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Black Veterans: Organizing and Strategizing for Community Development

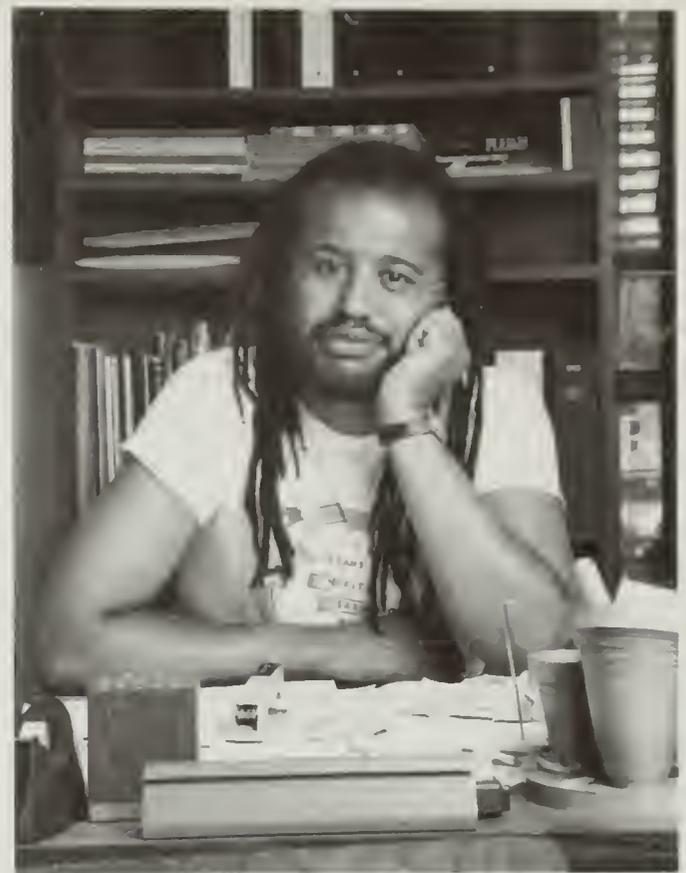
by

Ron E. Armstead, M.C.P.

The following article summarizes the findings and conclusions of a case study that was undertaken as part of the author's master's thesis at MIT. Ford Foundation Professor Frank Jones served as advisor. The study is part of an overall strategy to develop a National Black Veterans Network in conjunction with the Veterans Benefits Clearinghouse, Inc., and the Congressional Black Caucus Veterans Braintrust. It is hoped that the study will provide a planning, research, and educational tool to enhance organizing and affordable housing development efforts on behalf of black veterans across the country. Future research is being proposed on a national scale to examine the success of such organizing efforts in order to understand the ways in which black veterans can implement strategies for community development and initiate other self-help initiatives.

Eighteen years have passed since the official end of the Vietnam War in 1975 and the unceremonious homecoming of Vietnam veterans. The unpopularity of the war placed side by side with the civil rights and Black Power movements made the homecoming and transition experience into post-military adjustment even more difficult for black veterans. Nevertheless, the ensuing years saw black Vietnam-era veterans attempting to adjust and organize along many fronts as an attempt to create meaning and define their space within a landscape of social, political, and economic upheaval and unrest.

These organizing efforts and strategies met with varying degrees of success or failure, but never reached the magnitude of a social movement. Many veteran activists like myself have participated in the process of organizing so many groups, associations, organizations, conferences, and meetings over the past eighteen to twenty years that time and space limit my ability to recall all their names. Yet, all too often these efforts based on good intentions and "felt need" have resulted in group self-destruction within six months of origination, or failed to provide long-term solutions to veterans' social problems. No study to date has been conducted of Vietnam-era veterans' organizing efforts, particularly those of black Vietnam-era veterans. Thus, eighteen to twenty years after the Vietnam War, we know little about the factors involved in successful self-help organizing.



