

# Communication for Social Change Working Paper Series



## Talking Cure:

A Case Study in Communication  
for Social Change

By Christopher Reardon



### The Communication for Social Change Working Paper Series: No. 2

The Communication for Social Change Consortium is a network of practitioners, researchers and scholars dedicated to building local communication capacity in marginalized communities. With such capacity the people living in marginalized communities can own, create and manage communication processes in order to sustain democratic values and improve their own lives.

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A Case Study in Communication  
for Social Change

A Troubled City Puts its Trust in  
Civic Dialogue and Community-  
Based Decision Making

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**By** Christopher Reardon

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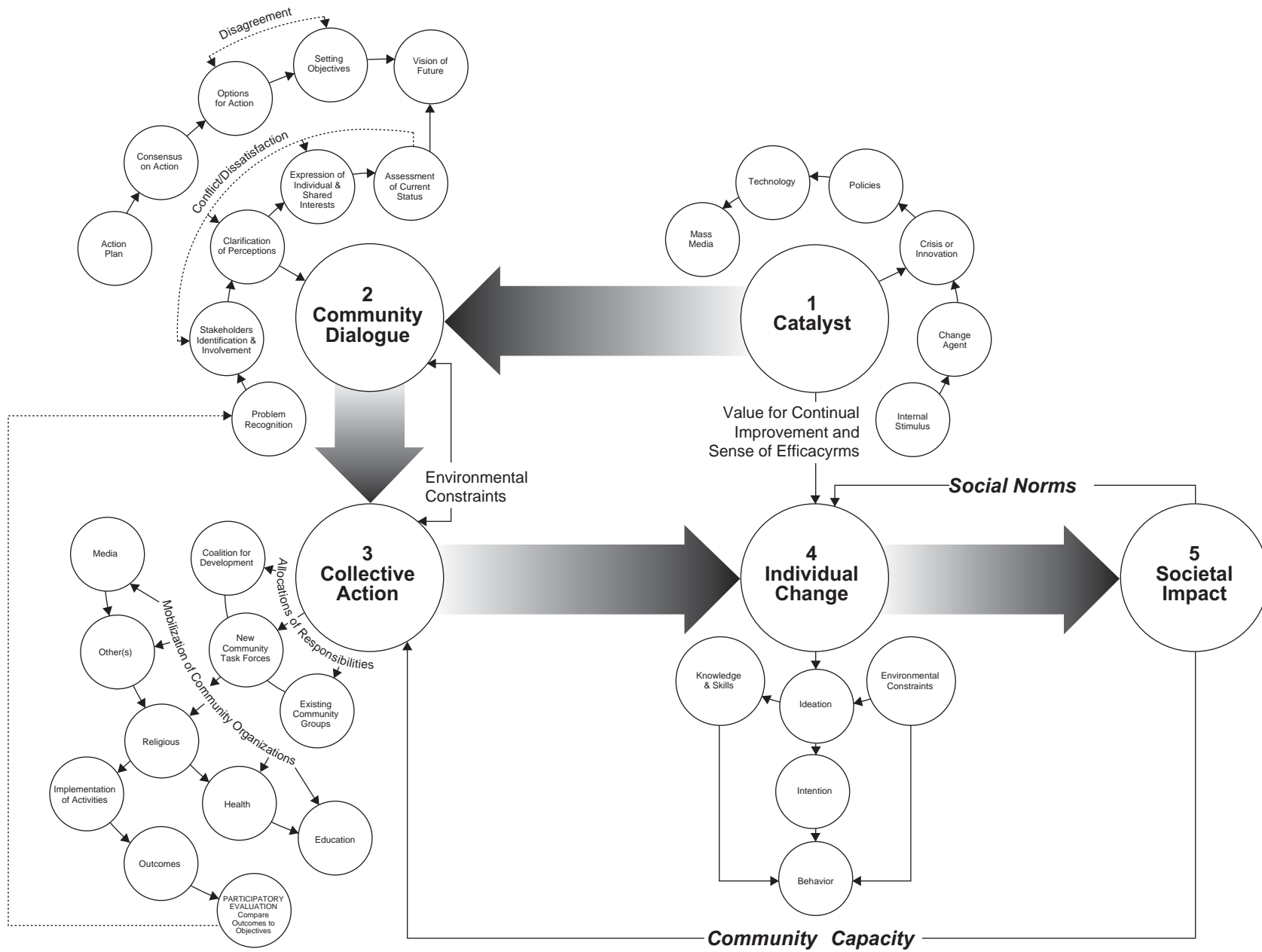
Christopher Reardon writes for *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*,  
*Ford Foundation Report* and other national publications.

