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# For a New Civil Society

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By Eloise Anderson



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A P R E F A C E T O

## For a New Civil Society

**O**ur Mandate for Madison's primary concern is the role of the state in the lives of Wisconsin's citizens. But we hope our focus on government is not confused with any fundamental belief in it as a guiding hand or caretaker or beneficent presence. The good things in life in this democracy — opportunity, fulfillment, upward mobility, prosperity, the redounding energy and succor that comes from free association, love of relatives and friends — do not emanate from Madison or D.C. They come from the private sector, from family and from civil society — that space between the individual and government.

Churches, clubs, community associations, private schools, charities — these are the so-called mediating institutions of civil society that foster social connections, friendship, participation, dignity, belonging and ultimately the advancement and support that comes from communal bonds. As noted in "The Space Between: Renewing the American Tradition of Civil Society," a publication of the Joint Economic Committee, civil society is also essential in minimizing estrangement and alienation — the problem that surely is contributing to much of today's societal conflict and violence.

Civil society is the essential space for the growth of character, for acts of kindness, for development of trust — for the altruism that drives Wisconsinites to help each other when they see a need.

Unfortunately, as others have noted, the fundamental pillars of civil society are eroding. From 1974 to 2018, the share of adults who reported spending an evening with a neighbor at least several times a month dropped from 44% to 29%. From 1972 to 2018, the share of adults who reported attending religious services once a month or more dropped from 57% to 42%. Membership in fraternal organizations has plummeted. The share of Americans who have never attended any sort of club meeting increased from two-thirds in the late 1990s to three-fourths in the late 2000s.

A healthy civil society is absolutely essential to a healthy democracy. As The Bradley Foundation's Rick Graber noted in a speech, *A Civil Society for the 21st Century*, that some of us here at the Badger Institute attended at the Wisconsin Forum in October 2021, "During those inevitable times when some of our fellow citizens endure hardship, it is families, neighbors and communities — and not government — that are most capable of providing help and assistance."

Alexis de Tocqueville famously noted in his first volume of "Democracy in America" in the 1830s that "Americans of all ages, all conditions, all minds constantly unite. Not only do they have commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but they also have a thousand other kinds: religious, moral, grave, futile, very general and very particular, immense and very small; Americans use associations to give fetes, to found seminaries, to build inns, to raise churches, to distribute books, to send missionaries to the antipodes ... . Finally, if it is

a question of bringing to light a truth or developing a sentiment with the support of a great example, they associate.”

Or did.

For guidance on how Wisconsin can again value and participate in civil society, we turned to one of the most thoughtful and experienced people we know on these issues, on civil society and the family, someone who has worked extensively within government but also knows the great value of what happens outside it, Eloise Anderson.

— *Badger Institute*

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**M**any believe the deteriorating condition of American society, especially in the urban centers, is the result of government crowding out what is known as civil society.

I had feared that the bigger the federal government got, the less important cities, villages and towns and, in reality, the individual would be. Unfortunately, that fear has been realized. But I’ve never given up on the reemergence of those pillars of civil society, the churches and community organizations, to displace pessimism with optimism, purposelessness with purpose and hope.

Since the Depression, government has intervened with the conviction that it could and should replace the traditional support system of family, neighbors and church.

No thought seems to have been given that the government must forcibly take from one group of people, taxpayers, to do its good. Policymakers have legislated not understanding the full impact of the support they seek to provide.

How did this happen? What are the effects? Can this be turned around? **Turning it around will require the retreat of all government, but especially the federal government, from American lives.** It will mean supporting men and fathers with education and training and restructuring how public education is funded and governed.

In the mid-1960s, Milwaukee was a beautiful and safe place to live. It was the economic engine of Wisconsin. I often called it the “star of the North.” But at that same time, Milwaukee was experiencing decline and the loss of many industries. As the base of heavy industry began to shrink and change, workers and their families turned to government and away from their old support systems.

In August 1964, President Lyndon Johnson, a Democrat, signed the omnibus Economic Opportunity Act, the legislation that launched the Great Society. That same year, Warren Knowles, a Republican, was elected governor of Wisconsin.

Leaders of both parties have come to believe that government was the instrument to perfect civil society. Every governor I've worked for believed that government can do good, so they want to help. We should beware of good intentions.

