whole bundle of problems which... were put together and appear to have created a whole bunch of solutions.”

### A new kind of “old-fashioned”

“It all adds up to a community so old-fashioned it’s, well, new...”

– Ted Koppel, *ABC News Nightline*, 1996

There is a name for the segmentation of problems with separate funding streams for services – we call it creating “silos” – and this phenomenon is one of the chief obstacles to the kind of synergy that Hope Meadows relies on.

Of course you can’t just concentrate problems and expect new solutions... But you can look for how problems are inter-related and how people who have become identified as problems may actually be untapped resources. Everyone in fact – families, neighbors, and even kids themselves – who have been cut out of circuits of care.

Social networks as circuits of care – not always necessarily, but always potentially. So the question is, under what conditions?

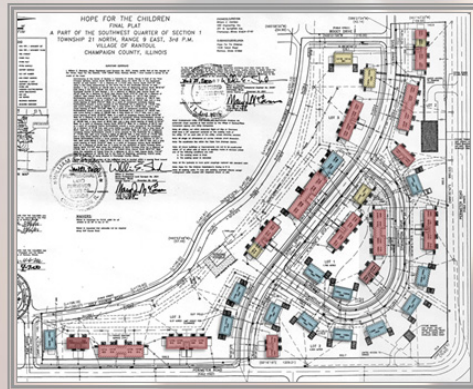
The newness of this old-fashioned concept consists in the fact that it is deliberate and diverse; a ‘normal’ neighborhood, yet also multi-generational, integrated with respect to class and race, and characterized by a high level of professional competence that is diffused throughout the neighborhood, and thus effective in an understated way. The entire process is managed so as to evoke a sense of an ‘old fashioned’ village, but without recourse to the usual exclusions and coercions that made such traditional spaces possible. The ‘normality’ that is sought and achieved in this way is both natural and artificial.

Again the question is, what conditions make this possible? This leads to a discussion of **structure** (next slide) – architectural, programmatic, socio-cultural, etc. – that contains and makes possible the kind of dynamics we recognize as an “old-fashioned” solution to new social problems.

## Structure

Relationships develop naturally, but not automatically. Hope Meadows builds and supports an “old-fashioned” network of relationships in several ways...

## Architecture and site design



As mentioned above, new solutions will not emerge automatically. The devil is in the details of **structure**, which in this case encompasses several layers that normally don't get addressed together in such a comprehensive manner. The next few slides present a heuristic set of categories through which program coordinators and designers can introduce structure, beginning with the physical built environment.

At Hope Meadows everyone's most basic role is simply that of neighbor, but being a neighbor is also a programmatic role.

Normally when architecture and programming do get addressed together it's usually in the context of something like “service-enriched low-income housing” or of “continuing care retirement communities” – neither of which incorporate the residents themselves as integral elements of the “programming”.



## Structure

Relationships develop naturally, but not automatically. Hope Meadows builds and supports an “old-fashioned” network of relationships in several ways...

## Architecture and site design

## Routine and special events



Community events are scheduled as either routine, such as daily after-school tutoring and other activities at the IGC, annual Easter Egg Hunt, 4th of July barbecue (pictured) etc., or special – a good example of a special event becoming part of the community’s routine identity is the Formal Tea pictured below, which began as a spontaneous project of a few “Red Hat Society” ladies (“when I am old I shall wear purple...”) in the neighborhood and now is an annual event.

## Structure

Relationships develop naturally, but not automatically. Hope Meadows builds and supports an “old-fashioned” network of relationships in several ways...

Architecture and site design

Routine and special events

Volunteer engagement



The roster of volunteer activities adds a crucial element of “compulsory engagement” that – among other things – helps to overcome the “viscosity” of developing social networks – people have to engage with one another on tasks that really do need to be done (no make-work envelope stuffing...), and this provides a natural way to get acquainted and connected. Of course it also adds instrumental value to the program as well, the equivalent of tens of thousands of dollars of labor each year.

## Structure

Relationships develop naturally, but not automatically. Hope Meadows builds and supports an “old-fashioned” network of relationships in several ways...

Architecture and site design

Routine and special events

Volunteer engagement

Roles and expectations



From the outset of the program the very definition of roles such as “Hope Senior” help to structure expectations and behaviors, laying down a foundation for cultural evolution within the community.

