RESPONSIVE SYSTEMS AND COMMUNITIES

Prepared for the Central California Children's Institute Leadership Team

Nancy M. Richardson
Consultant, First 5 Fresno County
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Responsive systems and communities are those that are mindfully composed of people, at all levels, who solve problems. Problem-solvers are people who work with others to increase their skills at (a) recognizing problems, (b) acknowledging them aloud in an appropriate forum, (c) considering the upside potential and downside risks of a wide array of solutions, (d) building support for a course of action, (e) assuring implementation, and (f) reviewing and revising as needed.

In order to cope with our complex world, we divide jobs into manageable segments. In so doing, we often create isolation and helplessness. Or, to look at it another way, we play into people's natural tendency to draw their world to their own specifications—narrowly and with the least responsibility. Cultivating a community or system as a problem-solving juggernaut requires the opposite: it requires all of us to think and act beyond our immediate range of responsibility, and to intentionally and consistently broaden our understanding of how well what we do fits together with what others are doing to solve problems and improve our world.

How well do we do this around the world and in our own area? Let's look first at a global perspective, then at our own area.

A look at nations which are considered "failed states," is instructive. A "what not to do list" helps inform a "to do" list.

A report on the 2009 Failed States Index, the fifth annual collaborative effort of *Foreign Policy* and The Fund for Peace, begins, "It is a sobering time for the world's most fragile countries—virulent economic crisis, countless natural disasters, and government collapse."[1] The report ranked 177 states from most to least failure, listing 60 as most vulnerable. You will be happy to know that the United States is not among the 60.[2]

The indicators of risk used for the Failed States Index include:

- Demographic pressures, such as population density relative to food supply
- Refugees/internally displaced persons
- Legacy of vengeance-seeking group grievances
- Human flight, i.e. flight of professionals, intellectuals, entrepreneurs, etc.
- Uneven development, such as group-based inequality

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[1] http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/06/22/the_failed_states_index
[2] The top ten for 2009 are Somalia, Zimbabwe, Sudan, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Afghanistan, Central African Republic, Guinea, and Pakistan.

- Economic decline
- Resistance of ruling elite to transparency, accountability & political representation
- Disappearance of basic governmental functions, such as sanitation, transportation, etc.
- Widespread violation of human rights
- Emergence of state-supported private militias that terrorize political opponents
- Factionalized elites
- External intervention

Take a look at Somalia, the poster state for failed systems and communities—in this case a failed state and region. Somalia has been without a widely accepted central government for nearly twenty years. It was formed in 1960 by the merger of a former British protectorate and an Italian colony. Islamists in 2006 gained control of much of the south, including the capital, after their militias kicked out warlords who had ruled for 15 years. With the help of Ethiopian troops in 2006, forces loyal to the interim administration seized control from the Islamists. By late 2008, Islamists had regained control of much of the south. The fighting continues to this day. Fighting has resulted in the countless deaths and the displacement of over one million people.

The Travel Warning[3] issued by the U.S. Department of State warns against any travel to Somalia, citing the following:

Kidnapping, murder, illegal roadblocks, banditry, and other violent incidents and threats … can occur in many regions. Inter-clan and inter-factional fighting flares up with little or no warning. Unpredictable armed conflicts among rival militias are prevalent in southern Somalia, particularly in and around Mogadishu…. Merchant vessels, fishing boats, and recreational craft all risk seizure by pirates and having their crews held for ransom…. It is recommended that vessels travel in convoys and maintain good communications contact at all times.

As this Central California Children's Institute Leadership Team examines the topic of "Responsive Systems and Communities," taking a global view helps us recognize that our region's problems, by comparison, are quite manageable. A close examination of the risk factors faced by failed nations allows us to cross some of them off our local list of things to worry about. Central California has not been invaded by a foreign power (actually, our nation *was* the foreign power who took California from Mexico.) On our way home tonight, we will not be chased by marauding militias, or forced at gunpoint out of our homes because we criticized our government. We do not live in refugee camps, or risk being kidnapped when we go out to buy food.

On the other hand, it would be a mistake to overlook risk factors which, in varying degrees, *do* apply to our nation, to California, and to our region.

