

Building an Alliance around the Needs of Women and Girls

Everyone agrees: collaboration among organizations providing services makes sense. The trick is to make it happen. In Des Moines, a collaboration called the Women's Alliance has gotten organizations that serve women and girls to do more than tout the virtues of working together – but to actually do it effectively.

Their experience so far suggests ways to overcome the many barriers that organizations face as they collaborate.

By Kristin Senty

The Women's Alliance is working to improve the futures of women and girls, in part by making policymakers more aware of their needs.



“What is challenging for those of us trying to fund this work is that, as much as we expect or hope women understand how to navigate the system, it may not be friendly or easy to use.”

—Terry Hernandez

“I just wait for the police to come.”

—statement by a woman
in a focus group

This statement was made by a woman in response to a question about where she turns when she has a problem. Her answer surprised and alarmed the person who helped organize this focus group, Chrysalis Foundation Director Terry Hernandez.

With a long history of working in community development and promoting collaboration among nonprofits in Des Moines, Hernandez expected the women in these focus groups to mention the names of

a handful of popular local community-based organizations – many of which Chrysalis funds – as sources of support in a time of crisis.

But the answer didn’t come as expected. For Hernandez, “it was like an epiphany,” revealing a disconnect between the clients in need and the services designed to assist them. Moreover, it showed weakness in the collaborative process itself.

Well aware of the number of quality services available in the community, Hernandez thought there was a strong safety net in place to meet needs. But this woman in the focus group was suggesting that the net wasn’t catching clients, or clients weren’t using it as a first step in an intervention.

If women turned only to the police in a crisis, were community-based services truly accessible? As a funder, Hernandez knew that a collaborative environment among community-based organizations yields a system where women can readily connect the dots to solve their problems. But in light of this woman’s comment, she questioned whether such a system was working effectively in Des Moines.

Hernandez decided to find out for herself how accessible the system was. Posing as an individual in need, she called a local hotline

On the cover: Emina Seho, Aurora Lodwick and Katie Bishop were part of a delegation that talked to state legislators (including Sen. Jack Hatch) about the needs of women and girls in Iowa.

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“There is such value in collaboration and partnerships. The message to me is, whoever you are, don’t ever think you can do it all yourself. If you’re an agency, a funder or a donor – don’t think you can do it alone.”

—Terry Hernandez



The Chrysalis Foundation’s Terry Hernandez says that Des Moines’ services for women who need help were so difficult to access that she “got nowhere” when she tried to follow-up on the leads she received from a local helpline. “And I even understand the agencies.”

that provides emergency information and referrals. Surprisingly, the referrals and phone numbers she received were difficult to follow and led to many dead ends.

“I got nowhere,” says Hernandez. “I’m a pretty educated person and I even understand the agencies.”

She concludes, “What is challenging for those of us trying to fund this work is that, as much as we expect or hope women understand how to navigate the system, it may not be friendly or easy to use. That is part of the challenge.”

To make a system easier to navigate, the organizations that provide the services need to work together to streamline

their services and make it easier for clients to connect from one point to the next.

“There is such value in collaboration and partnerships,” Hernandez says. “The message to me is, whoever you are, don’t ever think you can do it all yourself. If you’re an agency, a funder or a donor – don’t think you can do it alone.”

But while most people see the value of collaborations, they also have seen how hard they are to build and maintain. Organizations may share a common vision of helping clients, yet each arrives with its own set of perspectives, motives and expectations. Some welcome collaboration as a chance to reduce isolation, but others view it as another requirement or an imposition on their autonomy.

“When you get down to the bottom line, what are we doing with those dollars?
They’re not just here to keep your door open. They’re here to help families
who we’re supposed to be providing services for.”

—Sue Renfrow

In Des Moines, a group of community-based organizations that seem to understand both the possibilities and complexities of collaboration are approaching it from a new perspective. Tired of going it alone but frustrated with collaborations required by grantmakers, their experience in building the Women’s Alliance has lessons for others who want to forge a more collaborative system.

What’s notable about the Alliance’s approach to collaboration is its openness about the struggles of collaborating. People say that this openness has helped their organizations work together more honestly and effectively than they have in the past.

Making Connections has also had an impact, getting more people to approach their work in new and innovative ways, according to Hernandez. “*The presence and example of Casey and Making Connections has helped our community partners look at each other in a whole new way. It’s a new collaborative environment, where we’ve been able to give the partners a better intro to each other.*

“The Women’s Alliance is a true peer network that has opened doors of communication and potential partnership, helping people better see how their work fits into the broader community strategy.”



Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement’s Kathy McFarlin (on the left, with Sue Renfrow) says that the Chrysalis Foundation “has been key in keeping a focus on the work and bringing the leadership.”

