

Opportunities & Challenges of Government-Sponsored Community Mediation

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Three models for community mediation "housing" have emerged among Washington's nineteen community mediation programs. The first, and most common, is a free standing, non-profit program. The second is a program operating as an agency of a larger non-profit. The third is government sponsorship. Of the nineteen programs in Washington, only two are housed in government, Community Mediation Services (CMS) and Bellevue Neighborhood Mediation. I am the Program Manager for CMS, a program of the City of Vancouver which serves all of Clark County. This article focuses on the contrasting limitations and possibilities of government sponsorship.

Challenges

Separating mediation services from the ubiquitous enforcement role of government is a constant labor. Citizens often contact CMS with the expectation that we (i.e. "the government") should fine or punish their neighbor. It takes a concentrated effort to clarify that mediation is a distinct process which

can exceed the results gained through traditional enforcement.

Generic concerns about and suspicion of "government" sometimes hinder citizens' willingness to engage in the mediation process. These issues may also taint their faith in the neutrality of mediation services. However, the community-building nature of mediation and our ability to genuinely listen to citizens are powerful tools for dispelling public mistrust of government.

The imperative to defend the confidentiality of the mediation process may frustrate other departments and give the appearance that CMS is not a "team player." The desire to avoid this perception puts added burdens on the mediation staff. The best way to overcome these conflicts is through active dialogue and a clearly stated rationale.

Government-sponsored mediation programs in the Northwest tend to be the most specialized. Over-specialization can leave potential mediation clients without services or lead to the development of multiple mediation programs competing for limited funds.

Opportunities

Since mediation is still a relatively new, alternative phenomena, non-governmental programs find it difficult to establish linkages with referral sources and government resources. Government sponsored mediation benefits from the legitimacy and security it receives from being located inside government. This translates into frequent referrals, free exposure to the community, access to referring agencies, housing, computer support, oversight, and more.

The specialization of government-run mediation leads to expertise. One of the most obvious benefits of government sponsorship is over-all stability, measured by the level of funding and employee salaries. Government-run mediation programs have slower staff turn-over.

In the end, government may be the primary beneficiary in the union of government and community mediation. Mediation unleashes powerful forces of individual healing and empowerment and this undoubtedly uplifts government.