Some of the risk factors which may have a ring of familiarity include:

- Progressive deterioration of public services
- Fragmentation along group lines
- Economic decline
- Group-based inequality
- Demographic pressures

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[3] http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/tw/tw_933.html?css=print

- Brain drain
- Environmental decay

Failed nation-states like Somalia lack responsive systems and communities—writ large. How about systems and communities in Central California? Can we look in the mirror and identify ways in which we can prevent a slide, no matter how incremental, toward Failed State status? How can we, a region marked by the greatest concentration of poverty in the United States, respond to the question asked in the Failed State Index report: "Whom do you help when so many need it?" This really is the core of the series of presentations, of which this is one, which is designed to help the Institute devise a children's agenda for the region, employing the findings outlined in "Children of the Valley."

To address the topic "Responsive Systems and Communities" in a local context, I will rely on my own experiences and my writings over the past several decades. A recitation of everything that has gone well would be incredibly boring and would not furnish the cautionary tales from which we learn. So, permit me to review some instances of poorly responsive systems and communities, along with the recommendations which arose from these analyses. Direct quotes for these reports are italicized. The same themes arise again and again.

How Did Something So Big Go So Bad? (1991)

This paper was written to describe the events of the period 1989-1991 in the Fresno Unified School District. My vantage point was as a former Board member, having served from 1975-1979, and as a current Board member in a subsequent term of office which went from 1990-1993.

The District has known some memorable and rewarding times, but perhaps the most inauspicious years of the District have been the period from 1989-1991. During that period the District was beset by problems previously unimaginable:

- *The Deputy Superintendent was charged with four counts of grand theft and 26 counts of filing false claims, all felonies.*
- *A new Superintendent was fired on a 3-2 vote after less than nine months on the job.*
- *A recall election resulted in the removal of three Board of Education members. Each was recalled by a vote of approximately 70% "yes" votes to 30% "no" votes.*
- *The Controller of the State of California audited District travel practices and issued a report with seventeen recommendations for tightening controls.*
- *The State Department of Education and the State Controller investigated the District's Adult School and identified numerous instances of improper financial procedures.*
- *The District's longtime business manager resigned when it became evident that financial practices were so loose that nobody had an accurate picture of the District's dismal fiscal situation. Multi-million dollar deficits were undetected until well into the fiscal year.*

In this report, I concluded that the key factors for "judgments that went disastrously awry," included:

- Lack of responsible, consistent administrative leadership
- Blurring of role distinctions
- Group-think
- Norming down
- Denial
- "Leave it to the experts" syndrome
- Unfortunate mix of personalities
- Hubris

Tackling Truancy: School Attendance Review Boards in the Fresno Unified School District (1994)

The body of the report describes an attendance system which was antiquated and fractionated, with predictably poor results.

Problems cited in this report include:

- Frequent changes in administrative leadership
- Inattention by the Board of Education
- Little or no direction to the people doing the direct attendance work
- Responsive-after-the-fact systems, not proactive systems
- Poor data availability, tracking, or analysis
- No clear lines of responsibility or accountability—centrally or at school sites
- Lack of involvement by the Juvenile Court
- Lack of a rationale for Probation Department practices relating to truancy

The report notes:

The current system is not a system; instead, it is merely the placement of one foot in front of the other. It contains no mechanisms for feedback or improvements.

As players change in all of the agencies, rationale for "policies" takes on the character of folklore. Practices tend to become institutionalized without periodic re-examination, and they are too often accepted as immutable truths which cannot be changed.

The report contains 25 recommendations, which use verbs which reoccur in the other reports cited in this paper: **conceive, devise, formulate, assign, assure, organize, audit, incorporate, provide, differentiate, clarify, abandon, replace, utilize, and involve**. Responsive systems and communities require active people making these verbs manifest in every endeavor.

Doing Something About Juvenile Crime in Fresno County   (1995)

This report was written in response to public fury over an unrelenting and escalating wave of juvenile crime in Fresno County. Arrests of juveniles for homicide had gone from 1 in 1984 to 24 in 1993. During the same period, auto theft arrests of juveniles increased 668%. Commitments to the California Youth Authority went from 63 in 1985 to 195 in 1993.

It is worth quoting directly from the report:

In Fresno County, juvenile justice system interventions are often too little, too late to be effective. The juvenile justice system is so overwhelmed with the volume and seriousness of juvenile crime, that during much of the last decade only the most serious cases have received any attention at all…. [M]any juvenile offenders [are] virtually unaccountable for their actions until very late in their criminal career. This tacitly gives permission to kids to commit crimes. And they do. Again and again.

