

# SOUTHERN MUTUAL HELP ASSOCIATION

## AN AGENT OF CHANGE

SMHA was founded in 1969 TO BE AN AGENT OF CHANGE.

A multiplicity of factors were at the origin of Southern Mutual Help Association in the Summer of 1969. These factors include the various oppressive systems of the time and the personal experiences of each founder.

SMHA was born out of the distress and oppressive conditions found in the Louisiana cane fields where, even under benevolent administrations, the goal was to maintain the status quo. This situation, which affected over a 100,000 people on the plantations, was virtually unknown to most people in the State. The conditions on the plantations were so pervasive that, as a matter of justice, they were not to be serviced, they had to be changed.

SMHA was also born out of the challenges and the public tensions that underlined the War on Poverty: the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act said one thing, public officials enforced something else. Intensive hostility and confrontations across the land compounded the situation.

### WE WERE BORN OUT OF STRONG CONVICTIONS AND OUR PASSION FOR JUSTICE

Several of us had previously confronted the failures of the War on Poverty, of policies that did not change people's lives because they were based on service, not on real change. When we began to make changes, to involve people into real decision making, we were fired. Across the South programs were taken over and became tools for the creation of a service system, not for making substantive change.

The shared experience of the War on Poverty was compounded by our personal experiences of racial segregation, sexism, war, labor relations... It was a time of social upheaval.

### WE ARE WHO WE ARE BECAUSE OF OUR ROOTS

We understood and became more knowledgeable and sensitive to the real causes for the existence of marginalization and poverty.

We became even stronger in our passion for justice and our determination to implement a new approach to the problems so obvious on the plantations, more elusive (disguised) in today's marginalized communities. Justice and innovation are at the core of who we are.

## THE COMPOSITION AND BACKGROUND OF OUR BOARD was in itself a STATEMENT OF CHANGE

We worked with and bonded with people of like convictions:

- \* a belief in the inherent dignity of the oppressed and marginalized to chose and make their own decisions
- \* a belief that it is difficult to enter into partnership if we ar unequal

The first Board Members were Blacks and Whites at a time of racial segregation and black separatism, women and men when male supremacy was the rule and largely went unchallenged, members from diverse religious affiliations (or none at all) at a time of denominational tensions. We were labor union activists, plantation workers, survivors of the War on Poverty. We had experienced that public policies are designed to maintain the status quo, to keep marginalized and oppressed people - especially people of color and women - in ignorance and dependancy.

We knew that our Board was strongly committed and had to be so because we were on the cutting edge, outside the mainstream of thoughts, because we were challenging the mainstream. Board members were deliberately chosen, successfully in most instances, for their ability to withstand a siege, to be regarded as being outside the mainstream thinking.

On occasions we had members who did not have the same agenda. The Board had to be strong to be faithful to its mission. Even though we wanted to insure diversity, these Board members had to be removed.

## SMHA'S MISSION

Our mission is to help people develop strong, healthy, prosperous rural communities in Louisiana. Our special focus is with distressed rural communities whose livelihood is interdependent with our land and waters. We work primarily with pervasively poor communities, women and people of color. We help build rural communities through people's growth in their own empowerment and the just management of resources. Southern Mutual Help Association helps rural communities to devise solutions to intractable problems.

## OUR STRUCTURES AND STRATEGIES

We wanted to insure diversity, commitment to justice, commitment to be an agent of change. We understood plantationism under its different forms. We were sometimes faced with the dilemma between being inclusive of all stakeholders and not losing a focus on our mission. We understood also that the Board had to be strong to carry out its mission. Hence the careful selection by the Board of future Board Members

Our basic convictions included:

- ◆ that we do not live in a working (true) democracy
- ◆ that only by working together as equals across racial, gender and religious lines, we could build a just society.
- ◆ that we needed to implement systemic change rather than service
- ◆ that we must have a comprehensive approach to change

- ◆ the belief in the inherent dignity of all, including marginalized peoples,
- ◆ the belief in the right of all to make their own decisions
- ◆ the belief in the interdependence of humans between themselves and their environment.