“It’s a collaboration of not the usual suspects.
It really is involved in the work that we want to do around social change
and not just to get us together to hang out.”

—Kathy McFarlin



Chrysalis Foundation Women’s Alliance Partner Organizations

In partnership with over 25 nonprofit organizations working with women and girls, Chrysalis leads development of a community plan to improve individual lives, strengthen nonprofit effectiveness, and measure success of focused, collaborative work.

Annie E. Casey Making Connections
Beacon of Life Residential Center
Bernie Lorenz Recovery Center
Bidwell Riverside Community Center
Catholic Charities Hispanic Outreach
Central Iowa Shelter and Services
Children and Families of Iowa
Children and Family Urban Ministries
Citizens for Community Improvement
Des Moines Neighbors
Employee and Family Resources
Family Directions of Iowa, Inc.
Family Violence Center
Home Connection/New Directions
Shelter
Hispanic Educational Resources, Inc.
House of Mercy
Iowa Commission on the Status of
Women
Iowa Homeless Youth Centers
ISU Extension – Polk County

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“I remembered how collaborating, sharing ideas and building relationships had been beneficial, it was the idea that every nonprofit would have others to go to when they needed help.”

—Terry Hernandez

How the Women's Alliance came together

In 1998, Hernandez brought several community-based service providers together, a group that came to be known as the Women's Alliance. She says her original purpose “was to pull agencies together for learning or mutual support, because Chrysalis didn't have enough money to help every program.”

The Des Moines-based Chrysalis Foundation provides funding and technical assistance to local CBOs whose programs and services help women and girls in Des Moines. Chrysalis's resources are designed to promote self-sufficiency, economic independence and leadership opportunities for women and girls of all ages, and to change policies and systems that are limiting.

From 1997 to 2000, Hernandez served as Chrysalis's first executive director. But when she left, the Women's Alliance disbanded. In her absence, a larger endowment boosted the foundation's capabilities as a local funder. In 2004, Hernandez had the opportunity to resume her former position, and she planned to reestablish the Women's Alliance.

In early 2006, Hernandez saw an opportunity to get these women-serving organizations to work together again.

Her foundation received a grant from an international association called the Women's Funding Network, funded through the Annie E. Casey Foundation. This grant was awarded to five Making Connections sites to study women's perspectives on healthy relationships and marriages as a potential strategy for improving client outcomes.

Along with getting the results of the study, Hernandez saw this research grant as an opportunity to bring renewed energy to the collaboration table.

“I remembered how collaborating, sharing ideas and building relationships had been beneficial,” she says. “It was the idea that every nonprofit would have others to go to when they needed help. They would have peers they could contact, develop greater efficiency, partner on projects, and come together for different funders or activities.”

The study included interviews with 24 community-based service providers whose programs support women and girls. Many were former members of the Women's Alliance.

Information was also gathered through focus groups with 90 women and girls,

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Most of the other grantees said, ‘Here’s our position, now let us try to influence you.’
Terry incorporated the views of the community.”

—Carole Thompson



State Senator Jack Hatch talks with Aurora Lodwick, Emina Seho and Katie Bishop.

including many who routinely utilize services. Participants were asked to talk about their stresses, their struggle for self-sufficiency, and the barriers they experience in accessing services.

Everyone participating in the study was also asked to rank their critical needs in order of importance, with building healthy relationships – the concern of the Women’s Funding Network /AECF grant – being part of the list.

“Terry’s approach was to ask questions and listen,” says Carole Thompson, the Casey Foundation staff person who managed the study of healthy relationships. “She took the unique approach of going to various service

providers and began to ask them questions about healthy relationships.

“Most of the other grantees said, ‘Here’s our position, now let us try to influence you.’ Terry incorporated the views of the community.”

Hernandez knew that the study’s results would prove useful in themselves, but as organizations gathered to answer the questions, she thought of another valuable piece of information that she could collect. As a funder, she knew that community-based organizations often struggle to show their value in dollars and cents. Why not also use this as an opportunity to collect financial information about each organization and

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create a tangible business case that a CBO could show other funders?

“We wanted the community to know how efficient these organizations were in using contributed dollars,” Hernandez explained. *“When they’re talking to funders, they can leverage this information and tell their story better.”*

Building a business case was also designed to give Chrysalis a clearer sense of how local CBOs were functioning and how the foundation could better impact client outcomes with their funding.

“For a long time I think Chrysalis’ grant making was good, but it didn’t have a lot of long-term focus,” explains Hernandez. *“In order for Chrysalis to be really strategic, we needed to hear from the agencies and from the women and girls themselves.... For me, it was a sense of getting our arms around a clear result.”*

The results of this study made it very clear that many needs of women and girls were not being met. The study showed that women did not rate healthy relationships nearly as highly as stable housing, medical care or meaningful employment.