New children pick up very quickly on the interactions and relationships that are possible, and suddenly find themselves with a wealth of opportunities for (re)building a personal network of care and support.

This is particularly remarkable given that foster children normally are offered almost no opportunities for exercising this kind of proactive agency in their lives, and too often reach adulthood without basic social skills.

## Structure

Relationships develop naturally, but not automatically. Hope Meadows builds and supports an “old-fashioned” network of relationships in several ways...

## Architecture and site design

## Routine and special events

## Volunteer engagement

## Roles and expectations

## Communications



Formal channels of reliable communications are critical – not only in the practical sense of coordination and announcements and calendars etc. but also as a venue for recognition and acknowledgement of achievements. At Hope Meadows the weekly “Seedlings” newsletter pictured here has been a fixture since the inception of the program in 1994.

## Structure

Relationships develop naturally, but not automatically. Hope Meadows builds and supports an “old-fashioned” network of relationships in several ways...

## Architecture and site design

## Routine and special events

## Volunteer engagement

## Roles and expectations

## Communications

## Professional services and material supports



Finally there are the professional services themselves, delivered unobtrusively from an office that is indistinguishable from any of the homes. The play therapy room in the basement could be virtually interchangeable with a dozen other basement playrooms in the neighborhood – seniors sometimes set up their own basements as playrooms.

Caseworkers can visit their entire caseload by walking around the neighborhood.

There is a pastoral flavor to the professional service roles that is necessarily absent from the conventional service industry with its “field visits” (as if clients lived out in the wilderness) and 50-minute hours.

---

With this heuristic model in mind, we can begin to abstract from the concrete example of Hope Meadows, so that its design can be made useful to other programs and initiatives that might want to adapt or otherwise build on it.

---

This takes us into the next topic, the **Generations of Hope Community (GHC) Model** and the theory supporting it. The next two slides are just text – simple (maybe overly simple) statements. At this point everything pertaining to this model and theory should be considered basically works-in-progress:

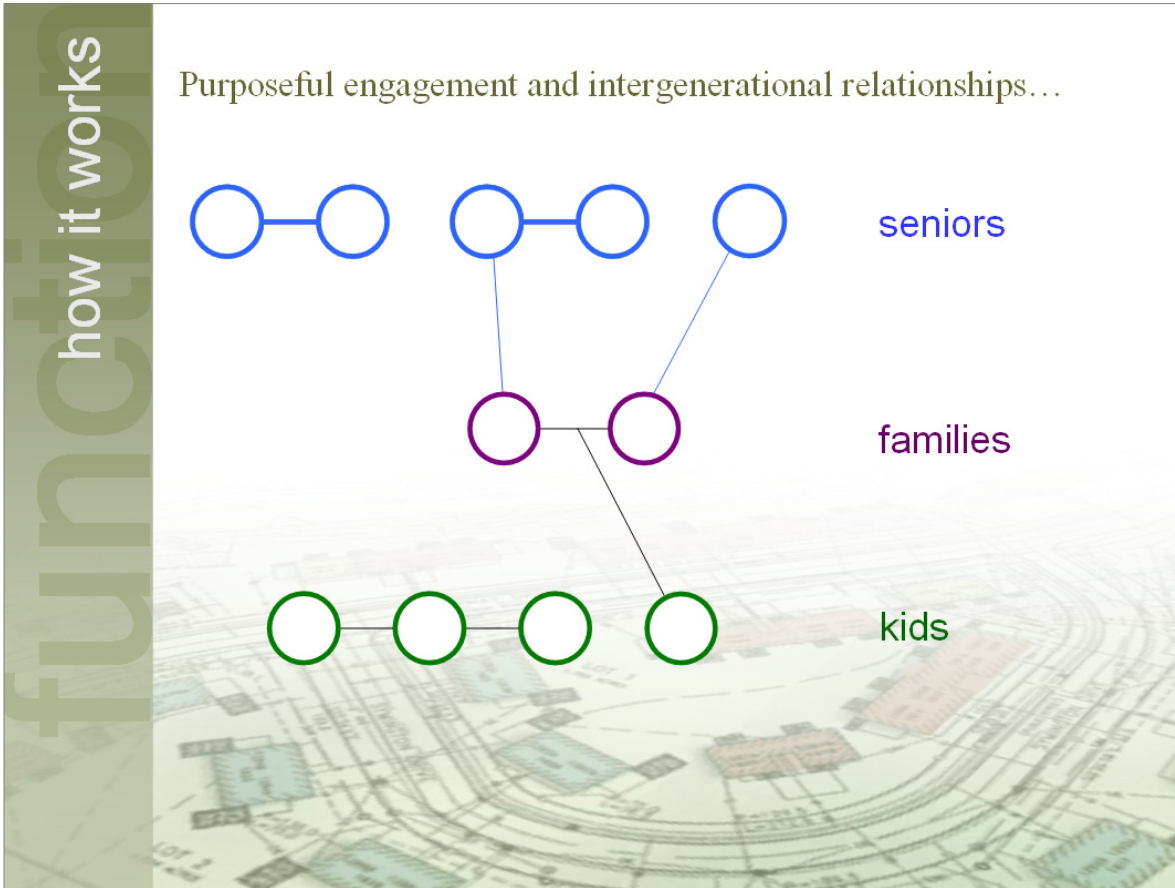
### **The GHC Model**

A Generations of Hope Community is an intentionally created, geographically contiguous intergenerational neighborhood, where some of the residents are facing a specific challenge around which the entire community organizes.

### **Theory**

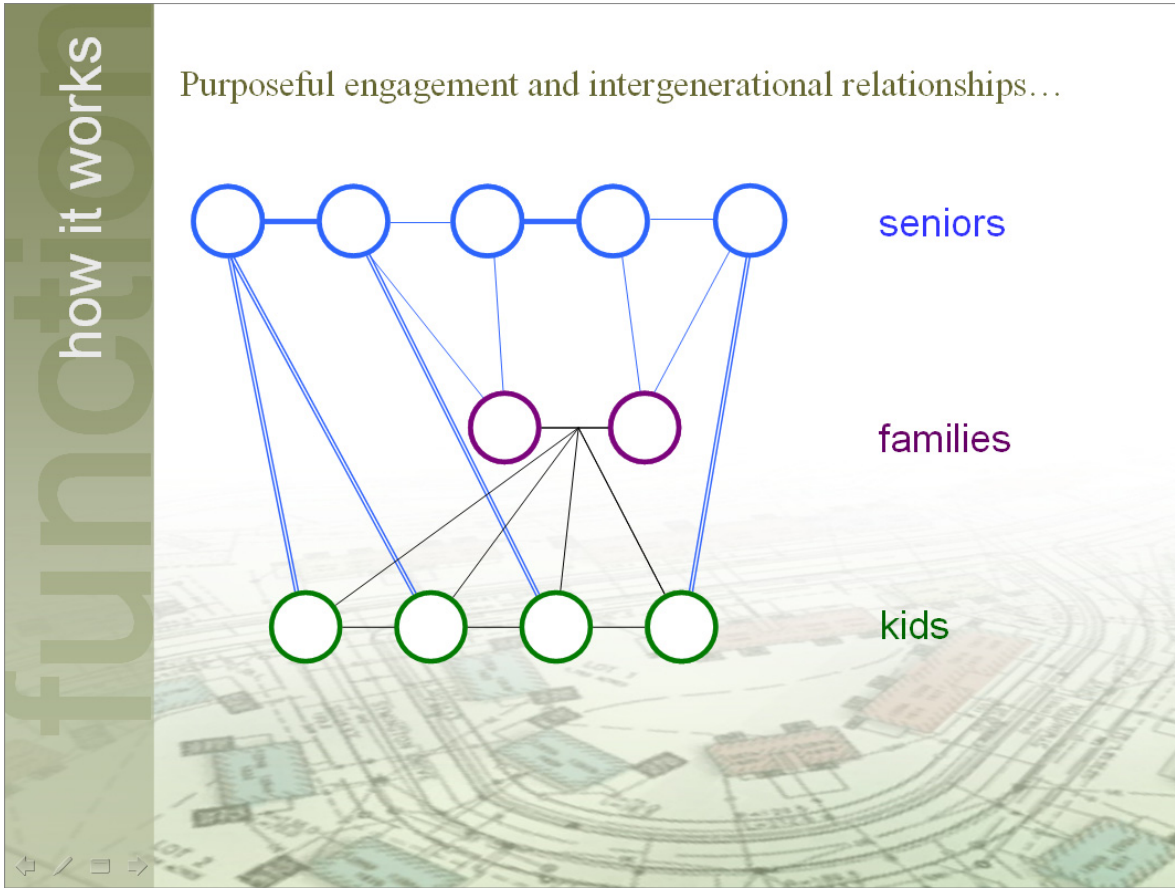
Purposeful engagement and intergenerational relationships, developing over decades within a contiguous neighborhood, can sustain transformative gains and support life-course transitions, producing new kinds of organizational capacity.