With this in mind, I began the process of questioning and reexamining the possibility of comparatively studying a select number of successful nonprofit organizations and their leadership to determine what strengths would be revealed regarding their success. Two questions for examination were: did military service contribute to their organizational successes in terms of skills, attitudes, or behavior? But more importantly, how would black Vietnam-era veterans themselves describe self-help organizing and organizational and community development—the struggles and barriers as well as opportunities for social reintegration within the community setting?

Three assertions guided me while considering these questions. First, blacks in Vietnam had paid a high price and consequently had made certain vows and promises about becoming social change agents when they returned to the "world." As Wayne Smith, a former Vietnam combat medic, said, "What ever happened to the promise that we were going to change the world?"¹ Second, the ability to establish a feeling of brotherhood or male bonding was a positive and intangible asset from the war experience. Third, Vietnam's military small unit tactics were tangible illustrations of how small groups of committed individuals could overcome major obstacles. This study attempts to ascertain if any aspect of these assertions has carried over into civilian life or been recaptured as a strength or building block for organizational and community development.

Models for Community Change

The study examined three nonprofit organizations in the Northeastern United States: the Veterans Benefits Clearinghouse, Inc., of Roxbury, Massachusetts, Black Veterans for Social Justice, Inc., of Brooklyn, New York, and Western New York Veterans Housing Coalition, of

Buffalo, New York. These three organizations formed the nucleus for gathering information about successful strategies and tactics involving organizing, organizational and affordable housing development, attracting specialized resources, and garnering political and community support. Further, the study proposed that a typology or model for replication exists in these examples for self-help organizing around the country.

All three were organized since the end of the Vietnam War as a response to felt need in their respective communities. Thus, these community-based organizations represent efforts by black veterans to reconnect with black community life. Furthermore, they represent symbolically untapped human resources contained in various communities around the country.

The study focused on examining why these three organizations were successful when other black veterans' organizing attempts were failures; if military service was a determining or contributing factor for their success; and, whether these factors or attributes were present in all three veterans and, if so, whether a formula could be developed based on these factors for replication in other parts of the country. The study also examined how these factors might manifest themselves in organizing community-based organizations for community development.

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Over a three-year period, interviews were conducted with the organizations' leaders: Mr. Ralph Cooper, executive director of the Veterans Benefits Clearinghouse; Mr. Job Mashariki, director of Black Veterans for Social Justice, and Mr. Jerry Bowman, vice-president of Western New York Veterans Housing Coalition between 1988 and 1990. These three-hour interviews consisted of categorical questions using an ethnographic research approach recommended by Dr. Carlos Brossard.

The study's principal value is its theoretical veterans community development model emphasizing the role played by military service, organizing and organizational development, higher education, relationship building, interpersonal skills, leadership, racial consciousness, and social activism on behalf of self-help. In this sense, the study represents a purposive sample and its goal is simply to give definition to a theory for veterans' supplementing community development efforts and a model for community application or practice.

Self-help offered these veterans a window of opportunity to offset feelings of need, negativity, frustration, hopelessness, and helplessness with programmatic responses. At the same time, necessity

merely sanctioned what had already become self-help practices. The idea of self-help motivated veterans to come together as a group and strive towards creating long-term solutions to their social problems, while expanding the realm of possibilities. This acknowledgment, however, should not dismiss the importance of a community context.

The overall goal of the study was to take a new approach to examining black Vietnam-era veterans focusing on factors of successful organizing and development of community-based nonprofit organizations. It also sought to investigate and understand black leadership attributes, rather than fall prey to continuing depictions of black Vietnam-era veterans as a tragic problem group.

The study examined the following premises:

- Black veterans are an untapped resource within the black community;
- Community development offers a window of opportunity for black Vietnam-era veterans to become integrated into the community setting; and,
- Homelessness and affordable housing development offer future areas of potential conflict and opportunity for black veterans;

The Effect of Military Service on Successful Organizing

Human capital formation by definition is added value or increase in human capacity through both generalized and specialized skills and training. The assertion here is that military service contributes to human capital formation versus being merely an instrument of U.S. foreign policy. Military service provides a modicum of tangible attributes through training, travel, occupational and leadership development, not to mention the intangible attributes of certain social behaviors, including interdependency, discipline, camaraderie, small-group cohesion, and teamwork, among others.

