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**LIFTING SPIRITS AND CHANGING LIVES: ANALYSIS OF
OUTCOMES FROM ONE ORGANIZATION'S JOURNEY WITH
COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH***

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ABSTRACT

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, local nonprofit service providers in the Gulf Coast region faced numerous challenges responding to people's immediate and long-term needs. Experiencing increased demand for services, limited resources, and vulnerability to future crises, several organizations commenced systematic planning, capacity development, and evaluation projects to help mitigate the effects of disaster and to promote long-term sustainability at the organizational and community levels. One such organization, Visions of Hope (VOH), Inc., in East Biloxi, Mississippi, participated in a collaborative community-based research (CBR) and evaluation process with a sociology, community development, and public health interdisciplinary team. Combining our academic and practitioner perspectives of this partnership, we describe how our project was developed and implemented. We also discuss the intended and unintended outcomes experienced by VOH, an important agent for social change and improvement of quality of life for vulnerable populations and the communities that organization serves.

In 2005, local nonprofit service providers in the Gulf Coast region were called into action and challenged by the immediate effects of Hurricane Katrina. While working to meet people's immediate needs, they soon recognized the emerging long-term needs associated with this type of disaster event. In addition, pre-existing needs of people in the affected communities became much more apparent. Nonprofit organizations quickly confronted their own strengths and weaknesses as service providers working on the front lines of this crisis. Experiencing an increased demand for services and limited financial and human resources, several organizations in this region commenced more systematic planning, capacity development, and evaluation projects as ways to address these issues (Bunko et al. 2008; Kerstetter et al. 2008).

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One of these organizations, Visions of Hope, Inc. (VOH), in East Biloxi, Mississippi, has participated in a collaborative community-based research (CBR) and evaluation process since 2007. Through a university-community partnership guided by a multidisciplinary research team from sociology, community development, and public health, the experiences of VOH provide testimony of the success of these efforts and the utility of community-based research (CBR) as a tool for developing and delivering services that function to improve the quality of life of vulnerable populations and the communities in which they reside. These experiences also help us to understand both intended and unintended effects of engaging in CBR from the viewpoint of local organizations traditionally underserved by the research community.

A GULF COAST JOURNEY WITH CBR

During Hurricane Katrina, East Biloxi, one of several neighborhoods comprising the City of Biloxi, experienced extensive storm surge flooding due to the neighborhood's proximity to the Gulf of Mexico and Biloxi's Back Bay. Many homes and businesses were destroyed, with several pushed off their foundations by the floodwaters. However, even before the storm, this neighborhood faced socioeconomic challenges. Compared with other areas of Biloxi, the East Biloxi neighborhood had lower levels of educational attainment, higher poverty rates, and many racial/ethnic groups, especially African American and Asian, primarily Vietnamese (Kleiner, Green, and Nylander 2007).

VOH provided building space and assistance for relief coordination efforts centered in the East Biloxi neighborhood shortly after the hurricane and wanted to maintain an active role in recovery and redevelopment efforts, as short-term relief demands subsided. In the first few years after the storm, many people were engaged in the development and implementation of citywide and regional development plans; however, less attention was focused on organizational planning and the development of grassroots organizations' capacity to participate in the redevelopment process. The Institute for Community-Based Research (ICBR), then housed at Delta State University and consisting of research partnerships with the University of Michigan and Southeastern Louisiana University, networked with a person operating as a community organizer and technical assistance provider in the Gulf Coast region after Katrina to identify groups that had participated in similar research efforts and had expressed interest in additional projects. Five community-based organizations in the region were identified as interested groups, and a collaborative capacity-development project commenced with them. VOH was one

organization interested in participating in this process. VOH had been serving the community for seven years and provided community leadership and building space for early needs assessment activities in East Biloxi following the storm.