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## PREFACE

*Communication for social change is an evolving methodology that allows communities to articulate their values, reconcile disparate interests and act upon shared concerns. Because it engages people in dialogue about difficult issues, it can be slow and unpredictable. It can also be difficult to evaluate. This case study makes no effort to analyze the field as a whole. Rather, it offers a narrative account of how stakeholders in one community – Decatur, Ill. – have tried to use the communication for social change methods to spark public and private dialogue, set an agenda, frame public debates and create an environment that is conducive to change.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Mattie Towles has lived in Decatur, Ill., long enough to see its fortunes rise and fall — and then fall some more. “It was a working town when we came here from Tennessee in 1968,” says Towles, whose husband leads the congregation at the North Jasper Street Church of Christ. “If you wanted a job, you could get one. With a high-school diploma, you could find work at one of the plants, buy a small house, raise a family. It’s not like that now.”

Many industrial cities in the United States have fallen on hard times in recent decades, but the downturn in Decatur — a blue-collar community of 82,000 people surrounded by some of the world’s most fertile farmland — looks almost apocalyptic by comparison. Since 1994 its residents have endured three crippling labor strikes, two calamitous tornadoes, a price-fixing scandal, a divisive racial incident and a tragic tire debacle. Nevertheless, some diehards and visionaries are working on solutions to overcome such setbacks by using a communication method known as *communication for social change*. The case study at hand tells the story of how Decatur residents have applied this process to their local needs.

“I think what we’re doing is the basis for good, sustainable change,” says Linda Kehart, a local activist who has championed these efforts. “We’ve tried other approaches, but this one seems to work best in our community.”

Economists say Decatur’s troubles began in the 1970s, when the national energy crisis dealt a weakening blow to the factories that turned out bulldozers, tires and corn syrup. Then, as employers tried to compete with cheap overseas labor in the 1990s, protracted strikes at Caterpillar, Bridgestone/Firestone and A.E. Staley, a grain processor, ended in wrenching union defeats.

A few months later, back-to-back tornadoes ravaged more than 200 homes in Decatur, injuring 36 people and causing \$10 million in property damage. Next came a price-fixing scandal at Archer Daniels Midland (ADM), the city’s largest employer; in 1999 a federal judge fined the grain-processing company \$100 million and sent three top executives to prison. Once known as “the pride of the prairie,” Decatur lost more of its dignity the following summer when investigators traced hundreds of fatal accidents to faulty Bridgestone/Firestone tires installed on Ford Explorers. Many of the tires were made in Decatur around the time of the labor dispute, when replacement workers with relatively little training manned the line. Bridgestone/Firestone closed the plant 16 months later, eliminating nearly 2,000 jobs.

As the work force grew increasingly dispirited, the city's social fabric began to fray. The most visible rift came in reaction to a fistfight that broke out in the stands during a high-school football game in September 1999. Citing its "zero tolerance" policy, the school expelled seven African-American students involved in the incident. Many local residents felt the punishment was excessive, given that the students, who became known as the Decatur Seven, had no other source of education. Jesse Jackson came to town to intervene, arguing that the school board's action amounted to "an educational death sentence," but as an outsider he only polarized the city further. By the time 200 members of the Ku Klux Klan arrived from Indiana to stage a counter demonstration, Decatur sat squarely, if uneasily, in the national spotlight.

A year later, *The New Yorker* published a five-page essay chronicling the city's "accumulation of calamities and embarrassments." The piece, by staff writer Mark Singer, ended with a long, existential lament about the futility of civic life in the age of globalization:

"Pay close attention, and soon enough it dawns on you that you're only a marginal player in a much broader narrative driven by people whose agendas don't really make allowances for the details of individual lives. One day, things quiet down enough for you to look in the mirror and to hear yourself think. And that's when you realize what a quintessential Decatur situation you've wound up in. Regardless of what ails you or how it all got started — and despite your suspicion that it's not going to turn out very well — basically, you're on your own."<sup>1</sup>

If many local residents felt that way, they had good reason. Organized labor had failed. Executives in London and Tokyo were calling the shots, without the sense of civic duty that once guided the merchant class. Not even Mother Nature was on the city's side. And so the people of Decatur began to resemble protagonists in a classical Greek tragedy. Their demise was inevitable; all that remained was to watch it play out.

Nevertheless, some civic leaders wondered if it might be possible to rewrite the narrative, to bend its arc toward a more agreeable outcome. Among them was Linda Kehart, director of the Decatur Community Partnership until March 2003. Since its inception in 1991, the partnership had worked to coordinate the activities of health- and social-service agencies so they could respond more effectively and efficiently to their clients' needs.

Shortly after the Decatur Seven made national headlines, Kehart and her colleagues learned about communication for social change, an emerging model using public dialogue and collaborative problem solving. In some ways it mirrored their continuing efforts to improve community health. Yet it spelled out some additional steps that might help the partnership bring its work to fruition.

The growing body of literature about communication for social change speaks of a sophisticated conceptual framework, but the basic aim remains quite simple. It is defined as "a process of public and private dialogue through which people define who they are, what they want and how they can get it."<sup>2</sup> This case study seeks to chronicle the efforts Decatur residents have made to embrace this process and adapt it to local needs.