However, the study unevenly reflects the impact of military service on human capital formation. Only one of the three interviewees reported being in Vietnam and drawing on the lessons of Vietnam when addressing present day problems and situational difficulties. The second stated that he did not think the military did much for his development, but then contradicted himself later in the interview when he noted that he traveled, experienced foreign cultures, acquired language skills, and felt for the first time felt he was received as a human being, rather than as a "nigger." He added that he felt this experience would be with him forever. The third veteran did not discuss his military experience to any degree.

The study is, therefore, somewhat ambiguous as it relates to the extent that military service might be a developer of human capital. Yet, while the veterans themselves were reluctant to attribute any good to their military experience, the study found that military service had in fact a profound socializing effect on their lives. The military as an autocratic organization imposed

discipline and order and frequently aided in sharpening critical assessment skills. In addition, it facilitated their ability to improvise more readily and become more mission- or task-oriented. The acquisition of this kind of operational discipline, coupled with the veterans' natural talents, proved to be a factor in successful organizing.

Veterans' Roles in the Community

All three veterans' backgrounds are rooted in community organizing and organizational development. All three men built local reputations as political activists on behalf of the broader array of black community concerns. Community organizing was a springboard for approaching the problems of black veterans from a self-help and community-based organizational perspective. All three mentioned seeing self-help organizing, social services delivery, and affordable housing development targeted towards black veterans as a continuation of their efforts at addressing community problems at large.

In Buffalo, the demise of industry or blue collar manufacturing jobs, the continuation of white Irish political control, and finally an increasingly vocal black population precipitated the community organizing efforts of Jerry Bowman and his founding of the Black Community Information Center. Job Mashariki helped to organize the East Cultural and Education Center, arrange economic boycotts of downtown businesses, and establish the Randolph Evans Funds in Brooklyn, New York, the city's largest borough where a large, progressive, and even militant segment of the population, largely African and Caribbean American, has had a long history of community involvement and political control extending from the local neighborhoods to the congressional district. In Boston, similar to parts of the southern United States, school busing during the 1970s and its aftermath of racial violence, polarization, and struggle for political control between the white Irish and the black population led to Boston's being labeled "the most racist city in America." Yet, despite this, Ralph Cooper opened the first Veterans Peer Assistance Counseling Program in the city of Boston on the campus of Boston State College, co-founded the Veterans Club and the Veterans Benefits Clearinghouse, and after graduation was awarded a Commonwealth of Massachusetts Fellowship and field placement at the Roxbury Multi-Service Center, one of the oldest and largest social service organizations in Boston's black community, to learn the internal workings of a community agency.

The Role of Higher Education

The study found that attending college played a major role in the post-military resocialization into civilian life and contributed to the personal growth and professional development of the three veterans. As older students possessing maturity and experience, college provided them with an academic and intellectual type of discipline and challenge not associated with military service. Most importantly, it provided an environment conducive to

short-term economic survival, learning and teaching, and, lastly, institutional maneuvering or manipulation. These black veteran organizers viewed higher education, social activism, and life-long learning in a positive light.

The college backgrounds and organizational histories of the three veterans interviewed revealed certain commonalities. All three attended college after the military and therefore brought a host of personal resources to the task of campus organizing, academic achievement, and community activism. In Boston, Ralph Cooper and others organized the Veterans Club on the campus of Boston State College which was later incorporated as the Veterans Benefits Clearinghouse; in Brooklyn, Job Mashariki attended New York State College while working at the Veterans Administration community storefront (a precursor to the Vet Centers, the Veterans Administration's version of a community-based organization) contributing to community activism, and organizing the Black Veterans for Social Justice; and, in Buffalo, Jerry Bowman organized the Third World Veterans Association on the campus of University of Buffalo and later assisted in establishing the Buffalo Vet Center. While employed at the Vet Center, Bowman also organized and assisted veterans in the Attica State Prison over a ten-year period. His advocacy work begun in the community at large finally culminated in the development of the Western New York Veterans Housing Coalition.