Here are some indicators of just how seriously awry the system has been:

> *According to Probation Department Annual Reports, the proportion of cases which resulted in informal probation or court action declined from 66% in 1991 to 47% in 1993.*
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> *As recently as 1992, there was a caseload of 1,400 cases which were grouped in a "bank." That is, these 1,400 juveniles received no probation supervision, except to the extent that new problems arose.*
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> *As of late March, 1995, nearly 1,000 juvenile cases, mostly involving felony-level offenses, were stacked up awaiting typing, before they could proceed to Juvenile Court.*
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> *Currently, juvenile offenders who are sentenced by the Court to serve time at Juvenile Hall or Wakefield, Fresno County's jails for juveniles, had an average of more than three arrests and two or more Court dispositions. Offenders committed to the California Youth Authority from Fresno County had an average of eight arrests and three prior dispositions.*

What most people do not know is that for more than a decade, there has been a relentless stripping away of programs which were once in place to salvage, or at least to keep from slipping further, errant kids. Budget cuts, compounded by the barriers inherent in a system even Rube Goldberg would find strange, led to a fragmented, tattered remnant of a system, one in which very few delinquent kids experienced any adverse consequence whatever to their misdeeds….

In Fresno County, the central barrier to attacking juvenile crime is that nobody is in charge…. It is essential to understand that there is *no juvenile justice system* per se*. Rather, there are various services, which, taken together constitute the parts of the "system." But to label something as a "system" is to connote that there is some identifiable source of control…. Having nobody exercising overall oversight has meant that there is not enough planning or coordination of services… Data collection, information analysis, research into effective strategies, and evaluation of program outcomes are casualties of the budget crunch.*

This report contains the predictable recommendations—the kind that use these verbs: think, establish, appoint, trouble-shoot, stabilize, enhance, insist, require, expect, and encourage. Perhaps the most important recommendation, however, is this one:

> *The precursor to all other actions is to assume an attitude that as a community we want and can devise a system which better suits ours and our youths' needs than what we now have. People who think there is nothing we can do should step aside and stay out of the way of people who want to roll up their sleeves and get busy.*

Wild in the Streets: Fresno County's Worst Juvenile Delinquents (1995)

In 1994, juveniles in Fresno County killed 12 people, shot 19 more, shot at 8 more people and 5 vehicles and 1 home, subjected 5 to armed carjackings, robbed 5 bank tellers at gunpoint, robbed 11 others at gunpoint, and severely beat one law enforcement officer with a metal object. Twenty-nine juveniles, all ages 16 and 17 at the time of their arrests, were tried as adults. Major factors for these 29 youth, as a group, were guns, drugs, and pervasive parental default. Recommendations spoke to parental responsibility, the access of youths to firearms, and substance abuse by minors. They also called for:

- Schools to work hand-in-hand with other agencies
- Agencies to move beyond a few pilot projects to more widespread and consistent coordination of services
- Agencies to get into the habit of jointly analyzing information about problems which impact on more than one of them

As in the previous report, the issue of mindset is addressed:

Without a doubt, the problem which pervades every aspect of the findings of this report is the belief that the conditions which breed serious juvenile criminality are irremediable. We seem to take as givens that substance abuse, multigenerational patterns of dependency and crime, parental neglect and abuse, school failure, and minors' access to firearms are conditions which cannot be changed. Allowing ourselves to believe this, we create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Of the 29 youths in this study, most of whom are murderers, attempted murderers, or armed assaulters, more than a few preceded their violent crimes with a period of extensive car thievery. By teaching them, and the younger kids who are out stealing cars now, that vehicle theft carries no real punishment, we allow them more time to develop into more extensive drug abuse, sexual irresponsibility, school non-attendance, and, of course ,an escalating pattern of delinquency.

Early Childhood Help & Outreach Project Report on Multi-Disciplinary Teams (2000)

In May of 2000, Juanita Fiorello, principal staff analyst with the County's Human Services System, and I prepared this report under the auspices of Early Childhood Help & Outreach (ECHO) instigated by the Presiding Judge of the Fresno County Delinquency Court Judge R. L. "Chip" Putnam.