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## AN EMERGING DIALOGUE

Communication for social change is not altogether new. In fact, it draws on several decades of theory and practice, in such varied fields as public relations, social marketing, development communication and community organizing. It gained additional visibility in 1997, when the Rockefeller Foundation launched a series of international meetings and publications to explore ways that communication could play a more integral role in development. The premise was that when communities articulate their own agendas, they are more likely to achieve positive changes in attitudes, behaviors and access to opportunities. What's more, because they are highly invested in the process, they are more apt to sustain these gains.

Rockefeller began putting these principles to the test a few years ago in Zimbabwe, where it supports rural youth groups seeking to halt the spread of AIDS. The work in Decatur marks their first explicit application in the United States. Why Decatur? "It was a very practical decision," says Brian Byrd, the foundation's assistant director for communication. "We were looking for a way to do a field test without going through a lot of hoops. We had informal conversations with counterparts at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, which was already funding the Decatur Community Partnership, and that sparked the whole thing. We saw an opportunity, and opportunities often have a very narrow window."

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<sup>1</sup> *The New Yorker*, October 30, 2000, pp. 58-62.

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<sup>2</sup> *Communication for Social Change: A Position Paper and Conference Report* (1999, The Rockefeller Foundation), p. 15.

In April 2000, Byrd went to Decatur with a one-page diagram in hand (see figure 1). While meeting with Kehart and other civic leaders, he outlined the five main phases of the process: typically some crisis or innovation prompts community dialogue, which leads to collective action, which spurs individuals to change their attitudes and behavior, which contributes over time to a wider societal impact. Of course, efforts to solve problems collectively rarely work out so neatly, even when they prove successful. That's because communication for social change is an iterative model, not a linear one; its power lies in the fact that the outcome of any given phase feeds back into the process.

Some of it sounded familiar. The partnership had recently conducted a community health assessment in connection with Turning Point, a national initiative aimed at strengthening the public-health system through better collaboration among agencies and closer ties with the community.<sup>3</sup> Starting in 1998, it held 40 focus group meetings where 2,000 community residents shared their views on quality-of-life issues and the health-care system. The assessment revealed five priority issues: substance abuse, race, community development, environment and health. The partnership then formed discussion groups on each issue, drawing input from dozens of local agencies. These conversations, in turn, led to some collective actions, including a campaign to ban residents from burning leaves, which many saw as a threat to the city's air quality.

Following the uproar over the Decatur Seven, there was a sense that the partnership could do more to promote civic dialogue and find meaningful ways to improve the quality of life among the city's youth. It was around that time that foundation communication staff had conversations with program officers at the Kellogg Foundation, which had been funding Decatur's role in Turning Point. They agreed that the city might find Rockefeller's model helpful, and Kellogg made an additional \$75,000 grant so the partnership could try its hand at communication for social change over the next three years.<sup>4</sup>

"The people in Decatur asked, 'What do you want us to work on?,' Byrd recalls. "We said, 'It's up to you' — and we meant it. We really felt we should trust the local community. The core principle of communication for social change is that communities know who they are and what they want. So we left them on their own to

identify the issues they wanted to tackle and come up with strategies to address them. In theory, this would give them ownership of the communication for social change process, thereby making it more sustainable. In practice, it seems to be working."

Then, two years later in August 2002, Byrd got a report in the mail outlining the partnership's recent efforts to promote youth leadership, manage pediatric asthma and prevent heart disease. "It was quite impressive," he says. "In retrospect, I think they were better off without a lot of external interference."

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## LISTENING TO YOUTH

The boys basketball team at Maroa-Forsyth High School, which serves an upscale area just north of Decatur, won five games and lost 19 in its 2001-2002 season. That dispiriting record didn't stop Kevin Miller,<sup>5</sup> a member of the Trojans' pep squad, from cheering his classmates on the court. But the police cruisers that pulled up outside the gymnasium during a home game that winter nearly did. At halftime, a school administrator and a police officer escorted Miller — the only African-American in the gym — to the principal's office, where they questioned him for more than an hour.

Earlier that day an anonymous caller reported that Miller was starting a gang and might bring a gun to the game. Maybe the police were right to check it out. But instead of approaching him that afternoon, or before he entered the gym, they humiliated him in front of his peers. The school messed up, too. "They let the police question him in the principal's office without notifying his parents," says David Kidd, a retired principal who met Miller a few months before the incident. "It flies in the face of education policy, not to mention state code."