This idea that taxpayer-funded government programs would assume responsibility for civil society would have confounded Edmund Burke, the 18th century statesman-philosopher. Burke believed the key to a society's success was the "little platoons," families, neighborhoods, schools and churches.

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The French diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville marveled at these platoons at work when he toured America in 1831 and later described them in his prescient book, "Democracy in America."

"With much care and skill, power has been broken into fragments in the American township, so that the maximum possible number of people have some concern with public affairs."

Programs such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), Housing and Urban Development subsidies, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Head Start have overwhelmed parental authority and undermined family stability.

One of these, Aid to Dependent Children, later renamed Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), provided assistance only to "suitable homes." In reality, the aid supported single parents, some adolescents, who never married and were independent of their own parents. The program did not support married parents living together with their children.

**What has changed in our society is the poor men. The economic base has changed on them.** The skills that they had no longer are the skills that work. And what we need to do is spend time providing them with the education and training they need to function in this new economic world that they're in. And the help needs to be focused on men and fathers.

If what we truly want for our communities is peace and prosperity, it will come not from government but from the family. Often, policymakers speak of the family as an organization of two parents and their biological children. Family therapists broaden this definition to include relatives who influence the dynamic of parental behavior.

No matter how it is defined, the family — responsible for rearing and sheltering, supporting and educating — exerts the most powerful influence on people, from birth until death.

Parents ought to be most responsible for the care of their children. In extended families, grandparents play a critical role. The single-parent household often lacks this support system. The young single parent is usually ill-equipped to provide the emotional and psychological support children need in their early years.

These years provide the foundation that will determine if a community thrives. The community needs parents engaged in developing their children's ability to think and reason.

Being in a married household is especially good for girls. Teen girls living in a two-parent household delay having sex longer than peers living in a single-parent household. Teen girls living with either their biological father or stepfather are less likely to get pregnant than those living with a single mother.

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On the other hand, boys with little or no involvement with their father do poorly in school, drop out at a higher rate and are less likely to be employed. They are more likely to be abused and violent, to be involved with drugs and alcohol. They are more likely to be homeless and more prone to suicide.

What's in the family — or not in the family — inevitably spills out into the neighborhoods, spreading instability, crime and chaos. The pessimism and purposelessness, the apathy and selfishness, disconnects people from their larger community.

**For all of the decades and the billions of dollars spent, government has provided no answers for these seemingly intractable social ills.** In a speech to the Federalist Society more than 20 years ago, retired federal Judge Janice Rogers Brown lamented:

“Where government moves in, community retreats, civil society disintegrates and our ability to control our own destiny atrophies. The result is: families under siege; war in the streets; unapologetic expropriation of property; the precipitous decline of the rule of law; the rapid rise of corruption; the loss of civility and the triumph of deceit.”

It's past time for the bureaucrats to step away and allow for two things to happen in order to form “a more perfect union.” We must commit to reestablish the importance of men, of fathers, in our society. And we must restructure K-12 and vocational education.

The child support system, a quasi-criminal-justice system that is punitive rather than supportive, should be refitted with no additional funding to provide counseling, job training and placement with the goal of providing for children.

Funds to pay for this structural change can come from government programs already

provided for children in homes without a father. Social work and mental health experts could develop a curriculum for fathers with no criminal history. Staffing could come from military veterans who have an understanding of discipline and structure.

**There should be a presumption that both parents have a financial responsibility for their children.** The financial support of children should not be the responsibility of the taxpayer.

There are roughly 2 million community organizations in this country, with about 11 million employees and 63 million volunteers supported by \$390 billion in charitable giving. They should not have to compete with government for resources that are better spent by people who know their communities best.

Funds already provided by the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014 should be directed to apprenticeship programs and employer-paid internships for single, unmarried men to improve their economic standing in the community and put them in a position to marry and provide for children.

Another component of this strategy would be a life and job skills training program through the University of Wisconsin Extension in every county in our state. Such a program would include a housing stipend tied to active participation in the program for men ages 18 to 26 who have come out of the foster care system and have minimal skills and a sporadic work history. Life skills would stress the basics — financial management, food purchasing and food preparation.

There is a tremendous opportunity for our prison and jail systems to play a role in rehabilitating rather than simply housing men and women. Mastering basic life skills, proficiency in English and math and some understanding of Western culture should be required for release. After all, we are all Westerners.

Jailed men and women who are the products of the foster care system should be provided direct mental health services with an emphasis on trauma from trained counselors, not prison guards.