The slides that follow then explore the theory statement, phrase by phrase.



Echoing one of the first slides of the presentation (extended social network), this animated slide focuses on the basic unit of analysis from an intergenerational perspective: the system of linked households that emerges around the foster-adoptive family.

In this illustration, three households of seniors (two couples and a single) connect as neighbors with a new family that brings one birth child with them, and adopts a sibling group of three. New family relationships and attachments need time to form, and the process can be challenging.



The active presence of multiple seniors, available to assume multiple roles as friends, mentors, tutors, neighbors, etc. (signified by the double lines connecting seniors with kids) – can mitigate the risks and difficulties entailed in this melding of family systems.

This is one of the ways a GHC approach can multiply or leverage resources beyond what is typically possible in more conventionally structured program models that might pair senior volunteers with children around specifically-targeted needs.

The animation also illustrates why it can take three senior households to adequately connect up with all the members of an adoptive family, hence our strong guidance regarding a 3:1 ratio of households for this particular program focus.

This extended network dimension is augmented by the extended time dimension, the subject of the next slide...



... developing over decades  
within a contiguous neighborhood ...



Miss Irene and Brandon – the first picture from the 1996 Nightline episode, the next probably about 2000, and the last 2007.

... can sustain transformative gains



Picking up on the theme of what becomes possible “within a contiguous neighborhood...” this slide looks takes a closer look at a pair of connected households.

A family built by adoption – spanning four races/ethnicities (the child on the left is Hispanic) – accomplishes the transformative work of adding a succession of new members. Among the seniors who became close to this family are Margie and Elmer Davis – some of the very first to move into the neighborhood in 1994.

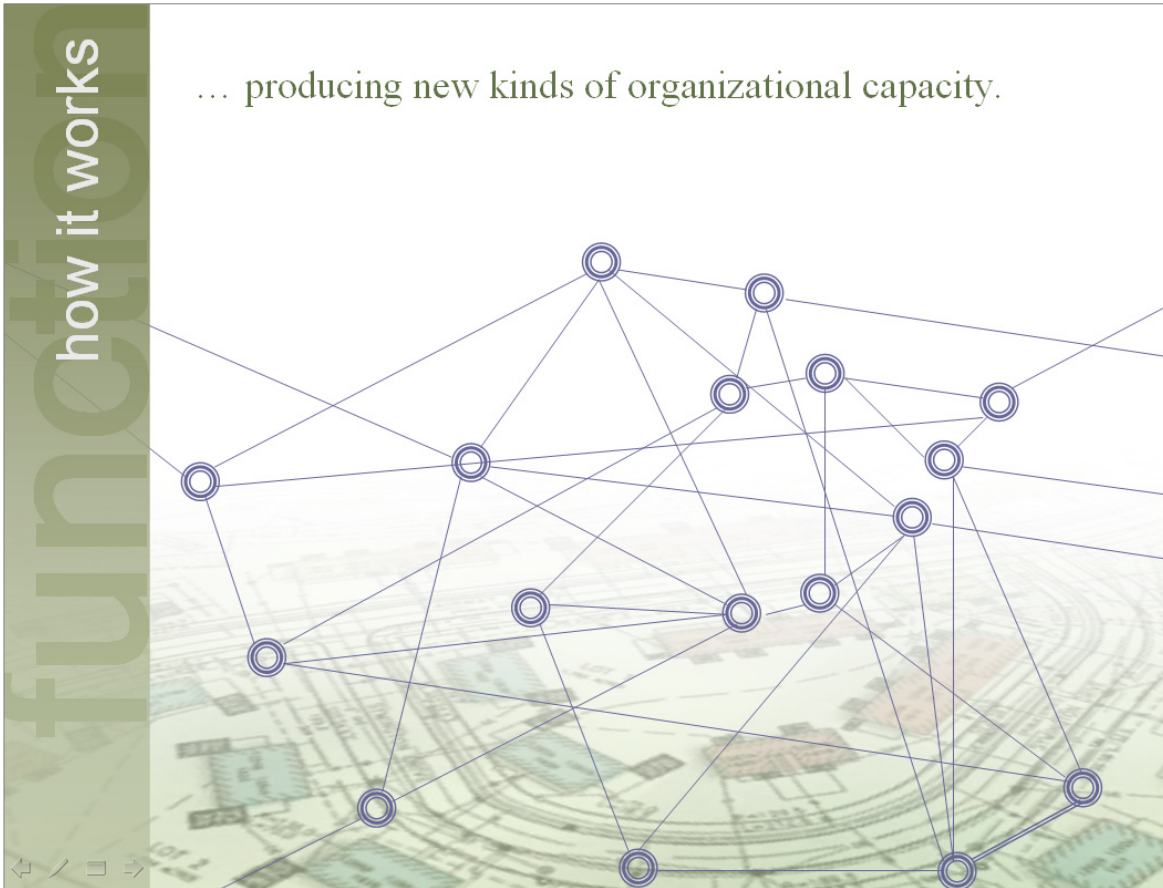
For Elmer the transformative gain was especially dramatic. Marge once explained that before moving to Hope Meadows, Elmer had largely lost any sense of initiative and purpose in life. “Down in Florida he just laid, didn’t what to do nothing...” she said. “Up here it’s entirely different.” Elmer struck up a particularly close relationship with Katara, driving her to school occasionally when she was late and then eventually as a routine every day.