Although they found no evidence of any wrongdoing, the police followed Miller home after the game. When he told his parents about the episode, they decided not to complain. As one of the few black families in the neighborhood, they were wary of calling more attention to themselves. Someone had already burned a cross in their front yard and made threatening phone calls. Kevin, though, found one place where he felt safe telling his story: at the youth group he attends each Sunday evening. Known as YES, it's one of 14 groups formed nationwide

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<sup>3</sup> To learn more about Turning Point, which began in 1997 with support from the Kellogg Foundation and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, visit [www.turningpointprogram.org](http://www.turningpointprogram.org)

<sup>4</sup> Rockefeller limited its support at that time to providing the conceptual model. Then, in December 2002, as the Kellogg grant was nearing its conclusion, it gave the partnership \$100,000 to continue its work for another two years.

<sup>5</sup> Given his age, and the nature of the incident, his name has been changed.

with support from Kellogg's Youth Engagement Strategy.<sup>6</sup> It offers a forum where young people can discuss racial tensions, develop leadership skills and explore opportunities for collective action.

Since the Decatur Community Partnership hosted the group's first meeting in the spring of 2001, its members have become visible agents of change. They not only run their own meetings, but also play increasingly vocal roles in the community. "YES is taking on bigger problems and asking adults to really change," says Cindy Laegeler, executive director of Partners in Education, a mentoring program that now coordinates the group.

Miller and his fellow members organized a Youth Summit in November 2002 to explore ways that young people can help shape decisions that affect their lives. The event, which was held at the local community college and drew 150 participants, looked at how different people define, earn and show respect.

"We had each person write down an action plan," recalls Lakiesha Byars, an 11th grader who helped organize the event, "something they would do to show or earn respect. We had them seal it in a self-addressed envelope. Then we mailed it back to them in February so they could see if they followed through. After that, we did a phone survey and asked if they did, and if their relationships with teachers, parents or friends had improved."

The dialogue continued in other ways, too. At the summit, a local radio station taped interviews with dozens of participants. For several months afterward, it broadcast excerpts in public-service announcements billed as "Youth Voices."

Led by 20 core members, YES has organized trips to New York, New Mexico and Minnesota to compare notes with other progressive youth groups. Its members have also met with dozens of business executives and public officials to discuss diversity, career goals and other concerns. But meaningful dialogue with adults has not always come easily. In a meeting with the editorial board at Decatur's daily newspaper, YES members were asked to comment on parking-meter fees. One teen-ager raised her hand and replied, "We aren't driving yet, and there are few stores or reasons for us to be downtown." The editor kept pressing the issue, somehow failing to register its lack of relevance to their lives.

As it grew, YES developed a committee structure to help it explore opportunities for collective action. One committee planned the Youth Summit. Another held a competition to promote community service by other youth groups, awarding six grants of up to \$1,000 each.

A third committee is exploring the possibility of setting up a teen court, where youthful offenders would go before a jury of their peers. Sentences might include community service, jury duty, restitution and counseling. YES did not come up with the idea on its own. Since the first teen courts were formed in the late 1960s, nearly 900 cities and towns throughout the United States have established similar programs—mostly in the last decade.<sup>7</sup> "Many of these programs have shown a very low recidivism rate," says Deborah Shrum, who succeeded Kehart as the partnership's director in March 2003. "Kids are more respectful of their peers on the jury than they are of an adult judge."

In its fact-finding phase, the teen-court committee met with a local judge, a county sheriff and a state attorney. Then its members traveled to Chicago to see a teen court in action. They are also exploring the possibility of establishing youth delegates to the city council, the school board and the county board of supervisors. "We can't do all of these things with just 20 kids and a couple of adults," says Kidd, the group's adult coordinator. "We're trying to be a catalyst that sets things in motion. We have to decide on what we want to do and go about it in a professional way."

Kehart is optimistic. Starting the YES group, she says, is "the best thing" the partnership has ever done. For its members, it has become a springboard to better speaking and leadership skills. But more than that, it is building the community's capacity to communicate across generational and racial lines. "YES definitely grew out of a crisis," she says, referring to the controversy over the Decatur Seven. "Now I'd say we're at stage three of the communication for social change model: collective action (see figure 1). We're seeing individual change among the YES members, who might live a different kind of life than they would have otherwise. I think societal impact is on the horizon."

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<sup>6</sup> In June 2000, Kellogg made a \$139,300 grant to support the partnership's work with YES for three years. To learn more about Kellogg's youth initiative, visit [www.appalshop.org/yes](http://www.appalshop.org/yes)

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<sup>7</sup> To learn more about teen courts, visit [www.abanet.org/publiced/youth/tab17.html](http://www.abanet.org/publiced/youth/tab17.html)



## Youth Leadership

- **Catalyst:** The school board's handling of the Decatur Seven erupts into a national controversy.
- **Community dialogue:** YES and its Youth Summit offer forums where local teen-agers discuss racial tensions and other concerns. The group promotes dialogue with adults through meetings with business leaders and public officials.
- **Collective action:** YES forges proposals for a teen court and for youth delegates to school board, city council and county board of supervisors. Its mini-grant program encourages other youth groups to engage in community service.
- **Individual change:** YES members develop leadership and speaking skills. Some are making choices — like foregoing drugs, continuing their education or engaging in community service — that may alter the course of their lives.
- **Societal impact:** “On the horizon,” Kehart says.

