

Coming to Terms:

The Problems and Possibilities of Our Community

**A Report Based on the 1993-94 Assessment of Human Needs
in Chattanooga/Hamilton County**

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Introduction

In the last decade, the Chattanooga/Hamilton County community has realized a part of its vision for renewal. Business has taken on new life both in the revitalized downtown area and along the river front highlighted by the unique Tennessee Aquarium. Entertainment is flourishing. On-the-road Broadway shows are playing to sold out houses at refurbished theaters. And the idea of Chattanooga as an environmental city is beginning to attract the attention of observers across the nation. In short, people are reawakening with a sense of pride in themselves and their potential.

At the same time, like urban areas throughout the United States, the community seems threatened by a decline in social order, by doubts about the ability of institutions to deliver on their promises, and by a growing pessimism as to whether or not our children will be able to continue to experience the benefits of an increasing standard of living.

These may be the bellwethers for what Robert Kaplan has called "strategic dangers," by which he means demographic, environmental, and societal stresses ("The Coming Anarchy," *The Atlantic Monthly*, February, 1994). Kaplan mentions, in particular, cultural divisions that are becoming the basis for conflict worldwide. The "withering away" of institutions, the rise of crime and violence, and the exponential spread of diseases are present signs of future decline if not of tumultuous upheaval. The life of the greater Chattanooga community has not been free from such signals. What have we learned from what we've been through? Where do things stand? Where might we be headed?

What is a Needs Assessment?

By its very nature, a needs assessment is not an act of self-congratulation. Instead, it involves identifying and coming to terms with the community's problems as well as its achievements. It is done under the conviction that opportunities for some are not enough; we will not be the community we would like to be unless we make sure that all of our citizens, with the full participation of the disadvantaged, have challenging and meaningful possibilities.

But identifying our strengths and our weaknesses is not the final purpose of the needs assessment process. The ultimate product is a plan which allows the community to address its most serious concerns. That was the task which the Needs Assessment Partnership undertook in the spring of 1993. Twenty-nine volunteers, representing a cross section of the community, met monthly throughout the year to study issues, to absorb and interpret various kinds of data, and to outline a problem-solving plan.

The assessment included:

- ◆ Research papers on the economy, poverty, health care, education, and crime and family violence;
- ◆ A door to door survey of over 700 households with respondents from all zip codes in Hamilton County;
- ◆ A mail survey with responses from over 200 key informants (community leaders);
- ◆ Six issue-specific discussion groups; and
- ◆ Community reaction to the proposed plan.

The research, survey, and discussion findings were reviewed extensively by the members of the Needs Assessment Partnership. Out of the Partnership's deliberations came recommendations about the most urgent issues facing the community and strategies for addressing them. The result is a guide for community problem-solving. The technical documents (research, survey, discussion, and focus group findings) that served as the background for this report are available through arrangements with the Metropolitan Council for Community Services.

An Overview of Our Community

The greater Chattanooga community, because of its size, is known as the fourth metropolitan area in Tennessee—preceded by the Memphis, Nashville, and Knoxville areas. It is the anchor of southeast Tennessee and northern Georgia. From 1980 to 1990, the populations of both Chattanooga and Hamilton County declined; however, recent estimates from the Chattanooga Area Chamber of Commerce and The RiverValley Partners indicate that this trend may have been reversed in the early 1990's due to recent economic development.

Over the years, the Chattanooga area has undergone a transition from a railroad and manufacturing center to an environmentally sensitive community with a much stronger emphasis on tourism and services than in the past. The changes that have occurred are

only partly the result of economic trends affecting communities throughout the United States. They are also, and perhaps predominantly, the result of self-conscious revitalization efforts.

In this process, a great deal has been gained. Chattanooga is regarded by many other communities as a model for urban development. At the same time, something has been lost—most notably a degree of economic security for those who have had to move from the manufacturing sector, where jobs are relatively high paying and offer good benefits, to the generally lower paying and limited benefit jobs of the services sector.