... can sustain transformative gains  
and support life-course transitions ...



The encouragement and support (emotional and material) that she received from neighbors like Elmer and Margie were probably critical in seeing her through to high school graduation, a major life-course transition.

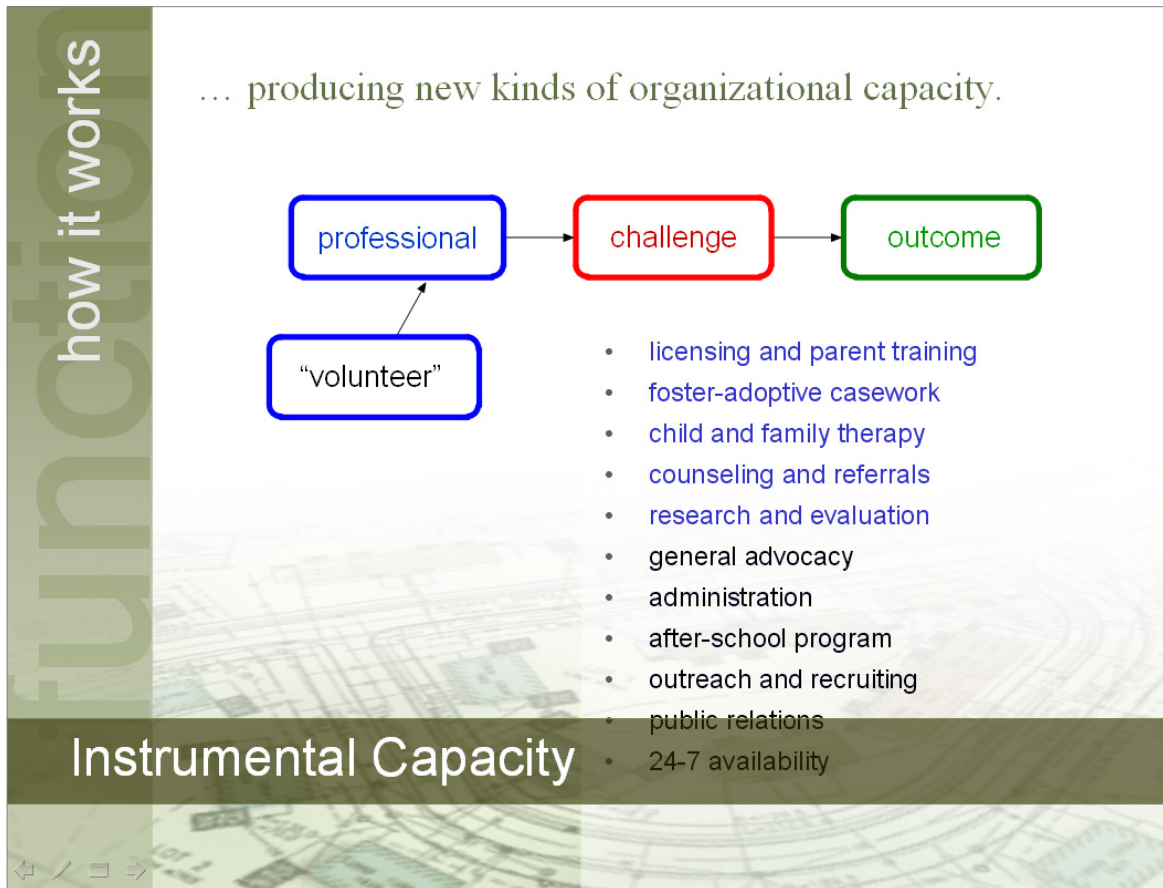
Conversely, when Elmer died, Katara and other neighbors were a vital resource for Margie. In effect Elmer's passing represented a major transition not only for Margie but for the entire community – a shared process of grief and of celebration and remembrance.