THROUGHOUT OUR HISTORY THIS PASSION FOR JUSTICE prevailed, leading to many critical decisions made for the sake of justice:

- ◆ turning down much needed funds when the funders required SMHA to hold elections on the plantations under the naive notion of democracy
- ◆ not pursuing a suit against FmHA for not processing farmworker loans - deciding it was better to direct our resources to farmworkers and create with them a new approach to housing.
- ◆ being party to suits against the Federal Government (USDA, HEW) and the State of Louisiana to establish basic rights of farmworkers and our essential mission as agent of change, even if these suits cost us the loss of our funds.

Always this search and passion for justice has been a strenuous and painful balancing act.

- ◆ It is also our search and passion for justice which led to giving up all federal funds to be free to better pursue our mission as an agent of change: our ability to make substantive changes was increasingly blocked by constraints of federal regulations and canned national programs.

## SMHA AS AGENT OF CHANGE NOW

We have defined our present role in our (1994) Strategic Plan with local communities.

We have a broader perspective to work with all segments of the community in order to build sustainable communities in a healthy environment: Low income communities, farmers, fishers often experience inter-related problems which call for common solutions.

We have been invited to take a broader role as agent of change in the State and the Region

We have developed models of community development that can be replicated

We have initiated a wholly owned subsidiary, the Southern Mutual Housing Development Corporation (SMHDC)

- ◆ to broaden our ability to answer housing needs and to diversify our housing products
- ◆ to free us for more community and leadership work

We have developed more efficient ways of working and to use new technology

We have initiated new models of cooperation with banks and other organizations (Churches, non profits, etc.). We have been selected to be part of a new partnership model between the USDA, LISC the Federal Home Loan Bank, the Fannie Mae Corporation and a local bank.

## OUR ROLE AS A COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION (CDC)

To enable local communities to become equal partners, to make their own decisions: the development and empowerment of local communities are facilitated by their setting up their own structures at the local level

To have more impact and to create economies of scale while keeping “mud on our boots”

We are challenged by the need

- ◆ to adjust to a changing social, political, economic environment while maintaining our goals and vision
- ◆ to deliver service \* in a way that does not demean \* as a tool for growth and empowerment
- ◆ to foster win/win collaborative solutions whenever possible, as opposed to “us versus them”. We, SMHA, we have not always done this. We have come to see it as more just and more effective when possible. Sometimes when a situation was so unjust we have used exposure and peaceful confrontation
- ◆ to promote the just management of resources

We are also challenged to

- ◆ share our 27 years of experience, successes and failures, with other CDC’s in the State and elsewhere,
- ◆ train other leaders in development skills and adjust them to their own communities.

In order to meet these challenges we must evaluate our own positions, capabilities, needed adjustments. We need to increase our own capacity to respond to the calls placed upon us both by the communities we are already working with and by the new challenges that are facing us.

## SMHA AGENT OF CHANGE IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY ?

We have to decide who we are going to be. The strategy may change, the mission is the same.

How will we stay on the cutting edge today and tomorrow?

- ◆ It is essential to any future strategy and decision about HOW we are, to know first WHO we are. The answer to this question is at the core of our success in whatever endeavor we engage in.
- ◆ We have to understand as clearly as possible
  - the world in which we live and operate
  - the interconnectedness between the local communities in the context of the broader regional, national, international and universal realities
  - that public policies affect, and often cause, the marginalization of many and the arrogance of others, the increasing disparity between the haves and the have-nots

- ◆ How are we going to pursue our mission EFFECTIVELY
  - In the age of “things”?
  - In the post market age?
  - In the age of global instant information?
  - In the age of increasing new technologies?
- ◆ What will constitute quality of life?
- ◆ How will humans define community?
- ◆ What is, what will be our role in this increasingly changing world at the local level?  
At the broader level?
- ◆ Who should we invite to our Board? How should our Board be structured? Should we have terms of office?
- ◆ How to insure diversity, partnerships, new solutions to changing situations, without mellowing our convictions, diluting our passion for justice?
- ◆ What will our role/ responsibility be as Board members?

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