NANCY VOLKERS Community-oriented lawyers have set out to weave back together what urban renewal and apathy have unraveled.

Urban renewal continues to effect sweeping changes—entire sections of cities are torn down, and neighborhoods destroyed. Along with urban renewal comes government dollars for helping individuals—many are helped right out of their neighborhoods. They can afford to leave, and do. Middle- and upper-class citizens also are moving away from urban centers, leaving isolated communities vulnerable to crime.

To this, add waning civic involvement, as Robert Putnam contends in his book Bowling Alone. According to Putnam, Americans are losing ties to their communities. They’ve reduced the amount of time they spend serving on committees, going to meetings, even having friends over for dinner and a game of cards.

In low-income neighborhoods, remaining citizens feel helpless, lost and alone. How can they fight open-air drug markets, vacant lots filled with trash or even noisy neighbors? How can they make their voices heard?

Answer: through community-oriented lawyering.

Community-oriented lawyering bucks the trends. It brings a community together, allows it to experience the synergy that comes from aiming toward a common goal. It focuses on the whole of a community rather than its parts, and isn’t afraid to break new ground. It may not be most people’s idea of “normal” lawyering, but that’s probably what makes it work.

GATHERING THE COMMUNITY-LAWYER COMMUNITY

To increase interaction and discussion about what community lawyering is, how to do it, do it better, and teach it, the School of Law hosted a three-day symposium in June. Co-sponsored by seven other organizations, the symposium convened current and potential community lawyers, as well as scholars, judges, public policy makers, government representatives, and community members.

Brenda Bratton Blom, clinical professor at the School of Law and coordinator of the symposium, believes that a law practice area was established at the symposium. “While many people are attempting to practice with a community orientation,” Blom explains, “there hasn’t been a conference where so many diverse practice areas came together to share experiences.”

“We need to think about most of our lawyering in the context of what strengthens our communities, rather than just an individualized solution,” says Blom. “Crime is linked to place most of the time; there is a place-based effect. If you keep your options open, it may be that we can solve some problems in nontraditional ways that heal communities rather than tear them apart.”

Besides its attention to a place over an individual, community lawyering thinks outside the box, or may just throw out the box altogether. "Community-oriented lawyering uses a problem-solving mode," describes Blom. "It starts with the premise that the right solution isn’t always given. Many lawyers practice in areas where this is the problem and these are the potential answers, and this isn’t always the case (in community lawyering)."

Roger Conner, a visiting fellow at the National Institute of Justice and the director of America’s Search for Common Ground, notes several more differences between traditional lawyering and community lawyering. "The two have different tools," he says. "Also, the ‘favorite question’ is different—in traditional lawyering, it’s ‘What happened?’; in community lawyering, it’s ‘What’s happening?’"

WHAT VOODOO DO COMMUNITY LAWYERS DO?
The scope of community lawyering is as wide as the imagination. Major areas of work include fair housing monitoring and enforcement, community-oriented policing and public safety strategies, community organizing, code enforcement, and redevelopment through tax incentives.

The Community Law Center (CLC) is a horseman in community-lawyering circles. The CLC has removed a drug dealer from his own property, administers a city-wide program to handle school truancy and community-related nuisance misdemeanors, and pursues receivership actions to eventually allow for the auctioning and rehabilitation of vacant properties. In 1998 alone, it pursued 2,220 cases. Most were nuisance-abatement, drug-related, or receivership cases.

The CLC has five in-house legal teams that serve 11 "core communities," but the center provides legal counsel to more than 100 other community-based organizations in Baltimore. After 14 years, "We have created a body of law and legal tools," says Executive Director Anne Blumenberg, "and now we can introduce cases on a large scale. We are trying to get quick results for neighborhoods so they can see that what they do has an impact."

In Richmond, Va., the Neighborhoods in Bloom project focused city spending on six neighborhoods, with goals of restoring the physical "livability" of the communities and improving their stability. After further focusing on specific areas within each neighborhood, the project initiated public and private investment, proactive code enforcement, and public safety measures. In one year, violent crime dropped by 37 percent, property crime by 19 percent, and more than 350 code violations were resolved.

According to Connie Bawcum, deputy city manager of Richmond, Va., the key elements to success are problem solving, collaboration and advocacy.
Bridges over trouble—
lawyers
If those are the keys to successfully taking back a community, then why is it necessary for lawyers to step in? Couldn’t other groups, such as law enforcement, take the leading role?

Not exactly, says Conner. Each group of professionals tends to work on problems within a limited sphere of control. Most community-centered problems require communication among many groups, which increases the chances of communications breakdown, non-cooperation and failure. For example, in some neighborhoods, the police are not seen in a positive light, although cooperation between police and the community could lead to improvements.

“I believe lawyers are advocates for solutions,” Conner says. “They can bridge these barriers. Very often, lawyers are gatekeepers for groups involved in solving problems.”

Fragmented relationships between community members and those who could help them aren’t unusual. Cliff Keenan, now special counsel for community prosecution in the Office of the Assistant Attorney General, detoured into law enforcement after getting to know police officers while in college. “As a police officer, I was not trained or encouraged to get involved with the communities I worked in,” he explains.

Prosecutors, too, have not been encouraged to develop relationships with the communities in which they serve, says Keenan. Now, in Washington, D.C., prosecutors are assigned to specific neighborhoods to allow them to become familiar with the community and possibly recognize patterns, he notes. Prosecutors also work with dispute resolution centers. It hasn’t all moved smoothly. “It’s been somewhat of an uphill battle to convince some prosecutors that it’s okay to be a service provider,” Keenan confesses.

In spite of the success stories, challenges remain. How to define community lawyering is still one of them. How to define the community, whom to listen to within that community, and how proactive to be are others. However, there is general agreement that community lawyering isn’t fading into the background any time soon. According to Conner, 40 percent of law schools have a community-oriented law clinic, and 38 percent of police departments practice community prosecution. And Blom thinks that the School of Law is at the forefront of that 40 percent. She believes that “The University of Maryland has established itself as a leader in the national trend of law schools considering or implementing a community lawyering practice area.”

Those involved in community lawyering say the rewards are great. “There is nothing like working with communities that are trying to rectify an injustice,” asserts Michael Sarbanes, executive director of the Maryland Governor’s Office of Crime Control and Prevention. “You can do it by living in a community, working with the community, or having an experience in the courtroom, but I think it’s essential...it needs to be injected into the lifeblood.”