The partnership helped ease the burden by arranging for local youth groups to rake leaves for elderly and disabled residents. Between 1998 and 2002, these groups raked about 2,500 lawns; in return, they received nearly \$125,000 in state funds. After four years the partnership handed off the project to the University of Illinois' extension program in Macon County, which dropped it a year later when faced with state budget cuts. The city is now looking for ways to continue the project in 2003 and beyond.

Many area residents suspected that leaf burning wasn't the only thing triggering asthmatic attacks. Autumn is harvest time in Macon County, and the air grows thick with dust from the grain-processing plants and exhaust from diesel trucks. The partnership assembled a strategy team to explore ways to combat pediatric asthma. Among its members were a pulmonary physician, an immunologist, physical therapists, school nurses, students and parents. The partnership decided to center the dialogue around health experts because the issue is both inherently technical and highly controversial. Indeed, any discussion of outdoor air in Decatur raises concerns about the aroma that emanates from the local grain-processing plants.

“Some people says it's the smell of money, because it's been the lifeblood of the community for so long,” Kehart explains. “Others say it's the smell of death. We didn't want 500 people in a room yelling that ADM and Staley were killing them. That didn't seem like a useful way to hold a dialogue.”

The team met four times to determine the scope of the problem and weigh possible responses. Then it held a public forum to present its findings and recommendations. Above all, it called on health professionals to provide families and schools with better information about asthma and better ways to manage it. The partnership then launched a pilot project, using materials developed by the American Lung Association, to educate families in one urban neighborhood.

More significantly, it teamed up with the Community Health Improvement Center (CHIC), which offers health care to low-income residents, to conduct a six-month study of 10 children with asthma.<sup>8</sup> Initially, none of the children, who ranged from 7 to 12 years old, knew how to use their inhalers correctly. Moreover, they and their parents expressed fear that exercise would trigger an attack, although health professionals say that fear is largely unwarranted. The partnership arranged for the children to take swimming and aerobics classes twice a week at the YMCA. Before and after each class, they used peak-flow

<sup>8</sup> The study was funded in part by a \$26,000 grant from American Hospital Association's Health Research and Educational Trust.

## BREATHING LESSONS

In the fall of 1999, Decatur was the only city in Illinois with a population of 75,000 or more that still let its residents burn leaves. It also had the state's fourth-highest incidence of pediatric asthma. Each autumn, the emergency department at Decatur Memorial Hospital saw an influx of children seeking treatment for asthma and other respiratory ailments.

To help clear the air, the Decatur Community Partnership launched an initiative in 1998 to ban leaf burning. More than 200 physicians signed a petition supporting the proposal, but still it ran into fierce opposition. For some residents, the smell of burning leaves brought back fond childhood memories; others worried about the cost of disposing of them; still others felt they had a right to do as they pleased in their own yard. After much heated debate, the city council voted 5-to-1 to prohibit residential leaf burning. The ban took effect on October 1, 2000.

“This was an issue where consensus was never going to happen,” says Kehart. “We had to find a political solution and it took years. Some people still haven't forgiven us, but others have come around. We didn't just walk away after we won the vote.”

meters to measure their ability to exhale quickly. Within six weeks, all of them had increased their readings — and learned that exercise can help alleviate their condition.

With help from their parents, the children kept journals for three months, noting when and where they had attacks. CHIC is now looking to see if there is any correlation with outdoor air quality, which the state measures hourly in Decatur. The results are still forthcoming, but Barbara Dunn, CHIC's executive director, views indoor air as a more likely culprit. As part of the study, she notes, researchers from the University of Illinois' environmental studies program visited each participating family's home to look for possible triggers. In many cases they found mold, dust, pet hair and cigarette smoke.

The study, which concluded in November 2002, showed that better education helped the children overcome their fear of exercise and learn to use inhalers correctly. All but one of the participants improved their attendance at school.

Yet Kehart found the study discouraging. By way of explanation, she tells the story of two twins enrolled in the study. Their father lost his job and their mother was hospitalized with kidney stones. The family kept putting off the indoor air check, finally admitting that their plumbing had stopped working and that they didn't have enough money to fix it. Sewage was leaking into the basement. The partnership spent \$200 to get the kitchen sink working. Then it helped make costlier repairs to the sewer line, which dated from 1929. "The partnership can step in and help families like that from time to time," Kehart says. "But what if there are others? What we need is structural, systemic change."

There are some encouraging signs. CHIC has taken steps to provide ongoing education and better case management for the asthmatic children it serves. And in recent years, the Decatur *Herald & Review* has run numerous articles on how to minimize the impact of pediatric asthma.