Organizational Philosophies: Similarities and Differences, Strengths and Weaknesses

The missions of all three organizations are based on providing action-oriented responses to felt need, but their resulting success and evolution warrant further scrutiny. This is particularly true of the Veterans Benefits Clearinghouse and Black Veterans for Social Justice. The immense task of organizing and sustaining organizational growth and development within a black context and without previous models has not been fully or even partially documented. In reality, race and veterans issues are not everyday political and social priorities for most of society. Therefore, organizing specifically around black veterans' issues is slower and substantially more difficult than other types of organizing efforts, a fact that makes the success of these three black veteran organizers all the more remarkable.

According to the study, there are basic similarities and differences in the organizational structuring, staff composition, and operation of the three groups. The Western New York Veterans Housing Coalition is governed by its board of directors and has no staff with the exception of a project manager. The members of the board of directors are volunteers and are composed of ethnically diverse, social service agency representatives as well as established businessmen. In the majority of instances, they are Vietnam veterans or at least emotionally connected to the issue of Vietnam.

Veterans Benefits Clearinghouse and Black Veterans for Social Justice are managed by strong, talented, and

gifted directors, but weaker boards of directors which in these cases have had a much less formidable role in the organization's overall growth and development. Contrary to the Western New York Veterans Housing Coalition, board members are viewed with skepticism.

The Western New York Veterans Housing Coalition is generally more oriented to the overall veterans population rather than being almost exclusively geared to servicing black and minority veterans as are the other two organizations. Since their founding, the Veterans Benefits Clearinghouse and Black Veterans for Social Justice have steadfastly maintained racially and culturally specific programs whereby black and minority veterans are treated holistically and humanely.

Developing a Housing Strategy

Organizational shifting from direct delivery of services to affordable housing development is another theme that emerged in the interviews offering a source of both conflict and opportunity for these veterans. Western New York Veterans Housing Coalition started with the sole mission of providing affordable housing and so role conflict was not experienced in this case. However, in the cases of the other two organizations studied, both primarily service providers, the shift to affordable housing development has been much more complicated. Especially in the case of Job Mashariki, this shift from social services provider and tenant advocate to housing developer or landlord created role conflict with regard to the organizational leadership and mission of Black Veterans for Social Justice.

The Impact of Racism and Discrimination

Findings concerning racism and discrimination are compelling. The combination of race and veterans status constitutes a dual dilemma, by and large. Advocacy along the lines of race is met with extreme resistance within the white veterans population, leading white veterans to label blacks as divisionist or nonveterans. On the other hand, advocacy around veterans issues within the black community is met with a lukewarm reception. Subsequently, black veterans tend to fall between the cracks.

The study illustrates other aspects of race as a major factor: first, it acknowledges the interpersonal nature of racism within an interracial organizational context; second, that institutional racism still exists in governmental agencies responsible for providing services to veterans; and, third, that structural racism is indicated by governmental philosophies, policies, and programs espousing "color blindness." Moreover, governmental agencies' legacy of discriminatory hiring practices and patterns have eliminated blacks from decision-making positions. While it can be argued that race was not a decisive factor in all cases, when examined from the point of view of longer housing development start-up time, lower expectations for black veterans, and no whites in visible leadership positions, community development

project implementation and funding takes on an added dimension that epitomizes racial bias.

The Importance of Strategic Planning

The studies evaluated all three organizations in terms of their plans for comprehensive ongoing organizational development strategies. None of the three organizations had a strategic plan for significantly increasing their organizational capacity. They also lacked an economic development strategy that would allow them to wean themselves off governmental and private foundation assistance and move towards financial independence.

While the study pointed out the need for a process-oriented planning model for organizing and economic development, the following is a partial list of comments and suggestions by the three veterans that further provides justification of the need for ongoing planning efforts: replicating activism and organizing models; teaching and political education; exploring capital development and profitmaking enterprises; documenting black institution building within America; and clarifying organizational ideas and concepts for both internal and external purposes.