And so it goes... replicated and extended over and over, creating a complex network of interwoven lives.

From the perspective of organizational development, I think we're really looking at a new kind of capacity here.

To be just a little more analytical... let's look at the notion of "capacity" a bit more closely...

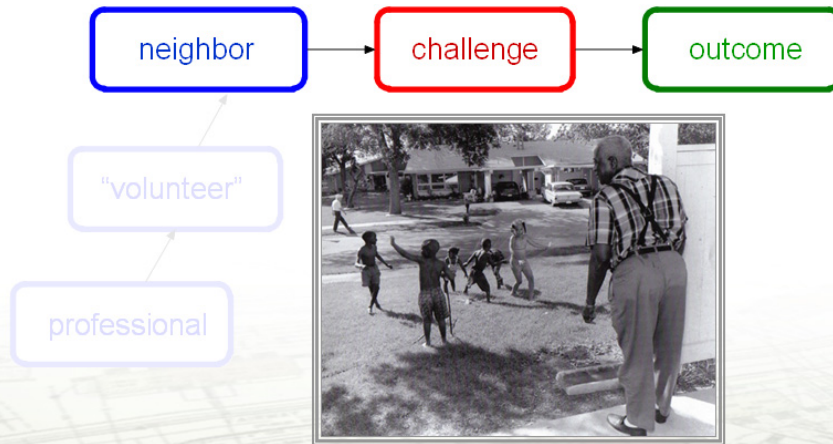


What's new is not really the presence and contribution of volunteers – although in terms of delivering reliable and knowledgeable assistance this model has a lot to recommend it.

The conventional paradigm for professional services and intervention is to meet a challenge and produce a well-defined outcome. When volunteers are added to the mix it's usually in a way that's designed to take some of the burden off the professionals – to extend their reach so to speak.

