

Foreword

The fifty American states have been termed “laboratories of democracy,” places where people and communities can test and refine imaginative new laws and policies far from Washington and free of the political pressures and compromises that too often impede innovation on the national scale.

Innovation at the state and local levels is especially important in times of federal retrenchment when agencies of the national government choose not to promote public health, protect the environment, increase access to health care, or advance the common good. In these circumstances, local action can protect vulnerable populations against the consequences of ill-informed federal policy. Also local experiments can assess the feasibility of unconventional strategies and, when these strategies are found to work, pave the way for their later widescale adoption. Recent examples include Massachusetts’ path-breaking creation of a universal health insurance program, a plan that became the model for the Affordable Care Act; Vermont’s attempted introduction of a single-payer health care system; and courageous action by Ohio and thirty other states to expand access to Medicaid.

Hazardous environmental exposures such as air pollution, lead, toxic industrial chemicals, and pesticides are powerful determinants of health and disease in the United States, especially among disproportionately exposed minority communities, and these hazards have long been targets of state and local action. Examples of state and local interventions against environmental hazards include California’s enforcement of motor vehicle emission standards much stricter than those of the federal government; New York’s formation of a unique statewide network of centers of excellence in children’s environmental health; Rhode Island’s efforts to sue the manufacturers

of lead-based paint; and actions taken by California and other states to ban brominated flame retardants and the neurotoxic insecticide chlorpyrifos.

Successful state and local initiatives in environmental public health require the formation of diverse, multisectoral collaborations whose members typically extend far beyond the “usual suspects” in the public health and environment communities. If they are to achieve their goals, these coalitions must hold together for long periods of time, sometimes for years, and persevere in the face of great opposition. The best of them are superb examples of local democracy in action.

No systematic analysis has been undertaken until now of locally based collaborations in environmental public health. What are the factors responsible for these coalitions’ successes (and failures)? What are the barriers they must overcome? What are the lessons and principles that can be distilled from their work and then translated elsewhere? Such analysis is the purpose of this important new book, *Bridging Silos: Collaborating for Environmental Health and Justice in Urban Communities*, by Professor Katrina Korfmacher of the University of Rochester.

Korfmacher approaches her task by undertaking deep examinations of three local case studies in environmental public health, all of them in low-resource settings: (1) a community-based approach to lead poisoning prevention in Rochester, New York; (2) diverse efforts to promote a healthy and equitable built environment in Duluth, Minnesota; and (3) development of a systematic strategy to make protection of environmental justice communities a key planning priority for the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, California. Her goal is to develop a generalizable conceptual framework that assesses the key elements of successful community-based partnerships in environmental public health.

Korfmacher identifies three critical elements:

First, it is essential to properly frame the issue and precisely specify the coalition’s goal. In each of the three case studies that Korfmacher examines, the local coalition framed their initiative around ending an environmental injustice. This formulation proved a powerful unifying theme. It was lofty, yet attainable. It was a target on which all could agree and few gainsay.

Second is the importance of integrating diverse systems and partners, of “bridging silos” between disparate groups, such as the public health and environment communities, local residents and academia, and community

activists and government agencies. Korfmacher presents illuminating examples of how individual government officials contributed to the work of community coalitions even while their agencies sat on the sidelines. She describes how partnerships between community residents and university researchers, especially faculty and staff in university-based environmental health outreach and engagement programs, enabled communities to gain access to previously unavailable technical and intellectual resources.

Third is the need to discern the motives, professional cultures, values, goals, and constraints of each member of a coalition and to understand how these factors can either block or promote collaboration. This knowledge is critical to identifying common goals and formulating acceptable strategies. It also guides the accommodations that partner organizations may need to make to better support their members' participation in collaborative efforts.

Bridging Silos is an important and much-needed book by a scholar who has worked on the front lines of urban environmental health for more than two decades. I commend it to all who work in public health and environmental protection, and especially to my colleagues working to achieve these noble goals at the state, local, and community levels. This book presents clear guidance on how to build durable partnerships. It presents a road map on how to harness human capital—the accumulated wisdom, knowledge, and experience of communities—to advance the common good. It describes a path to attaining social justice that can successfully be followed even in times when material resources are scant and the political climate unfavorable. *Bridging Silos* sends a message of hope. It is a call to action.

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