The financial information that Chrysalis collected showed how efficiently and effectively CBOs were using their dollars to achieve objectives.

Hernandez said the research served as a focal point that helped to reframe and prioritize the issues CBOs cope with every

day. Ultimately, this clearer view of client needs and perspectives – combined with financial details about the CBOs who serve them – gave new energy to the need for collaboration.

“What helped form the Women’s Alliance was the identification of some key things we see together,” explained Hernandez, *“rather than coming from the other side and saying, ‘It’s important for you to collaborate, so figure out how you’re going to do it!’ What we’ve been able to do is identify some key challenges and opportunities each agency and its clients see, and then talk about them.”*

In the year that followed the survey, Women’s Alliance members drafted a business plan with a vision that could set the course of their work together. It took a full year to do this, about twice as long as Hernandez expected, but she thinks the time devoted to this task was necessary in order to really hear what people thought.

This willingness to listen was crucial, says *Making Connections* Site Coordinator Margaret Wright. *“Providers talked about the common thread and denominator and thought about how they could leverage and align those programs.”*

“By bringing this depth of conversation,” Wright adds, the people around the table began to think not just about how to do “horizontal collaborations” among similar service providers, but also how to do “vertical integration,” bringing in new stakeholders.

“Providers talked about the common thread and thought about how they could leverage and align those programs.”

—Margaret Wright

Hernandez describes the plan that came out of this process as “asset-based and not a rescue.” In other words, it focused on the Alliance members’ strengths, not their needs.

The plan (see page 10) included priority areas where the Alliance wanted to have a collective impact, ways of measuring its impact, goals to meet by 2010, and the steps they would take to meet these goals.

Using that plan as a guide, the group decided that approaching policymakers with a single message would be their first collective approach to change. They spent time learning how to affect policy as a group and “*to develop talking points to better state their case so policymakers can get it,*” in Hernandez’s words. “*We wanted these nonprofits to get better at telling their story.*”

Hernandez says the group went with a “multi-pronged approach,” where Alliance members isolated one larger issue in a way that allowed “each to grab a part of it.”

“If it’s an issue like asking for more funding for after-school programs, we can talk about how that improves grades and school retention, how kids stay out of trouble in those vulnerable hours after school, or how mom can be a better employee when she’s not worried about her kids. We’re looking at one funding issue in a way that shows broad community appeal that anyone from an educator to a business person can relate to.”



“The business plan helps create this spirit of unity that the community wants to see.
It’s right there in black and white with the business plan:
these are the priorities and the action steps.”

Bobretta Brewton

Women’s Alliance Business Plan

Led by the Chrysalis Foundation, the Women’s Alliance is a collaborative project working to measurably improve lives of women and girls and to strengthen nonprofit organizations in this work.

Vision: All women and girls in Greater Des Moines are economically self-sufficient and do not live in conditions of poverty.

Mission: The mission of the Women’s Alliance project is to work collaboratively to empower all women and girls with assets, support, and opportunities to be economically self-sufficient.

GOALS - Women’s Alliance partners will build the following assets in women and girls and improve community indicators related to their economic self-sufficiency:

- **Financial assets:** work income, savings, home ownership, investments, equity in a business, property, and assets of value
- **Human assets:** character capacity, healthy self-worth, life skills, health and wellness, and education
- **Social assets:** relationships, networks, trust between people and groups, social capital, and civic engagement

STRATEGIES - Through interviews, focus groups, and planning activities, the Women’s Alliance created its business plan around the following elements to build assets and reduce/eliminate conditions of poverty for women and girls:

- 1. Economic Empowerment** – creating better ways to earn, keep, and grow wealth (*building financial and human assets*).
- 2. Education** – making educational opportunities more accessible and effective and targeting educational opportunities to attain and keep jobs that pay wages that support self-sufficiency (*building financial, human, and social assets*).
- 3. Shelter, Housing, Affordable Living** – helping women to own or rent safe and affordable housing (*building financial, human, and social assets*).
- 4. Health** – assisting in advocacy and education to increase availability of health services including primary, oral, mental health, family planning/reproductive health, and prevention (violence/substance abuse) services (*building financial and social assets*).

NOTE: The business plan also includes, for each of the four strategies, specific performance measures, benchmarks for 2010 and activities.

“If you’re a small nonprofit with a small staff, you want to be involved in everything.... But it is difficult when you have other things you have to do. You get busy putting out fires, and then you have to make a choice. That is the reality.”

—Suzanne Renfrow

Why is collaboration so difficult?

What does it take to find the common ground needed to work together? Many community-based organizations share a common vision in helping clients move out of poverty, yet there are a number of reasons why this vision doesn’t easily translate to working collectively.