Before implementing both collective and individual capacity-building activities with the five groups, individual organizations' needs were assessed to help ensure that the project was responding to each group's priorities. Assistance provided by this project addressed several areas of capacity development advocated by the Mississippi Center for Nonprofits (2007), including organizational planning, human resources, transparency and accountability, fundraising, strategic alliances, and evaluating the effectiveness of programs. Collectively, the project activities were addressing myriad goals: assisting nonprofit groups with broader redevelopment efforts in the Gulf Coast region; utilizing applied research for expanding and improving direct services for underserved population groups, while working to minimize duplication of services; enhancing the capacity of nonprofit organizations through planning, ongoing assessment, monitoring, and evaluation; and learning and documenting practices to inform organizations on how to provide services during future crisis events.

Guided by faculty, staff, and students associated with the ICBR, collective workshops were offered to address common organizational needs, such as website development and fundraising training (Bunko et al. 2008; Kerstetter et al. 2008; Kleiner et al. 2010). Other meetings were held with the research partners, funders, and the service providers to discuss sustaining and expanding capacity development efforts. The participating organizations were provided with a mini-grant from the Foundation for the Mid South (through the ICBR) to support the implementation of technical assistance plans tailored to meet their needs.

A strategic plan developed collaboratively with VOH was one outcome of the capacity-development project. In addition, the organization collaborated with the ICBR on several subsequent community surveys and program evaluations from 2008 to the present, thereby developing a collective wisdom based on direct experience with community-based research. The desire and willingness to continue these project partnerships with the ICBR has contributed to VOH becoming an example of success as to how community-based research can be an empowerment strategy for a nonprofit organization and the communities it serves.

VISIONS OF HOPE, INC.: THE ORGANIZATION

Visions of Hope, Inc. was founded as Biloxi Visions of Hope in 1998 by current Executive Director Sarah Walker, her brother Gary Gray, and sister Stephanie

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Gray. It is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization serving people in the southernmost six-county area of Mississippi's Gulf Coast region. VOH provides home buyer education and counseling, financial literacy education, youth leadership development, General Educational Development (GED) certification, prescription assistance, and tax services through the U.S. Internal Revenue Service's Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program. Directly affected by Hurricane Katrina's 18-foot storm surge, which inundated its office in the East Biloxi neighborhood, Visions of Hope rebounded with a renewed commitment to organizational development and provision of services within days after the storm, making one of its buildings available as a coordination and relief center for several nonprofit organizations operating in the East Biloxi neighborhood. Later, through a strategic planning process that commenced within two years after the storm, the VOH Board of Directors and staff pledged to achieve the following: (1) identify a more focused and strategic approach to providing services for those in need in the organization's service area; (2) continue and expand collaborative networks with other public and private organizations to address community needs; (3) create and implement an ongoing assessment and evaluation system for the organization; and (4) develop resources for achieving a higher level of organizational sustainability (VOH 2009). This article documents how community-based research has empowered Visions of Hope to achieve these goals and to more effectively articulate future applications for community-based research in the Gulf Coast region and throughout Mississippi.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The numerous project activities involving Visions of Hope have been modeled on the community-based research (CBR) framework that directly involves people at the grassroots level in collecting and analyzing data to inform social change (Pretty 1995; Reason and Bradbury 2001; Selener 1997; Stoecker 2013; Stringer 2007). Founded on action-oriented participatory research approaches, the CBR framework is increasingly used to build partnerships among university-based researchers, formal and informal organizations, and community members. A key objective of CBR is to engage groups and individuals in systematic research that gives them the tools and strategies for effective problem-solving that further empower them to achieve social change. Stoecker (2013) has contended that conducting conventional research on a general population and applying that research to a particular place and/or a unique group of people could make the research findings irrelevant. CBR involves a customized approach to designing a project for a particular social setting. It begins with asking the community-based

participants what they need, and then follows up with a project designed to respond to that need. In this sense, the community-based participants guide the direction and type of research activities.