"We've got the right people around the table," Kehart says. "But we still need to reach school nurses, who are understaffed and won't administer breathing treatments. And we need training for families, which is costly. They just don't realize that the most common triggers for asthma are right there inside their homes."

## Pediatric Asthma

- **Catalyst:** High incidence of pediatric asthma raises questions about airborne irritants generated by grain processing, diesel trucks and burning leaves.
- **Community dialogue:** Leaf burning becomes a focus of public debate in city-council hearings and newspaper articles. A panel of health experts calls for a ban on leaf burning and better education on the relative threats posed by exercise and indoor triggers.
- **Collective action:** Youth volunteers begin raking lawns for elderly and disabled. City council bans leaf burning. The partnership provides asthma education for families and staff at one local elementary school. CHIC conducts a six-month study of 10 asthmatic children to trace the effects of education, exercise and environmental triggers.
- **Individual change:** Children who took part in the study now use their inhalers correctly and exercise without fear. Their families have taken steps to improve the air quality in their homes.
- **Societal impact:** CHIC now offers ongoing education and better case management for asthmatic children it serves. A wider impact, especially in the school system, remains to be seen. Unlike many health experts, local residents still regard outdoor air as a greater threat than indoor air.

## THE BEAT GOES ON

The leading cause of death in the United States is not cancer or car accidents. It's cardiovascular disease. The same holds true in Macon County. Although the local hospitals offer many advanced treatments, including open-heart surgery, little effort has gone into showing people how to avoid heart ailments in the first place.

"We go all out to treat people with cardiovascular disease," says Jerry Andrews, administrator for the Macon County Health Department. "What we do not have is a sound, strategic prevention plan designed to educate and motivate the public."

Andrews, who also serves as president of the Decatur Community Partnership's board, is working to change that. In December 2002, the partnership launched a campaign to show that voluntary changes in behavior and lifestyle can lower the risk of heart disease. The campaign, called "The Beat Goes On," aims to promote healthy eating and physical exercise among area residents.

Kehart enlisted Cindy Deadrick, a local consultant, to help manage the project. "We're confident this campaign will increase residents' knowledge of the disease," Deadrick says, "and offer them the opportunity to learn and participate in lectures, exercise, nutritious cooking and relaxation."

The campaign grew out of a series of health surveys, focus groups and one-on-one dialogues initiated by the partnership. This input indicated that prevention messages were not reaching people with little or no health insurance. The partnership formed a strategy team to explore ways to get out the word that healthy diets and exercise can add years to people's lives. The team included consumers, physicians, community activists, religious leaders, public-health personnel and social-service providers. Over the course of a year, they clarified the community's needs and developed a plan of action.

First they helped develop a unified protocol for blood-pressure screenings throughout the county. Then they arranged to use Care Force One, a mobile health facility purchased with part of the Turning Point grant, to provide the community with education on exercise, stress reduction and nutrition.

### Cardiovascular Disease

- **Catalyst:** Mounting awareness that cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death in Macon County.
- **Community dialogue:** The partnership convenes a strategy team to find ways to prevent cardiovascular disease. Its members include doctors, patients, community activists, religious leaders, public-health officials and social-service providers.
- **Collective action:** The partnership mounts a citywide campaign to promote healthy eating and exercise. Care Force One offers free screenings for blood pressure, cholesterol and glucose. A pilot project provides five local communities with measured walking trails and educational sessions on cardiovascular disease prevention.
- **Individual change:** Eight hundred people sign up for "The Beat Goes On." Some may continue to exercise regularly and eat more nutritiously. As a result of the screenings, some participants were diagnosed with ailments that might have gone undetected for months or years.
- **Societal impact:** "Time will tell," says Sexton.

Most ambitiously, the team called for a campaign to "get people off their duffs," to borrow Deadrick's description of "The Beat Goes On." Between January and April 2003, more than 800 people agreed to answer a questionnaire about their exercise habits and to record their activity on a wallet-size card. In return, they got free blood-pressure readings and free screenings of their cholesterol and glucose levels.

"It's a very down-to-earth program," says Kehart. "We're just asking them to walk 15 minutes a day, so it's an attainable goal for most people. There are also incentives: small things like T-shirts and big ones like a drawing for a treadmill."

The partnership also set up measured walking trails near five pilot sites in March and April 2003. In the coming months, county health officials will drive Care Force One to each site and offer free screenings for blood pressure, glucose, cholesterol and abdominal aortic aneurysms. They will also provide informational sessions on ways to reduce the risk of heart disease.

One of the sites is Niantic, an agricultural village 11 miles west of Decatur. Randy Sexton manages the local grain elevator, where farmers store and sell their corn and soy. “We’re urging people to do something for themselves and for their loved ones,” he says. “They can start with baby steps and then do a little more. We want Niantic to become known as ‘the town that walks’.”

Sexton, a longtime resident who readily admits he could use more exercise, has been instrumental in persuading his neighbors to join the campaign.