The most striking physical feature of the greater Chattanooga community is the way in which the Tennessee River, the valley, and the mountains all come together. These were strong factors in its history and its development over time. They are now strong factors in its economic renewal. New development is making the most of the community's natural assets.

However, the needs assessment's research and the survey results indicate that some notions about the greater Chattanooga community should be kept in balance. Here are two questions to consider:

1. Is the playing field of opportunity level?

In 1990, the percentage of people in poverty in Hamilton County was exactly the same as it was ten years earlier. No real progress was made on that score during the 1980's. If we look a little deeper, a disturbing picture emerges. The rate of poverty in the inner city is much higher than for Hamilton County as a whole, and large numbers of our children and single parents live in poverty.

Urban poverty is inherently destabilizing. It undermines the fabric of society by leaving families in the position of not being able to afford such basics as decent housing, good nutrition, or adequate medical care. For some young people who live within social blight, even such risky behavior as joining gangs may represent a step up. Analysis of the needs assessment surveys shows that, across the board, problems are worse for minorities than for the general population and worse for low-income families than for families with moderate to high incomes. This constitutes clear documentation of the reality of disadvantage.

Economic struggles are not just the lot of the poor. Making ends meet can affect all economic strata. However, people with fewer resources often face more obstacles to economic success. Once success is achieved it can build upon itself and lead to even more success. The real challenge may be in achieving that first success, in developing the skills and resources to overcome the obstacles.

2. Has the community already turned the corner in key areas such as economic development and affordable housing?

The greater Chattanooga community, without question, has a new and potent symbol—the Tennessee Aquarium. It is a symbol of renewal and development that goes beyond its own walls. And through the efforts of Chattanooga Neighborhood Enterprise (CNE) and organizations like Habitat for Humanity, the community has done more to make decent housing available to low and moderate income families than perhaps any other comparable community in the nation. The findings of community research as corroborated by survey results, however, show that decent and affordable housing is still a problem for many of our citizens, particularly in the inner city, and that there is not yet sufficient economic development to make a dent in the level of poverty. In some key areas, the greater Chattanooga community has made impressive strides; accomplishments have been real and significant. The community is surely on to something, but we have not yet fully arrived.

Complexities of Assessing Need

The Needs Assessment Partnership struggled with complex perspectives in determining which problems are most serious and most compelling. The resources are limited so that we cannot do all things for all people. On the one hand, many people may be affected by a moderately serious problem. On the other hand, a few people may be affected by a devastating problem. For example, the number of babies who at birth are already affected by their mothers' use of alcohol and drugs during pregnancy is relatively small. However, the number is on the increase, and the cost of coping with the problem is very high. Furthermore, some of these cases will require a lifetime of services.

Services for some needs are better developed than for others. The community has a fairly good range of services addressing the needs of the elderly, the needs of people with developmental disabilities, and the needs of people with mental retardation. Though services are not always completely adequate, our community often goes further to meet these needs than comparable (and even larger) communities elsewhere. There are, however, signals from the demographics alone (people living longer and the aging of the "baby boomers") that the demand for services for the elderly will increase dramatically by the turn of the century.

The Needs Assessment Partnership stresses that services addressing the problems that affect large numbers of people should not, on that basis alone, come at the expense of those who are members of smaller needs groups. That is an unacceptable trade-off. Further, the Partnership feels that this needs assessment provides the community with the opportunity 1) to set up a process to determine program effectiveness; 2) to develop methods of cooperation among agencies and programs; 3) to stress prevention rather than correction; and 4) to develop broader funding sources.

With these caveats, the Partnership - based on the findings of the surveys, the community research, and its own deliberations - identified six issue areas that it considered urgent and that strike at the core of our community.

