

Building Customer Service in Local Government: Appreciative Inquiry in the City of Dubuque

By Laverne Webb and Sherry Rockey

In the summer of 1998 the Dubuque, Iowa Housing and Community Development Department found itself the focus of an increasingly public and contentious battle between landlords and the city about its affordable housing policies and the city's inspections of over 1,000 federally-subsidized rental properties.

This article illustrates how Appreciative Inquiry was successfully used by the City of Dubuque to clarify the role of the Housing Department, bring a customer service focus to its regulatory tasks and provide a vehicle for government and its constituents to create public policy together.



Background. The mission of the Dubuque Housing and Community Development Department is to provide services, programs and leadership to build partnerships, improved neighborhoods and better living standards for all citizens. Its services include community development, assisted housing rental programs, rehabilitation loans, code enforcement and leveraging private investments.

It was the City's enforcement of HUD's housing quality standards that had the local landlords up in arms. They complained that the city's inspectors were being overly strict in their enforcement of building codes and of an uncooperative attitude on the part of the department staff.

A few landlords had even demanded that David Harris, Manager of the Housing Services Department, be fired. According to Harris, "Relationships between the Housing Department and the housing providers had gone beyond the point of dysfunctional and had become openly acrimonious.



Our differences were being played out on the front pages of the newspaper and at mass attendance at City Council meetings. Clearly we needed to do something significantly different to overcome the impasse in communication."

It was Harris' determination to 'do something significantly different' that encouraged the city to turn to Appreciative Inquiry.

Harris felt that by continuing to focus on past grievances they would not be able to move the polarized parties away from the spirit of confrontation.

Instead, he sought a shared vision for positive outcomes. With that in mind he hired EnCompass LLC, a small, women-owned consulting firm located in the Washington DC area. He asked EnCompass to help guide an AI process that would build on the past successes and current strengths of the Housing Department with the focus on promoting new collaboration and partnerships among the Department, landlords, and the larger community.

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Description of the Process.

EnCompass assisted the Housing Department in implementing an Appreciative Inquiry using what is known as the "4-I" process – Inquire, Imagine, Innovate and Implement. Over the course of 18 months, the Housing Department conducted some 220 Appreciative Interviews, conducted a summit conference to discover shared values and common ground, created task forces and additional opportunities for citizen engagement on housing policy issues and implemented a new customer service approach to regulatory tasks.

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The Inquiry Phase: Planning and Appreciative Interviews. The Inquiry Phase focuses on the discovery and appreciation of the best of “what is” by seeking stories about high points or exceptional experiences from past history. Interviews reveal powerful stories and illuminate the key factors of success that made these exceptional experiences possible

In the fall of 1998 the city formed a Planning Committee to lead the AI process in collaboration with the Inter-Congregational Housing project, a group of six local women’s Catholic orders. This committee was charged with:

- Setting the focus of the appreciative interviews
- Identifying key stakeholders
- Selecting a larger diverse group of interviewers
- Planning a Summit Conference

The participation of the faith-based community served to bring a powerful moral voice to the equation that has continued over time to positively influence and significantly contribute to Dubuque’s housing services and programs.

To launch the inquiry, EnCompass trained 60 volunteers in Appreciative Inquiry interviewing techniques. The Planning Committee identified a list of 300 diverse stakeholders and conducted 220 interviews. Interview questions focused on:

1. What people most valued about living in Dubuque
2. What people were most proud of about the housing and services the community provided
3. Their most exceptional customer services from the Housing Department
4. Their values and wishes for the future

The Imagine Phase: The Housing Summit. The Imagine Phase asks the question, “What might be?” as interviewers and interviewees come together in a Summit conference to explore the positive past and create new images of the most desired and preferred future.

In February of 1999 a two-day Housing Summit

conference changed the landscape of the relationship between the City of Dubuque and the landlord community. As the 80 participants shared stories that expressed a sense of pride in the city’s housing services and experiences with exceptional customer service, they began to sense a common ground that held them together as a community.

When the group then created images of the future

and “provocative propositions” – bold statements about the desired future stated in the present tense—for their realization, old angers began to subside and new understandings and alliances were formed. In the closing dialogue, one landlord put it this way:

“I felt maybe it was all for naught, but we were heard.... There is and can be camaraderie between the different factions—landlords, tenants, housing providers.... Coming together we can all work toward the same goal.... And we’ll do what our conscience and our hearts tell us to do, what is best for the community.”

The Innovation Phase: Housing Action Conference. In this phase of AI, organizations build on the visions and positive images of the future to create what is called “provocative propositions.” These are framed within the social, technical and core processes of the organization, e.g., leadership, values, strategy, policies and procedures, staff, communication, management practices, etc.