“I think the bottom line is social change is effective when one-on-one contact or dialogue is involved,” says Deadrick. “You need dedicated people to go out into the community.”

Another pilot site is the neighborhood around the North Jasper Street Church of Christ, where Mattie Towles leads a women’s Bible study group on Sunday evenings. “We want to reach people spiritually,” says Towles, who would like to see her congregation forge closer ties with the surrounding community. “But we have to take care of their physical needs first.”

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## THEORIES OF CHANGE

“We were beginning to do this several years ago,” says Kehart. “But we didn’t have a model to refer back to. The integrated model of communication for social change has helped focus our thought process.” Previously, she explains, the partnership often neglected to clarify perceptions or assess the current status, two important steps in a productive community dialogue.

There is a tendency in the civic arena to jump from problem to solution, from crisis to action. “If you’re lucky you get a little individual change,” Kehart says. “But often the process breaks down or the results don’t stick. To get individual change and societal impact, you really have to invest in community dialogue. That’s what communication for social change taught me: If we weren’t getting people to take action, either we weren’t listening or we didn’t have the right people at the table.”

The challenge with community dialogue is to find the right momentum. If collective action comes too soon, people may doubt your sincerity as a listener. If it doesn’t come soon enough, they may grow discouraged. One key to success is to keep people talking, even as they undertake collective action. “It helps you reassess and refine what you are doing,” says Kehart. “You can back up whenever you need to, because the dialogue never really ends.”

One of the partnership’s greatest strengths is its willingness to let go. It wasn’t always that way. “We went through a phase of owning a lot of things,” says Kehart. “But then we realized that we needed to get back to being a partnership and a catalyst.”

In recent years, it has handed off several projects to other organizations. First Call for Help, an information and referral service started in response to the community health assessment, now resides with the United Way of Decatur/Macon County. The partnership’s litter initiative, Operation Sparkle and Shine, and its leaf-raking project both went to the University of Illinois’ extension program. Similarly, YES is coordinated by Partners in Education, even though it still meets each Sunday night in the partnership’s offices. The asthma study was conducted by CHIC. Care Force One and the campaign to prevent heart disease are both managed by the Macon County Health Department.

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## OUTLOOK

Despite its past achievements, the partnership faces some daunting challenges in the months and years ahead. The most immediate is a leadership transition. After nine years as director, Kehart stepped down in March 2003, although she continues to work on selected projects as a consultant. She was burned out. "It takes a long time to get a solid movement going," she explains. "Change just didn't happen fast enough for a personality like mine."

Deborah Shrum, her successor, is a former program director at HOPE of East Central Illinois, which provides counseling, legal aid and shelter to victims of domestic violence in Charleston, 40 miles away. As a newcomer to Decatur, she will have to build the social connections and trust that Kehart brought with her to the job.

Cutbacks at Decatur Memorial Hospital may also pose problems, since the hospital's foundation provides the partnership with clerical and financial support. Most significantly, though, the partnership must contend with financial and economic constraints that lie far beyond its control. The state of Illinois is trying to close a \$3.6 billion budget gap for the fiscal year starting July 1, 2003. Closer to home, Millikin University, which has collaborated with the partnership on several projects, is shouldering a \$46 million debt load. And there are fears that Caterpillar, like Bridgestone/Firestone, might someday leave town.

Many communities might simply throw up their hands at such daunting challenges. But Decatur has shown a resilience that Mark Singer's *New Yorker* article seems to overlook. By investing in the communication for social change process, many of its residents and institutions are strengthening their capacity to tackle whatever hardships fate and the global economy send their way.

With leadership from the partnership, people who might have remained strangers have discovered their similar interests, values and shared concerns. The community has begun to confront pressing issues through public and private debate. The information that people share in these dialogues has become more accurate. And local residents, including many disadvantaged people, have gained new leadership skills and seized new opportunities for playing a more active role in civic life. In short, the partnership is using communication for social change not just to solve current crises, but as a way to build social capital for the long run.

"Do most groups in Decatur make decisions this way?" asks Kehart. "Absolutely not. I don't think we would have the socioeconomic gap in pediatric asthma, for example, if everybody was really listening. But that could change. Our strength is our willingness to keep going back to the community, listening and responding to their concerns. That way, we don't let people down with our actions."

