

A COMMUNITY CENTER

WHAT IT IS AND HOW TO ORGANIZE IT

BY

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Washington, D. C.

*Every Schoolhouse a Community Capitol
and every Community a little Democracy*

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THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

March 13, 1918.

Dear Mr. Chairman:

Your state, in extending its national defense organization by the creation of community councils, is in my opinion making an advance of vital significance. It will, I believe, result when thoroughly carried out in welding the nation together as no nation of great size has ever been welded before. It will build up from the bottom an understanding and sympathy and unity of purpose and effort which will no doubt have an immediate and decisive effect upon our great undertaking. You will find it, I think, not so much a new task as a unification of existing efforts, a fusion of energies now too much scattered and at times somewhat confused into one harmonious and effective power.

It is only by extending your organization to small communities that every citizen of the state can be reached and touched with the inspiration of the common cause. The school house has been suggested as an apt though not essential center for your local council. It symbolizes one of the first fruits of such an organization, namely, the spreading of the realization of the great truth that it is each one of us as an individual citizen upon whom rests the ultimate responsibility. Through this great new organization we will express with added emphasis our will to win and our confidence in the utter righteousness of our purpose.

Sincerely yours,

(Signed) WOODROW WILSON.

[Letter sent to the chairmen of
State Councils of Defense]

"A system of general instruction, which shall reach every description of our citizens, from the richest to the poorest, as it was the earliest, so it shall be the latest of all the public concerns in which I shall permit myself to take an interest."

THOMAS JEFFERSON.

FOREWORD

The challenge of the World War to all thoughtful people is to organize human life on saner and juster lines in the construction of a better sort of world. This bulletin aims to make a suggestion toward an answer to this challenge.

The sorrow and tragedy of the war cause men and women everywhere to ask themselves not only what sort of a world they ought to work for, but also how and where they can begin to work for it. To find a practical answer to these questions is the persistent prayer of all who believe in democracy. Honest prayer is the expression of a dominant desire for what we believe is best *and also the willingness to coöperate in bringing it to pass.* The following pages are addressed to those who are willing to coöperate in answering their own prayers, to those who know what sort of world they ought to work for but are at a loss to know what is the best instrument to be used

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for constructing it. This bulletin suggests such an instrument.

It is a curious fact that usually it is comparatively easy to interest ten men in an indefinite scheme about which they have nothing to do but talk, whereas it is difficult to induce one man to undertake a more modest but definite piece of constructive work. But the war has awakened the desire of all people of good will *to do something*. They want to make a motor-reaction to the war's challenge. They say: "We see what needs to be done. What is the best instrument with which to do it? That is the difficult thing to find." The suggestion here made is intended for such people, who have discovered the futility of attempting to purify the water in a well by painting the pump, and who therefore seek a constructive plan in the process of building a better world.

The instrument here suggested is The Community Center, which may be put into operation anywhere, in city, village, or countryside. If we desire to get anywhere, we have to start from somewhere. The place to start from is where we are. The best point of contact with the world problem, raised anew by the war, is

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to be found in the community where we live, for the world problem exists in every community in America. All political questions, if considered fundamentally, will be found to apply to human needs which are at once local, national, and international. The international problem is now, and has always been, how to organize and keep organized a method of mutual understanding by which nations may coöperate rather than compete with each other. The national problem is to do the same for the social and economic forces within the Nation itself. The problem in any local community is to do the same for the forces operating in that community. With reference to this present and permanent world problem the writer has attempted to answer two questions—what is a community center, and how ought it to be organized. He has endeavored to make the answer as brief as may be consistent with clearness.

Our three most urgent national needs are to mobilize intelligence, food, and money. But it is not possible to mobilize them until we first mobilize the people. The Nation's present need has made apparent the necessity of

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organizing local communities. The Council of National Defense discovered it through its experience in the war. The Bureau of Education had begun the task before we entered the war. These two organizations have now united their forces for the accomplishment of their common purpose to promote community organization throughout the Nation. The slogan of the one is, "Every school district a community council for national service." The slogan of the other is, "Every schoolhouse a community capitol and every community a little democracy."