It is at this stage where bold and innovative actions can be launched. The “provocative propositions” become actionable and measurable when linked and aligned within this “organizational architecture.”

Harris saw the Summit Conference as a beginning and not a conclusion to this work, as many issues remained unresolved. The Housing Department supported the work of task force groups that had agreed to continue working on the provocative propositions after the Summit. Then he launched a major customer service initiative to engage landlords, tenants, and the business community with internal reforms.

“A two-day Housing Summit conference changed the landscape of the relationship.”

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Following the Summit Conference, Harris captured additional funds to continue the AI process in developing a Comprehensive Five-Year Plan. The city expanded the planning committee to guide the next steps in planning for the “Invest Yourself in Dubuque: A Housing Action Conference” to be held a year later, in February 2000.

This conference would develop common ground for action, build on the provocative propositions from the Summit Conference, and lay the foundation and set priorities for the next five years.

The Action Conference brought together 80 citizens who represented the “whole system” related to housing, and community and economic development. Together at this conference, these citizens determined the strategic directions and specific actions that have guided the city’s Consolidated Plan for Housing, Community and Economic Development, and the expenditure of some \$20 million for 2002-2005.

Many participants made individual commitments and continued working in task forces toward the realization of their shared visions for 2005, and the specific plans of action they created together. One participant said,

“I have been struck by the Appreciative Inquiry. Instead of getting bogged down in the negative like other communities, we focused on what has worked and how that can catapult us into envisioning the future. We focused on the positives instead of focusing on what is dysfunctional which actually creates conflict.”

The Implementation Phase: Outcomes and Impact. This phase is about grounding the visions, making the provocative propositions actionable, implementing change, and keeping the Appreciative Inquiry philosophy alive by creating an appreciative learning culture.

In an interview for this article David Harris was asked to describe the most significant changes brought about by the AI process. He replied that the perception of the landlords was the main change – instead of an

“us against them” viewpoint, the department is seen as a partnership. “Most landlords now assume that we understand and appreciate their business concerns and that we aren’t promoting the ‘evil empire’ agenda at the Housing Department.”

In December 2001 the city convened a group of 30 community members who had been involved in the AI process to evaluate the results of the three-year AI effort to collaboratively improve the delivery of city housing services.

There was unanimous agreement that almost none of the accomplishments or activities they identified through the assessment process would have happened without the AI/customer service process. They greatly valued that groups who barely spoke to each other three years before had begun to understand and appreciate each others’ perspectives and had learned to work together.

Organizational and Stakeholder Results. The AI process was transformational for the government’s customer service approach and its relationships with constituents.

- Frequent communication and customer feedback systems have been institutionalized.
- Housing Department staff, landlords and tenants worked in collaboration to create and implement practice and policy changes
- The Housing Department staff now use collaborative methods to test new policy results -- quickly abandoning ideas that don’t work and implementing practices and policies that proved effective
- There has been a “sea-change” in code interpretation and enforcement by empowering inspectors to make “common sense” code interpretations and by increasing support to ensure more consistent enforcement of codes
- Collaboration between work units within the Housing Department support coordination and new strategies for policymaking

Community Results. The community clearly benefits from this more open policy setting and enforcement process that includes all stakeholders.

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It also benefited in more concrete ways: A major outcome of the Action Conference was “Vision Downtown: A Future for the Heart of our City” -- a Task Force with a shared vision and goal to revitalize the downtown area of Dubuque, that has since achieved great success.

An additional outcome of the city’s work is the recognition it has received with national and state awards—a Best Practice Award from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in 1999, a State of Iowa HUD Best Practice Award in 2000, and a National Merit Award from the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials in 2000.


Sustaining the Change. This article clearly demonstrates that an AI process can provide a mechanism to help government connect on a meaningful level with the citizens it represents.

In the case of Dubuque, this approach to government has become a permanent feature of the Housing Department. David Harris explains, “We actively solicit partnerships with our constituents. We make a point of asking to appear on agendas of board of realtors and landlord meetings. We want to keep them informed of what we’re doing, and we want to make sure that we are making ourselves available to hear their concerns or questions. We recruit their representatives to serve on our boards and commissions. Again it’s customer-responsiveness. That’s the function of the business relationship we have established.”

He concludes, “It’s not the big things we are doing. It’s the every day little things that sustain relationships and build the basis for resolving bigger issues when those occur.”

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It’s the every day little things that sustain relationships...”*

The Dubuque story demonstrates how AI can be sustained over time in local government. Community involvement, active listening and a focus on finding

solutions have added to the strengths of the Housing Department to make positive changes in the way they deal with landlords and tenants and affordable housing needs. Appreciative Inquiry has proven to be a viable approach to large-scale organization change in government. 

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