It was prepared due to the suppositions that *(a) many multi-disciplinary teams had sprung up in the last few years, (b) no one person knows what all the teams are or do, (c) people on the teams don't know much about the other teams, (d) a child or his siblings or family could be seen by more than one team without the teams knowing this, and (e) a child who needs the services of a team might not be referred to any team at all, or might not be referred to the team most appropriate to the child's needs.*

Multidisciplinary teams at that time included:

Infant/Toddler Treatment Team

Interagency Sexual Abuse Team

Keep Kids in School

Multidisciplinary Round Table

Repeat Offenders Prevention

School Attendance Review Teams

Suspected Child Abuse Network

Interagency Resources & Placement Team

Intensive Services Team

Minors with Dangerous Traits

Multi-Disciplinary Team

MDT—Youth Challenge Program

Sexual Abuse Response Team

The report listed the following areas for concern: context, clarity of purpose, clearinghouse function, orientation and training, oversight, system improvements, youth not identified, and nobody in charge. As to context, it said, *"There is no press conference on the steps of City Hall when a new multi-disciplinary team is create. Most teams, in fact, serve a very narrow target population, so there is no reason to tell the world. Other teams, however, DO need to know. Existing teams are often unaware of what other teams, old and new, are "out there," and they are therefore unable to adjust their work to the wider context. They cannot know of potential overlap of target population, for example, or of a resource that might enhance their own work.*

Another familiar idea surfaced: *…It has become abundantly clear that the biggest problem of all is that nobody owns this problem. That is, there is no logical entity which holds or should hold responsibility for overseeing child-serving multi-disciplinary teams….. Who is in charge here? Everybody and nobody. It is nobody's job to receive these recommendations and prepare an Action Plan for their implementation. It is nobody's job to have ongoing responsibility for reviewing and revising ongoing improvement plans.*

As you might guess, the recommendations called for people to ensure, foster, affix, gather, disseminate, designate, name, form, identify, enhance, develop, and require. For awhile, maybe a year or two, there were quarterly meetings of multi-disciplinary teams.

Out of Sight Out of Mind: Central San Joaquin Valley Delinquents and the California Youth Authority (2001)

This 75-page report was released after one year of work which involved examining closely the delinquency data of San Joaquin Valley counties, interviewing people in each of the counties, researching records of a cohort of delinquents from Fresno County and interviewing many of them at CYA institutions around the state, conducting numerous other interviews, and reading many documents. The report was far too huge to summarize herein. However, there are a couple of paragraphs which by now will describe a theme you've heard before:

The history of juvenile corrections in California is one of wide swings—gigantic waves of scandal and reform, of hopelessness and engagement, of narrow-mindedness and enlightenment, of neglect and determination. Wide swings, too, characterize the uneasy dance between the State, which operates the California Youth Authority as part of its larger Youth and Adult Correctional Agency, and the counties, which are expected to fund and operate local juvenile justice systems. The swings are affected by a plethora of factors, making the movements jerky and unpredictable.

History shows, too, that a small number of intelligent and courageous people can have a huge positive impact, just as a small number of short-sighted and closed-minded people can have a disastrous, far-reaching impact. Wise people see the political dimensions of serious juvenile delinquency in neither liberal nor conservative terms, but rather in human terms. Neither mawkish sentimentality for children nor an unapologetic focus on punishment gets to the core of the issue. These delinquents all come back to live among us. For some it will be a short stay, a brief reprieve before they commit a crime which earns them a bed in State prison. Others, despite great odds, will straighten up and live a law-abiding life. Many will fall in the vast grayness in between. None of us will be unaffected.

Perhaps you are wondering what I expect from this and other reports I have written. I quote here from this report:

Not surprisingly, people ask me what I expect to happen as a result of this report. Thoughtful reflection would be a good start. Spirited challenges would be fine. Anything which gets people talking about these complex subjects is to the good. My hope is that this report joins the stream of other forces which cause the pendulum of change to swing harder and faster toward the many reforms which are needed.