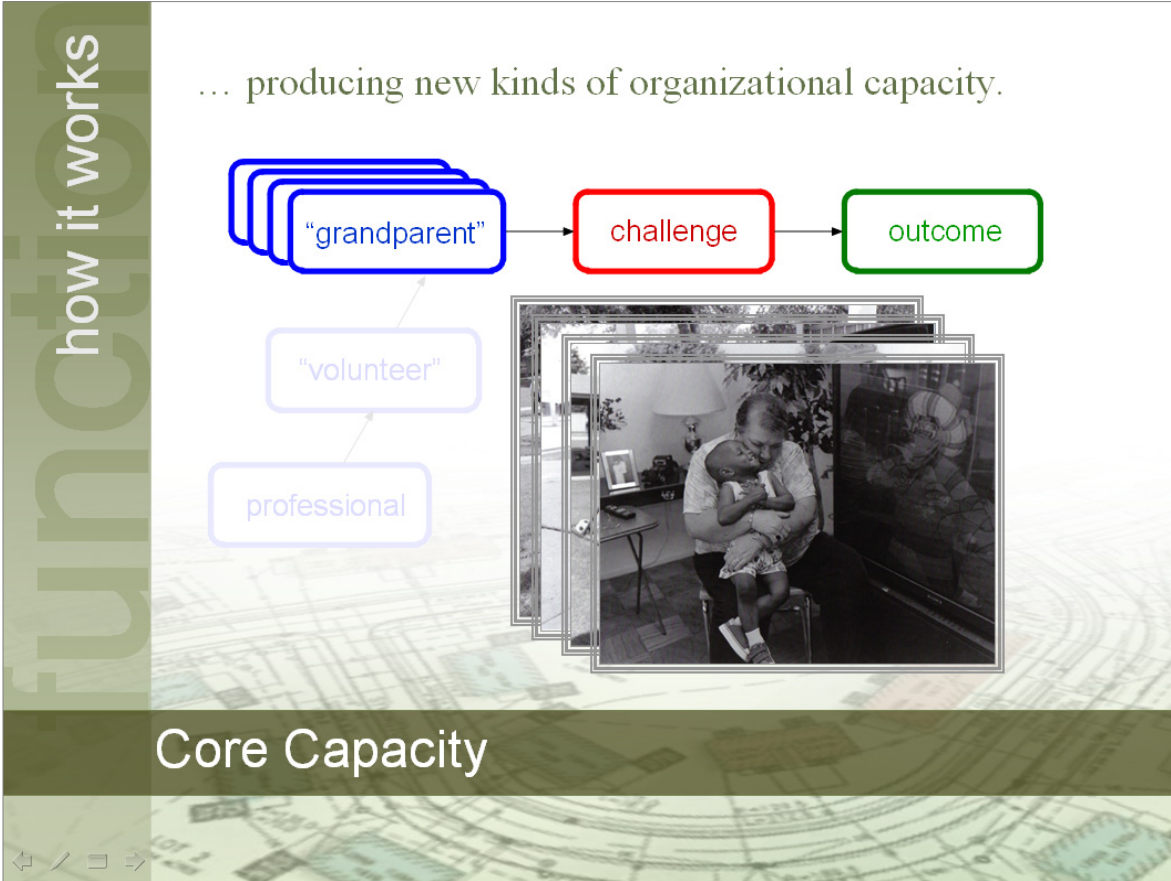
I call this **Instrumental Capacity** – and you can see some of the specific ways this works at Hope Madows.

... producing new kinds of organizational capacity.



It's also possible however for GHC professionals to take a back seat to the efforts and activities of residents, and support them from behind the scenes or in more understated ways.

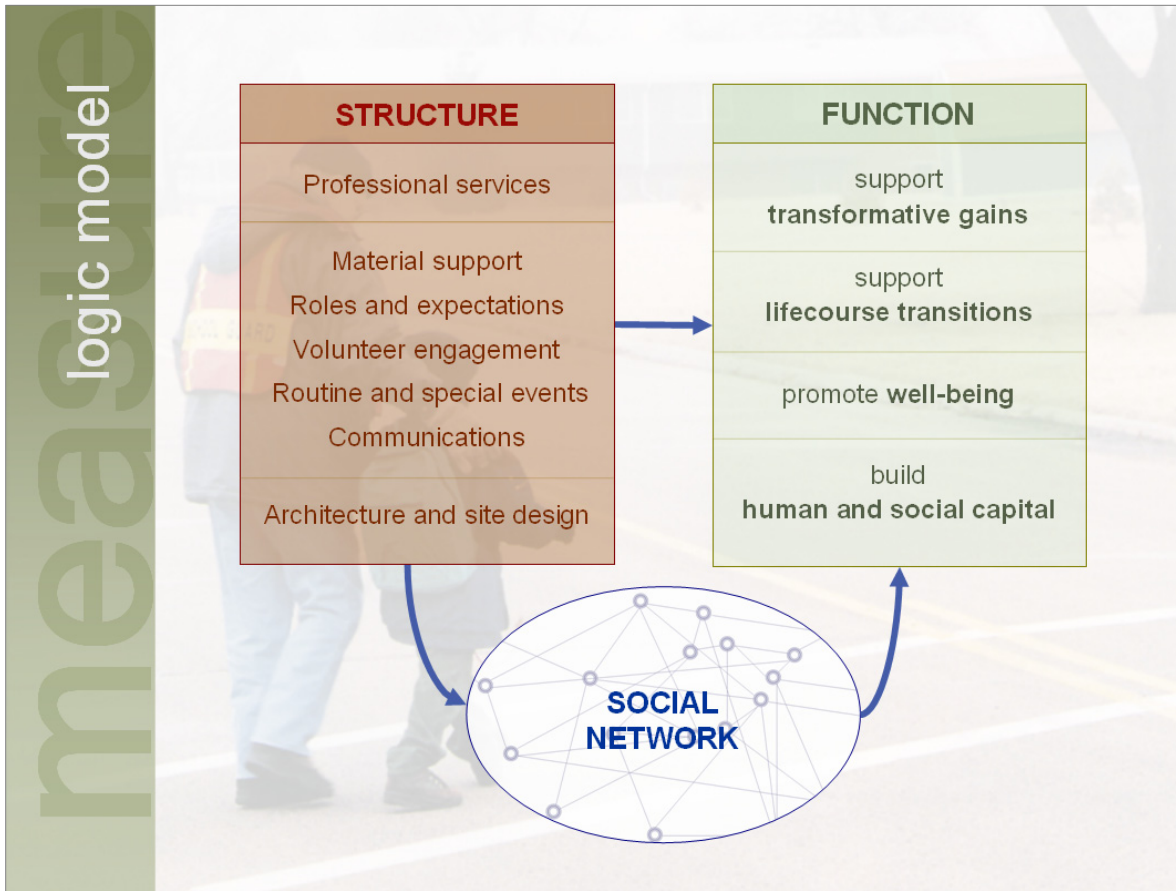
One effect then is that even the role of volunteer begins to recede into the background, after jump-starting relationships that continue to mature and develop on their own.