## Community Profile

	City of Decatur	Macon County
Total Population	81,860	114,706
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
White.	63,519 (77.6%)	95,760 (83.5%)
Black or African-American	15,940 (19.5%)	16,130 (14.1%)
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	978 (1.2%)	1,120 (1.0%)
<b>Education (age 25 or older)</b>		
High-school graduate or higher	42,873 (80.8%)	62,562 (83.2%)
Bachelor's degree or higher	9,020 (17.0%)	12,708 (16.9%)
<b>Employment</b>		
Education, health and social services	7,187 (20.1%)	10,544 (20.1%)
Manufacturing	6,793 (19.0%)	10,084 (19.2%)
Retail trade	4,347 (12.1%)	6,378 (12.1%)
Arts, entertainment, recreation, accommodation and food services	3,081 (8.6%)	4,011 (7.6%)
Transportation, warehousing and utilities	2,612 (7.3%)	4,093 (7.8%)
<b>Income</b>		
Median family income	\$42,379	\$47,493
Median household income	\$33,111	\$37,859
Families below poverty level	2,571 (12.1%)	2,883 (9.3%)
Individuals below poverty level	12,999 (16.5%)	14,316 (12.9%)

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000

## A Cycle of Sorrows

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A recent article in *Illinois Issues*, the state's leading magazine on public affairs, described Decatur's misfortunes as "an ever-worsening cycle of sorrows." Here are some of the major setbacks:

- |                       |  |
|-----------------------|--|
| <b>May 1995</b>       | A 10-month strike at Bridgestone/Firestone ends in defeat for 1,200 union members.   |
| <b>December 1995</b>  | A 17-month strike at Caterpillar ends in defeat for 1,800 union members.   |
| <b>January 1996</b>   | A 29-month lockout at A.E. Staley ends in defeat for 760 union members.  |
| <b>April 1996</b>     | Two tornadoes in less than 24 hours injure 36 people and cause \$10 million in property damage.  |
| <b>July 1999</b>      | Tate & Lyle, the British firm that owns A.E. Staley, wins a 50 percent reduction of its property tax assessment, lowering revenues at the public-school system by more than \$300,000 a year.  |
| <b>July 1999</b>      | A federal judge fines Archer Daniels Midland \$100 million and sends three top executives to prison in connection with a price-fixing scandal.   |
| <b>September 1999</b> | Eisenhower High School, citing its "zero-tolerance" policy, expels seven African-American students for fighting at a football game.  |
| <b>October 1999</b>   | Jesse Jackson intervenes on behalf of the Decatur Seven, prompting a counter demonstration by the Ku Klux Klan.  |
| <b>December 1999</b>  | Decatur loses its commercial air link to Chicago, leaving just two flights a day to St. Louis.   |
| <b>August 2000</b>    | Bridgestone/Firestone recalls 6.5 million tires as federal investigators study hundreds of fatal accidents involving Ford Explorers. The company lays off 440 workers in Decatur, noting that many of the crashes were linked to tires made there. |
| <b>October 2000</b>   | Archer Daniels Midland wins a 15 percent reduction of its property tax assessment, lowering school revenues by \$188 million a year.   |
| <b>December 2001</b>  | Bridgestone/Firestone closes its Decatur plant, eliminating 1,480 remaining jobs.  |
| <b>July 2002</b>      | ZexelValea closes its compressor plant, which had employed 550 people in Decatur.  |

## **Decatur Community Partnership**

The Decatur Community Partnership traces its origins to a citywide effort to curb substance abuse, which began in 1991. Through a series of focus groups, key figures from the criminal-justice system, social-service agencies, businesses and rural parts of Macon County identified local needs and developed suitable ways to prevent the abuse of drugs and alcohol.

In subsequent years, the partnership sought ways to streamline the delivery of social services, with the goal of bringing more people to self-sufficiency. A core group of organizations has sustained the partnership since its inception, while others have taken part for shorter periods. Among the mainstays is the Decatur Memorial Hospital's operating foundation, which provides the partnership with administrative and financial support.

In some respects, the partnership is more of an idea than an institution. In April 2001, it adopted articles of governance and restructured its board. But it has chosen to remain unincorporated in order to minimize turf battles and fears of competition among its partners. Because it does not have 501(c)(3) status, its grants are channeled through the Decatur Memorial Hospital's operating foundation. It has an annual operating budget of \$100,000 and three full-time staff members. "When we get a grant, we form a strategy team and get to work," says Kehart. "It keeps us flexible."

To learn more about the partnership's work, visit [www.decaturnet.org/dcp](http://www.decaturnet.org/dcp)

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## **Resources**

To learn more about communication for social change contact:

Communication for Social Change Consortium  
14 South Orange Avenue, Suite 2F  
South Orange, NJ 07079  
973-763-1115

Also, see these publications from the Rockefeller Foundation:

*Communication for Social Change: An Integrated Model for Measuring the Process and Its Outcomes*, a working paper by Maria Elena Figueroa, D. Lawrence Kinkaid, Manju Rani and Gary Lewis with the Rockefeller Foundation communication staff (2002).

*Making Waves: Stories of Participatory Communication for Social Change*, by Alfonso Gumucio Dagron (2001).

*Communication for Social Change: A Position Paper and Conference Report* (1999).

*Communications and Social Change: Forging Strategies for the 21st Century* (1997).

To order printed copies of these publications, or to download them in pdf format, visit [www.rockfound.org/publications](http://www.rockfound.org/publications)





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