Founded on a participatory action research framework advocating for grassroots application and collaboration, Stoecker's model of CBR (Stoecker 2013:32) consists of a project-based research cycle through which community-based participants: (1) guide the development of the research question, or identify the problem (diagnose); (2) help design appropriate methods for collecting the information needed to address the problem, or answer the primary question (prescribe); (3) collect the data (implement); and (4) analyze the data (evaluate), concluding with the results being shared in a manner most appropriate for the context and purpose of the overall research project.

Recent literature provides case studies of how CBR projects have been used to address a variety of social issues. Sachs (2007) demonstrated how CBR was utilized in Sri Lanka as a rebuilding strategy following a devastating tsunami. Local women's groups collaborated with university students and professors from Pennsylvania State University and the University of Perdeniya to provide technical support and conduct livelihood training workshops. As outsiders coming into the affected areas, the university research team helped raise women's expectations of what they could accomplish. Within the same region, social workers Pittaway, Bartolomei, and Rees (2007) used CBR to facilitate the inclusion of marginalized, socially-excluded, and vulnerable groups to gain attention and resources from all levels of government in the tsunami's aftermath.

In public health, numerous case studies of CBR's applicability to addressing health disparities are being used to document and evaluate its outcomes and overall effectiveness as an approach to doing research (i.e., Israel et al. 2005; Minkler and Wallerstein 2008). CBR has received increasing attention from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and other agencies, foundations, and training programs as an effective tool for building partnerships, designing research, and developing interventions to address health issues in varying social and cultural environments (Minkler and Wallerstein 2008). For example, Christopher, Burhansstipanov, and Knows His Gun McCormick (2005) described how CBR was used in collaboration with the Apsáalooke reservation in Montana to develop and implement a culturally-acceptable training manual for a pre-intervention survey exploring barriers to Apsáalooke women seeking cervical cancer screening. Outside health researchers recognized "a history of inequality, manifest in disrespectful interactions and in the community's inability to access, influence, or make use of information generated

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through research to improve health in the community” (Christopher et al. 2005:139). To build trust with the Apsáalooke women so that they might honestly and accurately discuss personal health issues upon which appropriate health interventions could be designed and implemented to best meet the needs of the women, the research team contended that the trained research interviewers should be the Apsáalooke women, themselves, and not external researchers. This community-based methodology allowed the women to take ownership of the research process and the data generated to improve health outcomes in their community.

A related and critical component of CBR is reflection by participants, through documenting and understanding people’s own experiences with and perceptions of CBR. Reflection may also involve analysis of learning outcomes for different participants and both the intended and unintended effects of a CBR project. For community-based health research, Wallerstein et al. (2008) explored the added value of CBR to research itself and to producing desired outcomes, as well as the potential pathways to system and capacity change outcomes.

Through a conceptual logic model, Wallerstein et al. (2008) assessed possible contextual factors affecting projects (e.g., the health issues being targeted and the capacity and readiness of local organizations and of universities to engage in a CBR project), as well as group and individual dynamics (e.g., organizational leadership structure, trust, complexity, diversity, time in the partnership, dialogue, project decision-making). Their analysis concluded that to reduce health disparities in communities effectively, minimal core characteristics of CBR projects should involve constructive analysis of social and environmental contexts of projects, political governance structures, historical institutional dynamics, evolving power dynamics between partners, and self-reflection among members of research teams and partners (Wallerstein et al. 2008). They also outlined potential testable propositions that could more clearly link CBR processes and practices to desired outcomes (Wallerstein et al. 2008). For example, communities with histories of being exploited by universities may have more relational difficulties with CBR. Participants who demonstrate cultural humility or collectivist identities, or both, may experience stronger relational dynamics, facilitating the achievement of positive outcomes through CBR. In addition, better group dynamics and a greater level of integration of local beliefs in the research, lead to a greater probability that CBR system and capacity changes will occur; hence, the greater likelihood of improved health outcomes.