I will never know what impact my written reports have had. However, let me relate one thing that happened in the year following issuance of this report. The Director of the Youth Authority, whose position is appointive and changes frequently, asked me to accompany one of his staff in visiting CYA parolees around the State to see how they were doing. I did. There was one issue which disturbed me more-so than all the others and which seemed to me to be urgent, even though it had persisted for a long time. It was that CYA parolees who were on psychotropic medications were released with two days' worth of medication and no way to get more. It would take weeks or months to get a MediCal card and to get an appointment with a psychiatrist to get a new prescription. Consequently, parolees were likely to self-medicate, to decompensate quickly, to commit new offenses, and to land in state prison—often within a week or two from release. This was reported to me by Parole Agents in many parole offices around the state. They said they had complained about this to their superiors, but nothing got done. So, I emailed the Director and told him he would get my full written report later, but that this seemed too urgent to wait. He was dumbstruck that this had never been brought to his attention, and he issued an edict to remedy this problem immediately. It was followed.

The painful question that arises is just how something with costs so great in human misery and in financial outlay by the taxpayers, and one which could be solved so simply, was left to fester for years.

After writing these and other analytical reports, I realized I was writing the same report over and over again. The subject changed, but the findings and recommendations were strikingly, perhaps depressingly, similar. Here are a few observations about this:

- We have immense latitude about how wide of a world we expose ourselves to. We can work to save Somalia, or we can sit on the couch day after day and watch "Jerry Springer." The in-between is immense, and we are not necessarily mindful of the spot we have chosen on that vast continuum.

- It is easy to define our world and our responsibilities narrowly and to consider most problems beyond our control or influence.

- We tend not to be very curious or to seek information if it is not readily available.

- Most people are willing to work hard, but they do not want to do the hard work. Consequently, complex problems become increasingly intractable.

- We avoid thinking deeply about our values, beliefs, and practices.

- We are risk-averse in work settings and in relationships.

Responsive systems and communities can occur only when there are responsive people who are willing to think deeply, to acquire and analyze information from many sources, to take risks in conveying important information and advocating for needed changes, and who are willing to expend the energy to convince others to come along with them. If you look around your workplace, or your family, or any other grouping, you will see that one person can have enormous influence on the others in the group—for good or for ill.

Can we help Somalia? As a nation, yes. We know that piracy is best addressed on land by recognizing and addressing the conditions which make piracy a viable career choice. As individuals, we can vote for elected officials who avoid hysterical, xenophobic, stereotypical positions and who instead speak and act with knowledge, courage, and far-sightedness. Wise leaders will know that Somalia's problems are our problems—as are the problems of all of the "failed States."

We can also help the Somalias of the world by providing a good example of how human beings from many cultures and religions can govern themselves, live together in peace, and solve difficult problems.

To build , maintain, and improve the responsiveness of our systems and communities, our primary role is to look in the mirror—now and often. It is we, and it only takes a determined few of us, who can make sure that our systems and communities respond to the *right problems*, digging deeply to know the differences between surface indicators and deeply-rooted causes, with the *best actions* we can devise at the time. We must be willing to fail trying, rather than fail to try. And we have to be willing to explain what we are thinking and doing, especially to the many who want and need simplistic, ill-conceived actions. We can be responsive to all the wrong demands for all the wrong reasons. Or we can patiently educate, advocate, and act—again and again.

- The more that we try to walk in one other's shoes, the better we all are. "Walking in another's shoes" is limited by the fact that we don't know very much about the lives of others—in our home, or workplace, our community, our region, our nation, and certainly in Somalia or any other nations. Nor do we know much about other times. We can expand our knowledge of people, times, and places by reading, reading, reading and by deliberately exposing ourselves to people and ideas with diverse backgrounds.

- People don't care what *we* think; they care whether we care what *they* think. All of us can continually improve on our skills for observing and deep listening.

- To foster responsive systems and communities, we must work beyond the usual definition of our responsibilities. For instance, we elect a governor to govern our state. But a good governor must also lead by working hard to affect national policies that will have an impact on our state. Similarly, each of us is most effective when we work both inside and outside the lines of our job description, our community, or our interest group.

- We need to reward responsive behavior by praising acts of competent leadership. This does not mean plaques and photo-ops. A few words or an email that is specific as to what the person did that was particularly praiseworthy can mean the world to a leader who is undertaking the hard work. This is important in a family, a work group, a community, a region, a state, and a nation.

How do we achieve responsive systems and communities? We do so by working for them—mindfully, courageously, and relentlessly.