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## **Listening Projects in Florida**

*by Erin Sologaistoa*

*Florida has long been considered a 'cousin once removed' from the South. For most people, Florida conjures up images of elderly men in Bermuda shorts playing golf and sipping daiquiris or of inner city gangs wreaking havoc on unsuspecting tourists. Certainly, these are aspects of Florida, but as with most stereotypes, the reality is more complex than it first appears.*

The vast majority of Florida communities are rural and poor. Precisely because we have so many well-off retirees, there has for the past 20 years been less emphasis on the needs of children and youth. By attracting business here with little or no taxes, we have shortchanged our schools and other public agencies which rely on those taxes to adequately fund services for those who need them most.

Traveling north and inland, away from the over-development that rings the southern part of the state, one finds another Florida that looks a lot more like the rest of the South. Tallahassee, with a population of 150,000, is the largest city for a 150 mile radius. Only 30 minutes from the border, it is much closer geographically and culturally to Georgia than it is to Miami. Even in developed areas like Orlando and its environs, the heavy reliance on tourism—while destroying the environment and culture—has had little benefit to average people in minimum wage service jobs which keep them among the working poor.

For the past several years, Florida has been actively engaged in a lot of Listening Project (LP) work. The last year in particular has seen positive changes which have made this tool increasingly accessible to low income communities. Much energy has gone into thinking about how this process can be used to meet diverse and ever changing local needs.

The focus of Listening Projects in Florida has been on building the capacity of resident groups such as

neighborhood associations, resident councils, tenants' association, and the like, to take leadership in decisions which affect their quality of life. Again and again we hear from low income residents that they are tired of outside service providers dictating how public resources will be used to "help them." This approach has failed miserably in addressing problems such as crime, teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, high school drop-outs, homelessness, lack of jobs and educational opportunities, and similar problems plaguing low income communities around the country. The Listening Project offers a tangible way for communities to take an active role in solving their own problems.

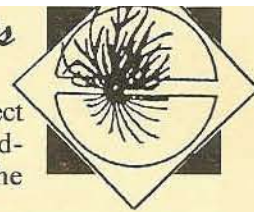
The Listening Project was introduced to activists from around Florida at the Training for Neighborhood Organizers in Winter Park last July. There were 80 people from around the state, including low income resident leaders and agencies that support the idea of resident-led community change. Many of the participants were Community Facilitators employed by the Florida Department of Children and Family Services' Family Preservation and Support Network. Each district in Florida has a Community Facilitator whose job it is to encourage local initiatives with resources, training, information, and support. This approach represents a positive shift in the way state agencies are approaching the provision of services for low income communities.

The Training of Neighborhood Organizers reflected the diversity that

Florida is known for. There were young and old, Blacks, Whites, Asians, Hispanics, and Caribbean Islanders, people from rural and urban neighborhoods. Everyone was there for the same reason, to learn skills for mobilizing their constituents toward positive community action.

Despite this diversity, it is striking to me how similar the issues facing low income communities are. The most glaring example has to do with youth. Almost every community I have worked with as a Listening Project trainer has put youth high on the list of issues to be addressed. One community diagrammed this by putting youth at the center of a wheel, with spokes such as parenting, jobs, education, drugs, self-esteem, high school drop-outs, teenage pregnancy, etc. In other words, all of these issues could be addressed if the Listening Projects were to focus on helping youth.

The Listening Project has helped numerous communities address some of the issues facing youth. The United Sisters of Pleasant City, an informal group of low income women from a West Palm Beach community, conducted a Listening Project five years ago which focused on how to make the best use of the historic African American High School. This process allowed them to gather valuable information, to build sustainable relationships and partnerships with community agencies, and to keep the momentum moving forward. The result is that on April 11th of this year, the Community Center had its grand opening. It took five years, but in that



time the United Sisters incorporated to become the Asili Resource Center, many youth have been placed in jobs; and they have a place to learn computer skills, to get their GEDs, and to learn about their African heritage.

The Family Involvement and Community Development Team in the Orange Avenue Apartments in Tallahassee held a Listening Project in 1994 to identify the concerns of the community. That resulted in a parents' support group, GED classes, computer classes, regular community meetings, and neighborhood fundraising events such as car washes and fish fries. They are in the process of incorporation.

The Training of Neighborhood Organizers helped build an informal network of communities that are using the Listening Project tool. Many of the sites we are currently working with are coalitions supported by the Family Preservation and Support Network or other organizations that support resident leadership. This represents a new approach to Listening Project work which places more emphasis on training organizers and giving long-term follow-up support to the communities they work with. By training and supporting organizers, who train and support local residents, Listening Project work reaches more communities, compounding the impact that we trainers can have.

**The projects in Florida include:**

- A collaboration between Family Preservation and Support and Healthy Communities, with The Harrellson Neighborhood Association and The Palms Resident Council in the Orlando area.
- Six neighborhoods supported by Family Preservation and Support in the Daytona area, including Espanola Citizens in Action, which is currently implementing a Listening Project, and five rural communities which are in the planning stages.
- A collaboration between Family

Preservation and Support and The United Way in three Lakeland area communities, providing training and technical assistance to Vista and Americorps volunteers organizing local residents' groups.



photo courtesy of Erin Sologaitoa

*Every community has put youth high on its list of issues to be addressed*

- Numerous rural communities in North Florida which will train Americorps and Vista volunteers to use the Listening Project in their organizing efforts.
- Several communities supported by the Children's Board of Hillsborough County, including: Plant City, a rural community working on issues related to race, jobs, and youth; and Palm River Point near Tampa, seeking to develop responsive community education and recreation programs.
- The Family and Youth Intervention Center in Coconut Grove, an inner city neighborhood in Miami, seeking to mobilize residents toward political action

Much Listening Project work has been concentrated in Florida recently because of groundwork and contacts that have made it easy to do the work there. But, there is good LP work happening throughout the Southeast and beyond. RSVP is providing Listening Project training to the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, which is working with several inner city churches in New Orleans and Kansas City. We remain committed to using

the Listening Project and *Voices* to address issues in the entire Southeast.

At February's Board meeting, the Florida staff had the opportunity to visit Celo, to learn more about its rich history, and to meet people who have been involved with RSVP since its inception in 1981. Marnie Walters eloquently told us her version of how her husband Herb had been inspired to create the Listening Project. It was when she convinced him they should have a child that he decided he had to do something tangible to make the world better. The Listening Project was his way of doing that.

Marnie was modest and gave a great deal of credit to everyone who has contributed to the evolution of the Listening Project over the years. When she was finished, it was abundantly clear how strong the ties between RSVP and the Celo community are. The loving support and encouragement, the commitment to peace, the dedication to social change that have been the guiding principles of the Celo community for over 60 years provided the soil from which the Listening Project sprang. It will always have its roots there. But Marnie articulated it nicely when she said that the Listening Project cannot be contained. It belongs to no one, and, by its very nature, will always change. She wished us well—all who have benefited from the thought and energy that have gone into this transformative process—and she encouraged us to see it for what it is: a living thing, a fluid process that will manifest itself in different ways and continuously adapt itself to meet the needs of local communities. We hope that is what we are doing in Florida!

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