My interaction with Visions of Hope, an organization continually engaged in community-based research with me and our university-based collaborators, provides a useful case study of how CBR can create pathways for building research capacity and service delivery effectiveness of community-based nonprofit organizations. As a mechanism for reflection on our experiences, and to better articulate the actual and potential outcomes of the CBR process, I conducted a personal interview with my coauthor, Sarah Walker, Executive Director of Visions of Hope, Inc., in her office during January 2012.¹ With our numerous project partners consisting of faculty, staff, and students from Delta State University, the University of Michigan, Southeastern Louisiana University, and more recently the University of Mississippi, Sarah and I have enjoyed a five-year history of successful community-based research activities and partnerships. Providing opportunities to learn about Sarah's perceptions of and experiences with CBR directly from her – an astute organizational leader and social justice activist – is important for our professional and personal relationships. More broadly, these opportunities are critical for amplifying the voices of community-based activists like Sarah. Typically, only the voices and interpretations of university-based researchers are heard and reported in the literature. I was excited to have this opportunity to interview Sarah and to share her insights on how CBR has worked for Visions of Hope and how it can be improved and enhanced for the benefit of community-based organizations and the vulnerable populations they serve. I have used a “narrative” method for conveying Sarah's responses to the questions posed.

VOICES FROM THE GRASSROOTS

Perceptions of Research: Before and After CBR

I commenced the interview with Sarah by exploring how Visions of Hope may have been involved with research before the CBR process and how that process changed Sarah's earlier perceptions of research and the role of researchers. She indicated that VOH had not been involved in research before CBR. Nothing was occurring “in-house” relative to research. If she needed information, she went online to access data or obtained limited survey data from other sources. Regarding her perceptions of research and the role of researchers, Sarah stated:

¹Personal communication with Sarah D. Walker, Executive Director of Visions of Hope, Inc., Biloxi, Mississippi. January, 12, 2012.

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I thought it was 'hands-off'; people put it in a manual and put it on a shelf, and it gathers dust. With CBR, you came in and said you were going to reach out to the people. You were going to call the people. You were going to go door-to-door and get real genuine research. It changed my whole perception of it, especially after [Hurricane] Katrina. There were so many groups that came in, did research, and conducted surveys without listening to the voices of the residents. This information was to have been shared and used in the rebuilding process. Do I have anything I can look at now? No. Even city and county government was involved. Did I ever receive any of the information? No. Is it used now? No. Research is quite costly. I was initially leery [of CBR]. But we really use the information; it's invaluable. Relative to the strategic plan, we can now look back to see how far we have come.

Sarah stated that when people in the community hear about Visions of Hope engaging in CBR with the Institute for Community-Based Research, they are always curious. They want more information about it. For example, community meetings with the Mississippi Department of Transportation and other groups are being conducted in association with the planned port expansion at the City of Gulfport. People are expressing concerns about potential effects of diesel fumes from increased truck traffic, as construction commences and port operations intensify. Agencies and others are discussing possible research partnerships with universities and colleges around this issue. Sarah emphasized, "I am very proud to let people know about CBR and its benefits. People are shocked when I tell them the number of years that we have been involved in it. Other organizations are curious as well. Everyone I mention it to is very interested."

VOH has gained firsthand knowledge of how CBR can make the process of collecting data from community residents and using it to more effectively meet their needs, accessible to local organizations committed to addressing these needs. While some research methodologies of conventional research and of CBR are similar (e.g., phone surveys and in-person interviews), research itself does not solely have to be the function of external researchers who often extract information from the community and disseminate the findings elsewhere in support of a more abstract academic or governmental knowledge base. Through direct involvement in a CBR process (e.g., defining the purpose of the research and developing the wording of survey and interview questions) and a sharpened understanding of the validity and usefulness of the findings, service providers like VOH can be empowered to be

proactive research participants in projects that more directly benefit the people from which the research data is obtained.