Issue: The Family

The traditional family in which the father is the breadwinner and the mother stays at home with the children long ago ceased to be the norm. In the great majority of two-parent families, both husband and wife must work to maintain the standard of living that once was possible with just one person working. Partly to avoid the economic strain on the family and partly to realize their own rights to achievement, an increasing number of mothers of young children have entered the work force. While this may be to the family's financial benefit, at least two complicating consequences follow:

- 1) the stress of juggling work and family responsibilities
- 2) the increasing demand for high quality, affordable child care.

But even the two-parent family is not the norm it once was. Divorce, abandonment, and out-of-wedlock births are all giving rise to increases in single-parent families. In the case of the single-parent, child care of some kind is an economic necessity. Without it, the parent is unable to work.

As the National Commission on Children pointed out in its 1991 report, the well-being of families is closely related to secure family incomes. If family income is insufficient, basic needs-nutrition, housing, and health care-cannot be adequately met. It then becomes all the more difficult for the family to meet the emotional and intellectual needs of its children. The great majority of families in poverty are those of the working poor-people who work full time at wages so low that they are still below the poverty threshold and those who want to work full-time but can only find part-time work.

Issue: Economic Opportunity

Reference has already been made to the economic development that has taken place over the last eight to ten years and the strong evidence of that in the Tennessee Aquarium. Other initiatives are also integral to the community's sense of momentum-Ross's Landing, Miller Plaza, and the Tennessee Riverpark.

All of this, however, has to be balanced over against other economic realities-a shift in the economy from manufacturing to services, a decline in the rate of growth of personal income, and the overall loss of population for both Chattanooga and Hamilton County in the decade of the 80's. Each of these factors on its own raises questions about the community's economy. Together they demonstrate a lack of opportunity to the degree that a significant number of people have left the area in search of brighter options. Economic development in the late 1980's and the early 1990's may be stemming the tide with new jobs, but many of these new jobs are in services at relatively low wages and with, at best, minimal benefits.

Issue: Education

From the local to the national setting, concern about the level of educational achievement of our students has been widely raised. The reason is twofold. First, education is considered to be the key to American economic competitiveness. Second, it is just as much a key to good citizenship. Our schools, however, are under increasing stress because of the radically new kinds of problems with which they must deal problems like drugs, weapons, and violence.

For such reasons as these, there is much discussion about educational reform. The objectives to which reform is directed are to keep students in school, to increase the graduation rate, and to increase the level of achievement. Although SAT scores have improved, the overall level of achievement remains relatively low-nearly two-thirds of the students entering the freshman class at Chattanooga State Technical Community College require remedial work before taking on college level courses.

Issue: Youth Development

Recent surveys indicate that the children of our community are having sex at increasingly younger ages and with greater frequency. Moreover, the average number of sexual partners for teenagers is growing. Given the propensity of teenagers to believe in their invulnerability, these trends lay the groundwork for increasingly high rates of teen pregnancy and for the spread of venereal diseases including the HIV virus.

Just as the nation's "war on drugs" has produced ambivalent results, so community efforts to educate our children on alcohol and drug use has produced spotty effects. In a study done by the Metropolitan Council for the Chattanooga/Hamilton County Health Department, children in the community's schools indicated that they were aware of the dangers of drug and alcohol use and abuse. However, an inordinate number indicated that they use these substances anyway.

From this we can infer that prevention requires more than awareness to be effective. Further research is needed to determine what works best, but the Partnership suggests ongoing programs that build on and involve the strengths of neighborhoods and communities. In this regard, the needs assessment survey results reveal a strong feeling on the part of people in the neighborhoods that much more needs to be done to provide safe and constructive recreation for young people. The presumption appears to be that this would provide positive alternatives to juvenile crime and anti-social behavior-that leisure time which is not directed is a prescription for trouble. Good recreational programming, on the other hand, can bring structure to a young person's life, can teach important lessons about relationships with others, and can provide opportunities for intervention when signs of adjustment difficulties are observed.

Issue: Health Care

There are some indications that Hamilton County does better in providing access to health care than either the state or the nation as a whole. For example, the percentage of expectant mothers who receive prenatal care has been considerably above state and national averages, and the infant mortality rate has been below state and national averages.