President Wilson has clearly indicated the profound significance of this movement in the letter he wrote to commend it. He elsewhere says that our present need is "to arouse and inform the people so that each individual may be able to play his part intelligently in our great struggle for democracy and justice." This is a perfect statement of the aim of our movement. With the addition of one word it would be a complete description of it. That one word is "organize." The aim of the movement—to arouse and inform the people, to enable each individual to play his part in-

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telligently—can be achieved only when the people organize themselves.

The creation of a democratic and intelligent social order is essentially the same task, whether our approach to it be local, national, or international. This fact has been clearly understood by thinkers as far back as Socrates, who said: "Then, without determining as yet whether war does good or harm, this much we may affirm, that now we have discovered war to be derived from causes which are also the causes of almost all the evil in States, private as well as public." Any one, therefore, who attempts to remove these causes in a local community is working at a world problem, and he who attempts to remove them as between nations is obliged, in order to preserve his honesty and self-respect, to make the same effort within his own nation and in his own community. It magnifies the value and stimulates one's zest in working for it to remember that a community center is the center of concentric circles which compass not only the local community but also the larger communities of the Nation and the world. To establish free trade in friendship in all three

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communities is the goal of the community center movement.

HENRY E. JACKSON.

February 1, 1918.

NOTE

This book contains the reproduction of a bulletin, published simultaneously under the same title, by the United States Bureau of Education. The Bureau of Education is limited by law to 12,500 copies of its bulletins. But in its agreement with the Council of National Defense to promote jointly the organization of local communities, it promised to print and distribute, if possible, 300,000 copies, so that each school district in the United States might receive one copy. Since special funds for this purpose have not yet been secured, the bulletin is reproduced in this form to make it more available for use in the national campaign for the organization of community centers and community councils. The book contains also an additional section describing typical community centers in operation.

THE PUBLISHERS.

LETTER OF TRANSMITTAL

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR,
BUREAU OF EDUCATION,
WASHINGTON, February 19, 1918.

SIR: To make more valuable to the people those things from which the people are accustomed to derive value has very appropriately been said to be the prime business of legislators. That the schoolhouse, whose value to the people is already great, may become still more valuable to them, is the purpose of the community-organization movement which this bureau has undertaken to foster.

A great democracy like ours, extending over more than three and one-half million square miles of territory and including more than 100,000,000 people must be alive, intelligent, and virtuous in all its parts. Every unit of it must be democratic. The ultimate unit in every State, Territory, and possession of the United States is the school district. Every school district should therefore be a little democracy, and the schoolhouse should be the

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community capitol. Here the people should meet to discuss among themselves their common interests and to devise methods of helpful coöperation. It should also be the social center of the community, where all the people come together in a neighborly way on terms of democratic equality, learn to know each other, and extend and enrich the community sympathies.

For this purpose the schoolhouse is specially fitted; it is nonsectarian and nonpartisan; the property of no individual, group, or clique, but the common property of all; the one place in every community in which all have equal rights and all are equally at home. The schoolhouse is also made sacred to every family and to the community as a whole by the fact that it is the home of their children and the training place of future citizens. Here all members of the community may appropriately send themselves to school to each other and learn from each other of things pertaining to the life of the local community, the State, the Nation, and the world.

The appropriation of the schoolhouse for community uses has well been called "a master

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stroke of the new democracy." These facts are not new, but the emphasis on their importance is new and amounts to a new discovery. The Nation's immediate need to mobilize the sentiments of the people and to make available the material resources has directed special attention to the schoolhouse as an effective agency ready-made to its hand for this purpose. The national importance of this new organization is evidenced by the fact that the Council of National Defense has planned a nation-wide movement to organize school districts or similar communities of the United States as the ultimate branches of its council of defense system, believing that the organization of communities will enable the Council of National Defense to put directly before the individual citizen the needs of the Nation, to create and unify their sentiment, and to mobilize and direct their efforts for the defense of the Nation.

In order that this organization may be most effective and be made permanent, the council has expressed a desire to coöperate with the Bureau of Education, and I have detailed one of the specialists in community organization to

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coöperate with the council for the accomplishment of our common purpose. That the people may have information in regard to community organization in its simplest form, I recommend that the manuscript transmitted herewith be published as a bulletin of the Bureau of Education. It has been prepared at my request by Dr. Henry E. Jackson, the bureau's special agent in community organization.

Respectfully submitted.

P. P. CLAXTON,
Commissioner.

THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR.

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