The Outcomes of CBR

Sarah and I discussed the needs that community-based research has helped to address for Visions of Hope. Sarah emphasized that her organization can better assess needs in the community, as well as evaluate whether its services are still on target with community needs. As CBR is typically conducted with specific groups at the community level, it can help identify gaps in outreach and services associated with those groups, areas where more effort is warranted, and partnerships that should be developed to improve services and broader community quality of life. Sarah indicated, “We can provide a better quality of service and gain feedback from our clients.” She emphasized that VOH’s goal in the community is to “ultimately move them out of poverty.” Since it was initially developed in 2008 as part of the CBR process, the VOH strategic plan has helped to identify organizational goals and objectives for a four to five-year period and is used by staff and the board of directors to evaluate programs and organizational progress and to apply for grants. Sarah noted, “Organizations [funders] ask for it. They want to see the plan.” Data generated through other CBR projects, such as program evaluations, help to substantiate what Visions of Hope conveys about community needs and perceptions about the organization from the perspective of the people it serves. Sarah contended:

The research is all about the community. It’s not about us. Everything we do, it’s focused on the community. A lot of researchers who come in are working with government organizations, and it’s very few that are working with those on the ground – the ones really touching the people. It’s one thing to gather numbers; it’s another to have interaction with people served. We have, and you have, actually had that interaction with the people, and that makes a world of difference. It develops trust... “They are listening to us. What we say really does make a difference. They really care about us”... as opposed to just gathering numbers from somewhere and working with them.

Regarding enhancing applications for funding and program development, the information generated through CBR projects with Visions of Hope has been incorporated into grant narratives and shared with new organizational partners.

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Sarah believes the information generated through CBR projects “paints a picture of the need through the voices of those we serve.” The public health information gathered through our surveys is facilitating the development of future joint research projects with community groups providing health care services, with a focus on children and the environmental effects of living in FEMA trailers, as well as broader environmental issues associated with the British Petroleum (BP) oil spill in 2010. Reflecting on the health information generated through our surveys, Sarah noted:

It has opened our eyes as to how much people have been affected by all of these disasters. Our knowledge of the health side has been on adults [asthma, hypertension, mental effects]. We understand the reasoning behind the issues. Now we need to study children and how it has affected them, to more fully understand those issues.

As to how community-based research enhances the capacity of the organization through involvement by staff members and the board of directors, Sarah believes that it helps the board of directors recognize that the organization is doing what is needed in the community. Using the strategic plan as a tool, board members are involved in the annual planning of activities and want to know how residents perceive Visions of Hope. As to the board’s response, she noted, “They are very impressed. It provides them with an annual evaluation. They don’t take it lightly. They actually read through it. It helps them with the ‘elevator speech’, as they promote the organization and seek new partnerships.”

In addition, CBR helps to make Visions of Hope staff members feel like they are making a difference. It develops their sense of self-satisfaction. They too can better understand the needs and perceptions of the people they serve and those of the broader community. When discussing her own capacity development through CBR, as Executive Director, Sarah shared these thoughts:

I have increased my overall knowledge of how to do research; I know now what’s required to do it, as well as the different strategies for doing research. The follow-up conversations and visits [with project partners] have helped me to understand how it all comes together. It’s not just numbers. The questions [on the surveys] are asked from different angles [perspectives, disciplines, topics]. I can speak with more confidence when I give a general presentation or send out requests. I have solid information

behind me to back up my words. If someone doubts what I am saying, I have the evidence to validate it, which makes me feel confident. People will ask where you got the information. It brings credibility.

An important part of doing community-based research is recognizing the value of a mutually-beneficial university-community relationship. I asked Sarah what she has learned about us, about the university-based partners, and about VOH at the community level, as well as what she learned from the joint activities of the CBR projects. Sarah responded:

I have learned that you are very community-minded. You definitely care about people and want to use the voices of the people to identify cures for the problems – you realize that change must come through and from the people, as opposed to looking up numbers on the Internet and saying “This is what we found”. You have a love and passion for what you do. It is seen throughout the document. It’s like “We’re vested and connected to the document.” Visions of Hope could not pay for this service. It is invaluable. Even if we had the finances to conduct such studies, I do not feel it would be as detailed.