The infant mortality rate, however, fluctuates and as recently as 1991 was much above national objectives. In addition, the infant mortality rate is considerably higher among minorities than among the general population. Along similar lines, the percentage of low weight births is better than the state average but above the accepted objective. Progress has also been made in immunizations by the age of two but is barely above the critical level below which the risk of an epidemic increases dramatically.

However, the community needs to be concerned about the potential for the rapid spread of communicable diseases, especially sexually transmitted diseases. For example, as of 1993, the number of full-blown AIDS cases in Hamilton County was approaching 400. Services to deal with this problem are expensive and in demand, and statistics indicate that the need will increase. The current public health concern is focused on HIV infection (the precursor to AIDS), which is now spreading most rapidly through IV-drug use, perinatal transmission, and heterosexual transmission. The emphasis is on getting people to take personal responsibility in reducing risk-taking behaviors.

Through its community health centers and the health center for the homeless, the community has provided care for a significant number of those who otherwise would lack access to services. Resources, however, have not been sufficient to meet the need. A primary problem up to this point has been the uninsured and those unable to afford regular medical care. One of the objectives of TennCare is to increase the medical delivery system's ability to serve such people. The implementation of that program, regardless of its merits, will inevitably involve some transition pains. Of particular concern is the care of people with mental illness. Demand appears much greater than capacity, and there is still a great deal of uncertainty as to how services are to be delivered. This is a situation that needs to be monitored.

Issue: Neighborhoods and Crime

Crime in the greater Chattanooga community, it turns out, is in many cases a neighborhood issue. Whole areas are characterized by their unsafe environments. After a brief decline in overall crime rates in 1992, as reported by the FBI, the crime rate has risen slightly. The prevalence of crime, especially random acts of violence, leads some citizens to make themselves prisoners in their own homes and to give up control of their neighborhoods to criminals. As indicated from survey results and discussion groups, of particular concern is the rise in serious offenses committed by juveniles. Gang membership, car jacking, mall violence, and drug-related violence are increasingly identified with our youth.

Both the county and the city have instituted programs that are having some success. For example, police officers are being integrated into neighborhoods in community policing programs. Neighborhood associations are coming together and implementing active neighborhood watches. These and other efforts in cooperation between neighborhoods and police are showing promise in allowing communities to retake the streets and to reduce the level of fear.

What We Can Do: Goals for the Community

As the results of the surveys and the discussion groups indicated, these six issues are interrelated. Some stem from others in a sequence from insufficient family incomes to lack of decent jobs, inadequate knowledge and skills, and poor starts in life. As these problems build on each other and intertwine, they have an ever increasing impact on our community. Insufficient family income means the inability to afford such basics as decent housing and health care.

Family income, in turn, is directly dependent on jobs. The kind of job a person is able to get is further dependent on knowledge and skills. And the acquisition of knowledge and skills is closely related to good starts in life-healthy births, healthy childhoods, quality childhood development, and safe neighborhoods.

This, then, is what our issues imply. First, the families of the Chattanooga/Hamilton County community need viable opportunities in order to make it possible for them to have well-rounded, satisfying lives. Second, to be able to take advantage of these opportunities, our children and youth need solid education guiding them toward achievement and good citizenship. And third, for education to be what it should be, our children must have good starts in life giving them favorable opportunities for early and lasting success. It also turns out that early childhood development is the key to prevention of a whole range of problems that adolescents are subject to-substance abuse, dropping out of school, teen pregnancy, and delinquency.

Through Chattanooga Venture's Revision 2000 process, the community has already identified its ideal for human services: "a comprehensive social service system that supports creative solutions to personal and social concerns." This implies that the community should do in human services what it has begun in economic development with the Tennessee Aquarium. Though economic development has not fully arrived, it is at a stage of completion with something that people can identify with pride. Something parallel needs to happen in human services by:

- ◆ expanding the social conscience;
- ◆ investing in neighborhoods;
- ◆ investing in families; and
- ◆ investing in children.