Neighbors may become friends, and friends may become mentors, and mentors may even become grandparents. Another angle on multistranding, and another visual series to hang the concept on.

I call the resulting organizational resource “**Core Capacity**”.

From a staff perspective it’s a challenge to cultivate and work with this kind of capacity, because it’s so indirect – sort of like trying to back double semi trailers into a parking spot. Not everyone is up to it.

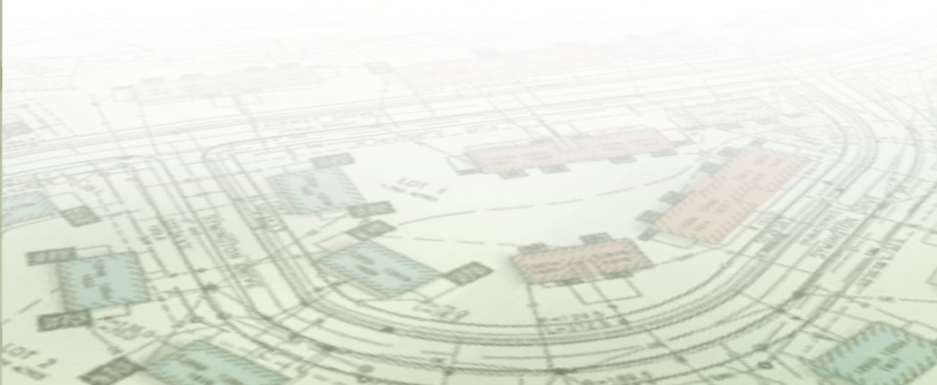


Recapping, and formalizing this whole process as a logic model, we can begin to look for ways to operationalize and measure the various elements and intended outcomes, and recognize interdependencies and emergent structures.



## Generations of Hope Development Corporation (GHDC)

GHDC was established in 2006, with a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, to develop and implement the GHC model nationwide, and to explore adaptations of the model to other social challenges.



## “Hope-inspired” sites now operating or in development



collaboration

**network**

We are all here on earth to help others.  
What on earth the others are for I don't know.

- W.H. Auden

The diagram features two blue-outlined ovals, each containing a network of nodes and lines, labeled "LOCAL SITE". Two blue arrows connect the nodes between the two ovals. To the right of the ovals, the words "POLICY" (green), "RESEARCH" (purple), and "PRACTICE" (brown) are stacked vertically. The entire diagram is overlaid on a background image of a person in a blue jacket and orange safety vest walking on a sidewalk.

← / ☰ ⇒

For more about Generations of Hope, the Hope Meadows neighborhood program, and Generations of Hope Development Corporation, including video segments embedded in this presentation, visit:

[www.generationsofhope.org](http://www.generationsofhope.org)