Health Care Reform Case Study

Background
Sam grew up on the West Side in St. Paul, Minnesota. She is active in her youth group at St. Matthews Church, also on the West Side, and recently attended the Young Advocate Leadership Training (YALT® Program) sponsored by the Children's Defense Fund (CDF). At the training, Sam learned about the cradle to prison pipeline: the intersection of poverty, abuse, poor health care, inadequate education and racism that together track poor and minority children into the juvenile justice system. In fact, a Black boy born in 2001 has a 1 in 3 chance of going to prison in his lifetime; a Latino boy a 1 in 6 chance; and a White boy a 1 in 17 chance. The way to solve the problem is to dismantle the pipeline to prison and break down the systems that prop it up. Disheartened by what she had learned about the pipeline, Sam wanted to do something to change it. She thought if she became a doctor one day, she could help people with their health problems. So Sam started volunteering at the free clinic located five blocks from her house. But lately, Sam has noticed that the waiting room at the free clinic has become more and more crowded with people she does not recognize from the neighborhood.

There was one family Sam helped who lost their health coverage when they did not fill out a renewal application because it was sent to an old address. Mrs. Perez told Sam that her children were previously enrolled in U-Care, the state-run health insurance program for low-income children. But when the recession started, Mrs. Perez had her work hours cut and her family had to move to a less expensive apartment. She did not realize that her children had lost their medical coverage until her daughter came down with tonsillitis, and the pediatrician would not see them because they did not have health coverage.

As a volunteer at the free clinic, Sam hears a lot of these types of stories. There was Mrs. Johnson who was denied health coverage from her employer because she previously had breast cancer or Mr. Lee who made $1,000 over the income limit of $25,000 for his family to qualify for medical assistance. Remembering what she had learned from the *YALT* training, Sam began to create a community map of the West Side to try to get to the bottom of what was going on.

Community Mapping
In the process of doing her community map, Sam examined the 2000 Census report, asked a lot of questions and conducted over 12 one-to-ones. She discovered that the average income in the community was approximately $10,000 less than the city's average income. However, the home ownership rate was approximately 10 percent higher than the city's average, suggesting that while the residents on the West Side were not as wealthy as their counterparts in the rest of the city, many of them had jobs and were qualified to buy homes. Sam wondered how many of them had health insurance through their work.

By asking questions about the gathering spaces in the community and then visiting and doing one-to-ones there, Sam also discovered that the local library was experiencing a lot of problems with

kids waiting a long time to use the public computers and getting irritable and causing trouble. At the same time, she learned that a coalition of organizations that provide after-school programs in the neighborhood had gotten together and began offering apprenticeships to some of the teenagers in the community. Furthermore, she learned that the local community development corporation was starting to convene house parties to start a dialogue on race relations in the community.

Sam contacted the local community development corporation and asked if she could attend the next house party and talk to her neighbors about health coverage. As a concerned citizen, she also began door knocking around her house, her church and around the free clinic to find out how many people had health insurance. Interestingly, Sam discovered that while many people had health coverage, they were very upset by the escalating out-of-pocket expenses they were paying such as co-pays per child per doctor's visit, surcharges on prescription drugs and steeper and steeper deductibles. Many people were scared that if they lost their jobs, they would also lose their health coverage.

After completing her community map, Sam started entering into a database the contact information of all the people and institutions she had met and learned about. First she created a contact list of all the people she had conducted one-to-ones with and door knocked. On the list were their first and last names, addresses, emails and telephone numbers. Then she added the names and contact information of the community and faith leaders and activists as well as the owners of the gathering spaces and businesses in the community. Sam also added the names of the principals in the local schools as well as the council member and state legislators who represented the area. She also found out which legislative and congressional district people lived in and who represented them.

Community Gathering

Working with the community development corporation and using their house party model, Sam sent out an email to all the people on her list, inviting them to a community gathering on health reform at St. Matthew's Church. After she sent the email, Sam personally called all of them to follow up on the email and invited them to attend. The night before the gathering, Sam called all the people who said they were coming or might be coming and reminded them to attend. Working with the apprentices at the after-school programs, Sam and her crew also posted flyers at the library, middle and high schools, cafes, churches, grocery stores and other gathering places.

Prior to the community gathering, Sam called up her friends at CDF in Minnesota and asked them to help her write out an agenda and role play what she would say. They agreed that it would be helpful to educate people in the neighborhood about the state of health coverage in Minnesota and health reform going on in Washington, D.C. They also thought it made sense to have a couple of people from the neighborhood speak about their experiences concerning health coverage.

On the night of the gathering, Sam and some volunteers she had recruited went to the church early to set up. Over 127 people attended the gathering and signed in including the local city council member. After hearing testimonies from Mrs. Perez and Mr. Lee and a presentation from a CDF staff member, people in the audience were moved by the urgent need for health reform – especially for children. People also began to better understand why there needed to be national reform, not just state solutions. Since Representatives and Senators in Congress would shortly be voting on health care reform, the CDF staffer urged the neighbors to act soon.

Sam suggested they start working on the local level to get support by having the St. Paul City Council pass a resolution to support the principles that all children and pregnant women should

have comprehensive and affordable health coverage and that the system for getting enrolled should be simple and seamless. The local council member agreed to present the resolution to her council colleagues, and once the resolution was passed, she said she would send it to the two Senators urging their support of the principles. During the meeting Sam sent around a sign-up sheet for volunteers to attend the next city council meeting and support the local city council person when she presented the proposal to the council. Sam also asked for volunteers who would write letters to the editors and make a phone call to their Representatives and Senators.

Sam wanted to have at least 12 people signed up to write letters and at least 27 people to make phone calls. By the end of the meeting, over 9 people had signed up to write a letter and 34 said they would make the calls. People were really excited about their neighbors coming together and asked when the next meeting would be. While the community gathering was supposed to last only one hour, people stayed behind and talked well after the meeting was officially over.

Conclusion

That night, Sam left St. Matthews Church excited about the relationships that were being built and the power that was being harnessed. She was already thinking about what tactics she and her friends could next organize to further get their Members of Congress to vote the right way for health reform. Sam thought that little by little, policy by policy, she and her neighbors could ultimately dismantle the cradle to prison pipeline.