Parameters for Community Action

In order to improve the opportunities for those in need, the community should adopt a set of parameters, principles under which services will be provided.

1. Communities can solve their own problems. This is not a statement of abandonment; rather, the Needs Assessment Partnership believes that any efforts to help those in need will be fruitless unless those same people are involved in the process of developing and delivering services. The Partnership further believes that the desires and wishes of those being served should be heeded and emphasized when developing services.
2. Prevention is almost always easier, more effective, and less expensive than trying to fix problems after they are already out of hand. The up-front investment in primary prevention should become one of the driving forces of efforts to improve the community.
3. Services should be located (or relocated) where the people in need are. Access lessens the burden of those in need regarding transportation, child care, and the confusion involved of traveling back and forth among agencies located in various parts of town. Furthermore, it fosters the awareness that a person's own neighborhood is the place for problem solving.
4. Planning for and developing services should begin with coordination including the possibility of co-location and consolidation. Since many people with one need often have others, co-location of services is desirable. However, when co-location is not possible, coordination and partnership building are all the more important to improve efficiency, to eliminate duplication, and to increase accessibility.
5. Economic development and social development cannot be addressed separately. Put simply, business and industry will not enter the community with good paying jobs if they are not assured of a first class work force, but a community will have little reason to invest in a first class work force if jobs are not available. Efforts at alleviating social need must be goal oriented with a view toward increasing economic opportunity and educational attainment for all in the community.
6. Just as neighborhoods are the building blocks of any local community, so families are the building blocks of any neighborhood and children the focus of families. Accordingly, any services directed at the community, neighborhood, or family levels should have these final goals in mind: the highest possible levels of self-sufficiency and better lives today for our children.
7. Services, if they are to support problem solving, must be delivered, not simply on the basis of eligibility, but also to assist individuals, families, and communities in pursuit of their own objectives. This means that the service providers should work with consumers to clarify their personal objectives over against whatever difficulties they may be encountering and to design service plans with the mutual participation and concurrence of clients. The

service plans should provide the transitional supports that enable clients to do what they themselves are committed to do to achieve their highest levels of self-sufficiency. The provider should make a further commitment to follow up with clients frequently to evaluate the degree to which services are assisting them in this personal problem solving process.

8. Services should promote the optimal level of independence for clients. In some instances, as with people who have permanent disabilities, lifelong services may be required; in other instances, services generally should have a beginning and an end. In any case, services should be designed with the optimum functioning of people in mind.

9. Proposed new programs should demonstrate their necessity, be able to measure effectiveness, and show that they will be part of a cooperative service delivery system.

The Plan: Working for a Better Tomorrow

Problem solving calls for systemic reform. Institutions, government, and charitable organizations will all have to change to meet people's needs. At the same time, the community should adopt some overall objectives so that it has clear goals and ways to measure the success of its efforts. The Partnership recognizes the desirability of measurable targets and recommends such where practical. Where quantification of objectives is not practical, the Partnership recommends a monitoring function. Accordingly, the Partnership suggests the following.

1. Expand the social conscience.

The involvement of community organizations (businesses, churches, civic organizations) in the problem solving process should be maximized through financial and volunteer contributions, building on the strong foundation already in existence. All citizens should be educated to the systemic defects of our community. Strategies should focus on causes rather than simply the treatment of symptoms.

While acknowledging personal rights, personal responsibilities to the community and to each other should be taught and encouraged. Every citizen should be an active, productive participant in the democratic process and should be able to access the political, judicial, educational, and economic systems.

Target objective:

- ◆ *The percent of eligible population registered to vote should increase to 80%, and voting rates in general elections should increase to 75% by the year 2000.*

Indicators to be monitored:

- ◆ *Number of people participating in volunteer activities.*
- ◆ *Number of people contributing to United Way.*

2. Invest in Neighborhoods.

Neighborhood associations should be further strengthened. What is working in some neighborhoods should be carried over to others. Coalitions of neighborhood, business, and governmental organizations should be formed to develop resources for communities. Cooperation between law enforcement and neighborhoods has had a good beginning. This should be increased so that all distressed neighborhoods have a solid presence of police who are well known by the residents.