Sarah is convinced that the information generated through CBR ensures the organization that it is needed, as it has functioned to provide positive, direct feedback from community residents. It assures us that “if our doors should close, it would leave a huge gap in the community, since there are services we provided for years that nobody else was doing – services that were offered long before Hurricane Katrina.” For example, VOH remains the only organization offering GED services in the East Biloxi neighborhood. In addition, VOH was the only organization with a housing program for at least a decade. Sarah has also learned that:

Visions of Hope has a long way to go, as far as building capacity, staff, and resources. In order for us to make a real difference, we must work more with youth. With adults, it’s hard to un-teach what has been learned [by the adult years]. If we really want to break a cycle, the wrong-doings, we’ve got to intercept negative practices. We must start with the youth. The youth have a lot of influence on the adults. Even with the GED program, youth enroll in the program, and their parents sometimes join them because the youth will set the example. Youth have the power to make a positive

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difference in their household. Community-based research fits my purpose. I love people. I love seeing that people appreciate what we do. [As an example] We've even had residents contact us who are suicidal. They call us on the phone, but we do not provide crisis services. But when they refuse to hang up, we find that we must say a comforting word to them. They will call us and say, "I just want someone to listen to me." That's why we do what we do – it's all about being there for our communities.

Based on Sarah's articulation of these experiences with CBR, I believe that she recognizes the reasons and strategies for collecting data through different methodologies (e.g., when surveys vs. focus groups are appropriate to use), how CBR builds trust between service providers and their clients, how accurate information on the community and its needs supports funding proposals and establishes baseline data to evaluate over time, and how direct involvement in research bolsters the long-term strategic planning activities of the organization.

Enhancing the Outcomes of CBR

As mechanisms for feedback are critical for the long-term success of relationships built upon community-based research, Sarah and I discussed ways to improve CBR and to address any unintended outcomes. To date, Sarah did not perceive anything negative associated with her experiences with CBR. She elaborated on unexpected outcomes:

I found out community-based research was a positive experience. I was shocked at how receptive the clients were [when interviewed] and how open they were with the researchers. We were quite concerned about this since the Census surveying was conducted at the same time. People were receptive – were willing to open their doors and give you the information. They liked the approach and that you were doing it for Visions of Hope. I also like the way the interviewers were paired up to make up for lack of experience [one experienced with one fledgling researcher]. This helps to alleviate fears. The real reason for CBR is to make the organization and its services better – to bring it full circle.

A less-positive surprise for Sarah that emerged from the community interviews was the fact that many people in the community still do not know about Visions of Hope. The organization has a primary webpage and a Facebook page and

distributes brochures throughout the community; still, even in nearby Gulfport, where many service recipients reside, the organization is not well known. Sarah expressed the need for more CBR, as a process of organizational empowerment, to help move people out of poverty. Toward this end, she identified a desire for us to conduct research on best practices and/or pilot programs that could be informative to VOH.

Using CBR to Build Mississippi's Future

Sarah's commitment to improving the quality of life of the people of Mississippi was clear. She noted that the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, from which Visions of Hope has received a multi-year grant supporting evaluations and assessments toward moving people off Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF), is also funding similar projects in other regions of the state. Sarah believes that our collaborative community-based research needs to be expanded and used to connect with other organizations in the state to address common issues across Mississippi. She noted:

Mississippi is last in everything that is positive. What can we do from one end of the state to another to try to move that forward? Our state is like three different countries, almost. We want to connect the state to understand what's holding Mississippi back. I hope the grantees across Mississippi can get together and develop a workable document. Maybe we can stay connected through that document. Eventually, it may influence some changes in legislation. Ultimately, that's what it's going to take to make our state move forward.