A Road Map for the Future

The study provided ample data for the development, structuring, and mapping of the process of organizing and strategizing for community development in terms of organizing, organizational development, program management, resource development, and leadership, among other factors. It also provided a profile of leadership attributes for future examination and use. The potential value of these typologies lay in their ability to serve as a kind of road map for the future, a simulation exercise or computerized data base for referencing and building on in the future. Additionally, the case study's information and insights into existing community dynamics, organizational development issues, and management problems would suggest that information sharing could greatly enhance organizing outcomes in other locations across the country. If packaged, presented, and marketed correctly as a training module, computerized exercise, or series of hands-on workshops, and coupled with readily available consultation services, a niche in the marketplace might be found.

More critically, the study offers a viable veterans community development model for replication and the possibility of a ripple effect with respect to organizing around issues such as social service delivery and/or affordable housing development across the country. Further, the study clearly indicates the need for a planning and research component to provide ongoing supportive services to these black veterans and other community-based organizations in terms of mid- and long-range planning in the areas of economic development, technical assistance and computer technology.

Professor Mel King of MIT commented in the study's defense that "the most significant fact of the study was

that successful housing development projects were done at all,” indicating the importance of this milestone for the Veterans Benefits Clearinghouse, Black Veterans for Social Justice, and the Western New York Veterans Housing Coalition. Equally important, the spinning off of development corporations as separate entities, as in the case of the Veterans Benefits Clearinghouse Development Corporation (VBCDC) and Sterling Street Housing Corporation (SSHC), and the garnering of housing resources (i.e., assets, finance, credit, and land or property ownership) for community development denote an important shift from the service stage to the development stage. In particular, this shift to housing development has enormous implications for future community economic development and the potential to move towards a new stage of profitmaking enterprises.

Towards New Policy Initiatives

The partial listing of recommendations presented here is drawn from the study itself and includes ideas for strengthening organizing, organizational, housing, and black community development efforts. The most urgent and feasible recommendations are outlined below:

Strategic Planning

In terms of strategic planning it is important to initiate a planning and research component that will provide ongoing support services to these black veteran-run community-based organizations in the areas of economic development, technical assistance, and computer technology. One example of this would be to explore creative and collective economic strategies for utilizing non-working capital available to black veterans (i.e., entitlement and benefits, including G.I. housing and educational loans) as part of an overall strategy for community development.

Community Development Training Institute (CDTI)

The concept of a community development training institute as a vehicle to learn, teach, and share expertise within a workshop format would serve to enhance the development of the practical skills deemed essential to successful strategizing, organizing, and community development. The goal of such a program might be to offer a series of one- and two-day programs, workshops, or seminars with speakers addressing the special concerns of veterans working in and concerned about community development.

Housing Development Coalition

The third recommendation is the development of an interorganizational housing coalition and housing development plan, called “Housing Initiative 2000,” that would be undertaken as a joint venture among black veteran housing advocates to bring a local, regional, national, as well as community-based perspective to the issue of affordable housing development for minority veterans. The goal of such a plan would be to increase

advocacy, resources, and housing rehabilitation options by concentrating, coordinating, and determining housing needs.

Computer Technology

The application of new technology (i.e., computers, telecommunications, and video imaging) is recommended in order to identify the potential for humanistic, organizational, and imaginative use of information technology. Black veterans’ abilities to solve organizing and organizational strategy problems for community development are integrally related to how well they use information and communication resources. The use of information technology will play an important role in redefining organizational alliances, managing scarce resources, and information sharing and exchange.

Areas for Future Investigation

Black Vietnam Veterans: An Untapped Resource

One of the most tragic conclusions reached in the study is that black Vietnam-era veterans, by and large, have not been actively involved in the process of self-help or community development. Arguably, alienation from society has all but rendered these veterans invisible. Further, the social liability of Vietnam participation and declining veterans status has significantly reduced their positive group identification as veterans. The three black veterans studied reported that they organized because of felt need, and not because of any positive identification with veterans as a group.