Citizens and community groups should advocate that state and federal mandatory sentencing guidelines be redrafted to ensure that nonviolent criminals are not taking up scarce bed space in our prisons and to ensure that the judicial system is enlarged to allow for the swift and long term removal of violent criminals from neighborhoods. The community should make a commitment to revitalize substandard housing and to provide good recreational opportunities in public housing.

Target objectives (by the year 2000):

- ◆ *Develop community policing programs in neighborhoods with the most serious levels of crime.*
- ◆ *Ensure that recreational centers are in every city and county district and that all have good recreational programming.*
- ◆ *Add 2,798 affordable housing opportunities for low and moderate income families and special needs groups (Chattanooga's CHAS).*

Indicators to be monitored:

- ◆ *Violent crime index.*
- ◆ *Activities of neighborhood associations.*

3. Invest in Families.

The community should address the problem of disadvantage through a combination of economic development and the development of our human resources. We should support welfare reform to allow parents receiving assistance to take low paying, entry level positions without elimination of benefits (including child care and health care). Benefits, how-

ever, should be phased out as pay level increases. Vocational or technical training and apprenticeship programs should be available to high school graduates who are not going on to college. Such training should be geared to ensuring competitiveness in the global, high tech economy and inculcating lifelong learning.

Solutions to family problems should be sought in such a way that families, as much as possible, are kept together. All absent parents should assume, or be compelled to assume if necessary, an appropriate share of responsibility for the emotional as well as the economic well-being of the child.

Target objectives (by the year 2000):

- ◆ *Create new jobs paying wages above poverty levels.*
- ◆ *Increase the high school graduation rate to 90%.*
- ◆ *Add 100 slots in the teen learning centers to keep teen mothers in school and to provide early childhood development for their children.*
- ◆ *Make parenting and early childhood development programs available throughout the community.*
- ◆ *Research prevention programs addressing substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and sexually transmitted disease; determine which are most effective; and implement .*

Indicators to be monitored:

- ◆ *Factors related to family poverty.*
- ◆ *Incidence of family violence.*

4. Invest in Children.

Children should be given good starts in life through healthy births, healthy childhoods, and good early childhood development. This will allow children to be fully prepared to enter school. Child care centers, especially those that are publicly funded, should seek accreditation under the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), and businesses should invest in corporate child care programs. Public-private partnerships should be established to provide resources.

Target objectives (by the year 2000):

- ◆ *Increase the percentage of pregnant women receiving early prenatal care from roughly 75% to 85%.*
- ◆ *Reduce the rate of low weight or preterm births to 7% or less.*
- ◆ *Increase the immunization rate of two year olds to 90%.*
- ◆ *Triple the number of Head Start-type slots.*

- ◆ *Double the number of slots for extended child care and provide satellite locations.*
- ◆ *Establish and maintain one-stop service centers in at least three strategically located neighborhoods with a range of services including eligibility for assistance, job skills training, parenting classes, early childhood development, counseling, and adult education.*

Indicators to be monitored:

- ◆ *Infant mortality rates.*
- ◆ *Child care waiting lists.*

Conclusion

The greater Chattanooga community, coming to the mid-1990's, must come to terms with some unattractive realities. The community, however, has shown an ability to come to grips with its issues. If our efforts are not sustained and expanded for the long haul, the progress we have made will be overcome by decline, the harbingers of which may already be making an appearance on the horizon. The investment required of community problem solving is long-term. And the key investments are those we make in our human capital-in the abilities of our people and the potential for lifelong growth and learning. The Needs Assessment Partnership calls on the greater Chattanooga community to reaffirm and to practice the values we claim:

- ◆ Economic opportunity
- ◆ A level playing field
- ◆ Community-wide support