Sarah also voiced her concerns about her belief that Mississippi has one of the highest high school dropout rates in the country and called for vocational education to be expanded through the schools, which may also require legislation. Sarah explained, "Our advocacy piece needs focus [using CBR]. I have focused on programs. Our programs matter, but it's much bigger than that. It has to start with the government." Elaborating on this comment, Sarah stressed the following:

We're putting a band-aid on the problem. We don't need a band-aid. We need a cure for the problem. We need workable documents, and to identify what needs to be done toward positive change. We need plans with steps, like a 5-year strategy. What direction for Mississippi? We need a

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comprehensive report. Organizations in Mississippi must bring in political leaders and present information from our research to them. Community-based research has been the first phase of connecting the dots. We need to take it from 5 to 10, to others who have the power to make a difference – people we have elected to speak for us. Right now, we’re only voices. It is time to move from the community-building piece to the advocacy piece.

Sarah’s commitment to Mississippi was expressed through other stories that demonstrate how assumptions about the state have been debunked:

That name “Mississippi” – it has a history. Until someone comes...and more times than not, are forced to come...they associate Mississippi with everything that is negative. I have spoken to so many people who have been stationed at Keesler [AFB] and who said, “When I was told I had to come to Mississippi, I cried.” These comments were made by both males and females. “I cried. I literally cried. Oh no, not Mississippi!” And then they come and spend their term here. And guess where they decide to retire? Right here! Unfortunately, I don’t see us living down those negatives anytime soon. Gaming has helped somewhat. Those that come say, “Mississippi is not what we thought.” They expect to see cotton fields everywhere. They are just completely shocked...when they come, they see what it’s all about.

As the interview concluded, Sarah expressed powerful testimony of her commitment to her life’s work. Her words also helped to clarify why my university-based partners and I return to East Biloxi repeatedly to work with Visions of Hope and continue to utilize community-based research as the model for our own work with multiple groups – why our collaborative journey should never be over. Sarah concluded: “We want to teach the people to be their own voices. We don’t want to be ‘the voice’ of the people. We are charged with teaching people how to use their voices effectively.”

LESSONS LEARNED THROUGH VISIONS OF HOPE

Through the power of experience and reflection expressed in the words of Sarah Walker, a voice for Visions of Hope and the community of East Biloxi, we can learn valuable lessons about the usefulness of community-based research and new directions to consider for university-community partnerships built upon CBR.

Community-based research can incorporate multiple strategies for documenting existing community needs, more thoroughly contextualizing the challenges facing vulnerable groups in a particular community or region. These may include quantitative surveys or in-depth qualitative interviews of community residents and service recipients, focus groups with a variety of stakeholders, and key informant interviews with organizational staff, board members, and partners from across the community. These methods have been used to assist Visions of Hope with program planning, evaluation, and needs assessment.

While these methods, in and of themselves, are commonly used in conventional research, community-based research facilitates VOH staff having direct involvement in developing appropriate methodological strategies and research questions to more effectively address a particular project's goals and generate usable information for the organization's program planning and service delivery. Staff members have also determined the timeliness of using particular research approaches. Examples would be if a VOH survey project coincides with a community-wide survey by a different organization, potentially affecting response rates, and/or if the targeted population sample should be accessed through more customized approaches to build trust and maximize participation, as the community has frequently been surveyed by external researchers focusing on their own analysis of the effects of Hurricane Katrina and/or the BP oil spill.

Translating the information generated through community-based research activities for easy use by community-based partners is critical for realizing its full value as a participatory empowerment process of assessment and learning for staff, board members, and other partners and stakeholder groups (Green et al. 2006).

From their involvement with CBR, organizations can learn a great deal about the research process itself, as they are more directly involved with the components of problem-identification, data collection, analysis of data, and dissemination of findings in various forms to meet a variety of purposes. Through a collaborative shaping of these activities, VOH staff has gained knowledge of the purpose and usefulness of the steps of the research process and information generated through them, not only building the knowledge-base and self-confidence of staff and board members, but supporting the organization's legitimacy and credibility as an informed service provider and a voice for the populations it serves.

As indicated through our conversation, research is no longer perceived as an activity only to be shaped and controlled by external researchers and invoked upon a community, such as through some recent post-disaster research microscopes. It

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can be a process accessible to local actors and offering practical solutions to salient issues within a local context.