The study, on the other hand, acknowledges the cautiousness or hesitancy of black veterans in Buffalo, Boston, and Brooklyn to become involved and active. These three veterans commented that the masses of black veterans always need tangible proof in order to become interested and involved. Black veterans are seen as being politically aware, yet they are also perceived as having multiple personal problems along with a limited knowledge of the system. Many are viewed as being simply caught up in the day-to-day struggle for survival.

However, these black veteran community organizers also acknowledge that black veterans possess a wealth of knowledge, skills, and experiences. The study concludes that these three organizers are guardedly optimistic about the prospects of mobilizing the black Vietnam-era veterans population. This optimism is found in their organizational philosophies of self-help and self-determination, and programs emphasizing spirituality, meaning, basic skills, support networks, job maintenance, and housing with dignity as holistic and humanistic approaches to meet basic needs.

Organizational Development

The study concludes that nonprofits run by black veterans are generally less sophisticated, less diversified, and less well-integrated into the black community than other black community-based organizations. Two of the three community-based organizations run by black

veterans have neither strong boards of directors, nor broad-based community support. Nevertheless, all three have survived and thrived in an atmosphere of economic uncertainty, political retrenchment, and in spite of an apparent national political leadership vacuum. Their success may hold the key to developing new veterans' initiatives within the black community.

Strategies and Tactics

In terms of the strategies and tactics involved in affordable housing development, black veterans compared favorably with the average community development corporations. Although tactics and strategies for leveraging housing rehabilitation projects compared favorably it should be highlighted that *veterans benefits and entitlements were not part of the development package*. There is no data contained within the study that would suggest that veterans benefits, entitlements, programs, and agencies, whether federal or state, played a role either directly or indirectly in securing financing for these housing development projects. There is also no indication that Veterans Administration home loan guarantees served as leverage or a magnet to attract significant housing financial resources. Finally, there is very little information on economic integration or "trickle-down" effects of veterans benefits and entitlements within the black community.

A Word on Leadership

The study concludes that there are essentially five attributes by which veterans' leadership is measured. These attributes include: successfully completing a program of higher education and campus organizing at college; excelling in social activism; maintaining consistent community leadership roles that facilitated the growth and development of self-help organizational entities, or community-based institutions; the ability to personally and socially integrate military experience, veterans status, positive black identity and ideology, street knowledge, and academic achievement, as well as the ability to sustain long-term commitment to black community development; and, finally, the ability to utilize one's military and community experience to function in three capacities: as a magnet to draw in other veterans; to instill hope and mobilize others through example; and to chart new ground or directions for the future.

Although not anointed as leaders by the black community, these three veterans have and continue to act for the betterment of the larger black community. These veterans reflect positive black male images and role models who are also activist, racially conscious, community-oriented, and committed to the cause of self-determination. All three have illustrated consistent leadership qualities as the organizers, founders, and directors of their respective organizations for the past ten years. The study concludes that veterans leadership is a composite or collective reservoir of experiences (i.e., military, street, college, and community) which forms the

basis for their "human capital."

A chief factor in leadership for these veterans was their interest in community service, older generational values, and the traditional philosophies of Pan-Africanism, Black Nationalism, and Black Coalitionism. These factors resulted in a feeling of moral responsibility towards other black veterans who have not, for one reason or another, been able to adjust to civilian life. They described their leadership roles as visionary, catalyst, stabilizer, or vanguard, and saw themselves as significant and strong supporters of the black community. Most importantly, their definition of leadership was a commitment to human and community service. As black veterans and community advocates, these three Vietnam-era veterans have created new visions and models for the future. Arthur Wright, founder of the Grunt House in Seattle, Washington, painted what was perhaps the brightest picture of all when he said, "Black veterans have to eliminate obstacles by turning them into opportunities."²

Notes

¹Congressional Black Caucus, Veterans Braintrust, Washington, D.C., September 1988.

²Ibid.

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