Men and women who grew up without a father in the home should get mental health services tailored to the most serious accompanying problems, physical and sexual abuse. Like foster care alumni, life and job skills and meeting educational proficiency standards would be required for parole.

And don't tell me that people won't come. When I was secretary of the state Department of Children and Families (DCF), my team and I developed a program called Transitional Jobs. We expanded the use of TANF, which is supposed to go to parents, and diverted

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some of it for fathers (they *are* parents) and sent it to local programs in Milwaukee and across the state. And men came in long lines to get jobs.

I went to Beloit, where we had a transitional job program. In the neighborhood was a factory. A young man got a job at the factory sweeping floors. People there took a liking to him, and he said he wanted to be one of the machinists. He worked hard. They sent him to school to become a machinist.

He said he had never seen what went on in this factory before, the kind of jobs that were there. "I live two blocks from this, and I didn't know it was here," he told me.

Transitional Jobs helped him get a job, a little sweeping-the-floor job, but it worked into something else. So, you've got to put these men in places where they've never been.

This kind of technical education must begin long before high school graduation. Graduates of apprenticeships and internships should feed our technical and vocational schools. Those schools should take an active role in shaping high school curriculum to maximize career opportunities.

This kind of reform can come only from the bottom up. The belief in government-run education as the vehicle best-designed to prepare youth for the future may already be dead.

Taxpayer money, so liberally spent and so foolishly squandered, should go to parents who can best determine where their children should go to school. **Parents and educators must be equal partners for educational outcomes to improve.**

This partnership would flourish, particularly in Milwaukee, if we reestablished neighborhood schools and residential high schools. Residential schools help bring stability into young lives that are often unstable and chaotic.

The governor, whoever the governor is, must start talking about the problems with Milwaukee Public Schools. And the same for Madison's public schools because it's not just Milwaukee.

The last governor who came to the inner city of Milwaukee was Tommy Thompson. We need the governor to do that again, to come down and talk to people and say, "Hey, this is what I see. What do you see? Tell me what you see. Tell me what you need."

When I was DCF secretary, I thought we should take on Milwaukee Public Schools. But opponents always said, "Well, you know, it can be helped."

I said it can't be helped, it's gone. It's got way too much administration for what it needs to be. We've got to go back to community schools. We're going to get rid of busing, unless you live in the country. We're not busing you to school anymore. You're going to walk

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to your neighborhood schools. And if it's too dangerous for your kids to walk to school, maybe you need to do something about it.

Parents right now can't get involved because the schools aren't in their neighborhoods. You don't know where in the world your kids are. If you have three kids, they might be in three different schools, so you can't get involved.

So, if we put the students back in their neighborhoods, where they are right down the street or around the corner, parents can go and get involved.

**I offer these proposals as a real-world attempt at reversing the cumulative effect of public policy decisions that have rewarded single parenting and damaged public education.**

Every one of these prescriptions is reasonable and doable within the current structure of our state government. They could use existing federal funds. But the money would be deployed with the goal of solving problems rather than sustaining programs. All funding should come with a sunset provision triggered by a program's success.

Government sunseting would give room for churches and community organizations to build on the already vital work they do and encourage new volunteer work locally. When men return to their families, neighborhoods become safer. Neighbors build trust. And through that trust comes a sense of community, of volunteering, of philanthropy — all hallmarks of a civil society.

To get all of this done, and believe me it's a big job, we need a leader, a governor who actually understands the problems with these schools and is willing to take them on.

The real question is are we ready to take back responsibility for our children's educations, to reintegrate our poor men into family and public life and reclaim our place as the stewards of civil society?

I truly hope so.

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## About the Author



**Eloise Anderson**, a visiting fellow at the Badger Institute, is known nationally and internationally as a leader on welfare issues, family structure and the role of government in people's lives. She served in Gov. Scott Walker's administration as secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families from 2011 to 2019. As the former director of the California Department of Social Services, she created a successful work model that led to thousands of people transitioning from welfare to self-sufficiency. Anderson began her career in Milwaukee as a social worker and in various roles within state and county government. In 1988, Gov. Tommy Thompson appointed her administrator of the Division of Community Services, a position she held for four years. She has over 20 years of experience in state service. The leadership of the U.S. House of Representatives named Anderson to the National Advisory Board on Welfare Indicators, and she was honored with the 1996 National Governors Association award for outstanding state official.