Facilitating daily use of research information by the community-based organization is imperative for the capacity development and long-term sustainability of the organization, as it completes funding applications and grant requirements, conducts strategic planning and evaluation activities, and markets services to the community. For VOH, community-based research has resulted in the timely documentation of community conditions and needs subsequently incorporated into grant applications and updates to the organization's strategic plan. CBR has increased the organization's ability to convey more accurate information about these issues to the broader nonprofit network in the Gulf Coast region, in Mississippi, and across the South.

I believe that supporting this success with CBR is VOH's strong history as a local service provider that routinely partners with nonprofit and government organizations at the local, regional, and national levels to more effectively identify community needs and acquire resources to deliver services. The dynamics of collaboration contribute to VOH's openness to exploring alternative relationships and research paradigms that bridge university-community resources in innovative ways, such as through CBR.

At the local level, as a community-based organization and participant in everyday life in the community, VOH can more personally connect to the people it serves and the broader community through CBR, when gathering information directly from them to more accurately evaluate program effectiveness and community needs. This demonstrates that the organization is open to feedback from people served and community members and is willing to improve services that function to meet people's needs, as identified by them. While VOH acquires feedback from the community through its research projects and the documentation thereof, it also receives more informal responses from community members about their interaction with research partners and the type of information sought from VOH through data collection activities, such as surveys and interviews. Participants have frequently followed up with VOH in person or on the phone, seeking additional information about services and activities of the organization. Very recently, through evaluation project interviews, staff became aware of people's interest in VOH offering a GED course during evening hours and/or at a second location in the region to meet varying work schedules and access issues better. Staff is now exploring the viability of these alternatives. Here, CBR has served as a

vehicle for VOH to become more aware of changing needs in the community and how the organization might respond to those needs.

Community-based research can more directly connect university-based researchers with people served by nonprofit organizations in meaningful ways. For people in a community, this can function to change common perceptions about the academy being out-of-reach to the community and lacking relevancy as a change agent for conditions at the grassroots level. For academic researchers, direct community connections can create “real world” applications and learning environments for testing theories, methods, and other formal knowledge developed through disciplinary inquiry. As suggested through their propositions about potential success with CBR, Wallerstein et al. (2008) identify cultural humility and the integration of local beliefs into research design and implementation as pathways to positive outcomes. Culturally-sensitive university-community relationships can draw strengths from each partner and more aptly achieve positive change in the capacity to improve outcomes and ultimately, solve problems.

As community-based research can empower organizations and the people they serve through localized program planning and evaluation, it can also be utilized for broader advocacy and social change, such as through multi-organizational collaboration, policy development, and legislative action at the state and federal levels. Already recognizing the benefit of participating in policy development, Visions of Hope has identified these policy pathways as an important “next step” for its application of community-based research methodologies.

From this interview, we have also learned that stories from the front lines of community-based research projects need to be documented and shared with broader audiences to understand what strategies potentially work and what might pose challenges to researchers and organizations as they do this work. While our projects with Visions of Hope have overwhelmingly been successful to date, I cannot emphasize enough how Sarah Walker’s commitment to her work, her ability to organize and manage the services she provides, her openness to receiving external resources and assistance to meet the needs of her community, and the astuteness and dedication of her staff, board, and partner organizations have all contributed to our collaborative success. It is when these elements are lacking within an organization that the greatest challenge may be presented to community-based research and what ultimately may be achieved.

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Sarah Walker, a resident of Biloxi, Mississippi, is cofounder and Executive Director of Visions of Hope, Inc. (a not-for-profit Community Development Organization). Ms. Walker has more than twenty-five years experience in social services and development of empowerment strategies for disadvantaged children, youth and adults. Ms. Walker serves on Biloxi Public School's Excel by 5, Biloxi 1st, and Federal District Planning Committees. She is also a member of numerous bank and governmental community advisory boards along the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

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