The people who are part of the Women’s Alliance have much to say about why collaboration is so challenging. One reason

is that community-based work is demanding, with many responsibilities rolled into each position and only so many hours in each day to meet these responsibilities.

“For an executive director of a small community organization, more often than not, their work is to keep the lights on and serve clients,” says Hernandez. “Anything beyond that is really outside of their frame of time, attention and ability.”

Family Directions’ Sue Renfrow says that some organizations “don’t want to let go of their dollars” even though they don’t use them as effectively as they once did.



“Staff turnover...can be a problem in collaboration. We can all agree on a project right now, but a year from now, if we change and there is a different person, the project may not continue.”

—John Patton

Women's Alliance member Suzanne Renfrow, executive director of Family Directions, is enthusiastic about collaborative work. But she admits that, in the flurry of daily demands, it can end up as an afterthought.

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Women's Alliance member Denise Aikoregie, the executive director of a faith-based organization called Pathway Enterprises, agrees that the demands on the directors of small nonprofits are enormous. In her previous career, Aikoregie worked in insurance and banking. But she says that, in comparison, *“I have never worked harder than I do today.”*

Stressful work conditions and low pay make it harder for community-based organizations to maintain employees over the long haul, which in turn can make it harder to keep collaborations going.

“Staff turnover...can be a problem in collaboration,” says Women's Alliance member John Patton, director of annual giving for Planned Parenthood of Greater Iowa. *“We can all agree on a project right now, but a year from now, if we change and there is a different person, the project may not continue.”*

Women's Alliance members also talk about how hard it is for community-based organizations to find and maintain consistent

funding. This struggle for resources creates an environment where CBOs can feel territorial of their niche, client base and available dollars. This instinct can make collaboration extremely difficult.

Renfrow talks about how this mindset can run counter to the objective of helping clients. *“Some organizations are getting the same funding year after year. They may not be as effective in using it as they were in the beginning, but they don't want to let go of those dollars.”*

“I understand...but when you get down to the bottom line, what are we doing with those dollars? They're not just here to keep your door open. They're here to help families who we're supposed to be providing services for.”

Hernandez thinks that some organizations misunderstand what “collaboration” means. *“For some it means merging, and they fear losing their identity. Real or not, they perceive that.”*

Sometimes board members “are not helpful” when it comes to collaboration, she adds. *“One board member can be very passionate about one organization.... The nature of collaboration is very important for nonprofit board members to understand.”*

Two other factors sometimes undermine collaborations. One is when they are not managed well. The second is when they are driven by a funder's requirements.

Effectively nurturing and managing a collaboration requires a lot of skills. Not every

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—Jennifer Bates



Central Iowa Shelter and Services' Jennifer Bates says that she has felt lost in some collaborations “because of the silos.”

nonprofit or funder that tries to develop a collaboration has those skills.

One critical skill is the ability to maintain a sense that progress is being made, according to Women's Alliance member Bobretta Brewton, development director of Primary Health Care.

“You need to see results. If you’re called to a meeting on collaboration, you expect to hear something in a couple of weeks as a result of spending time in that meeting. I would also expect that group to keep the agenda moving forward so that the balls are not dropped, and it doesn’t end up feeling like just one more meeting that doesn’t go anywhere.”

Alliance members said they also get discouraged if they think that the only reason a meeting was held was that a funder required it. These people acknowledge that many funders require collaboration out of an honest desire to see people work together. But if participants think that the collaboration is mainly driven by a funder's requirement and not a shared sense of mission, it will have a hard time succeeding.

Renfrow says the good feelings she has about collaboration get soured when she sees “a lot of organizations coming to collaborative tables where they feel they have to be there, but they don’t really want to be.”

When the collaborations are prompted by funders alone, Women's Alliance member

“You need to see results. If you’re called to a meeting on collaboration, you expect to hear something in a couple of weeks as a result of spending time in that meeting.”

—Bobretta Brenton

Jennifer Bates, program director with Central Iowa Shelter and Services, agrees that too few CBOs arrive with the right motivation.

“A lot of people show up at collaborative meetings knowing that, if they don’t go, they won’t get funded or get a letter of support. I think a lot of people are just there as bodies, doing other things while they’re there.”

For Aikoregie, collaboration borne from funding demands is an empty proposition. *“Funders that force collaboration do damage because collaborations need to come from business-driven, common objective-driven interactions – not just go out and pick four organizations and say you’re collaborating, which I think happens most of the time....”*

In such cases, hierarchical behavior can start to take over, Bates believes. *“I feel a little lost in some collaborations because of the silos or groups. We’re kind of down here and everyone else is higher.”*

Rather than fostering the best in people, self-protective feelings take hold and honesty is minimal, Renfrow says. *“I wish we could express honest feelings...but in a lot of collaborations we... fear retribution. We don’t want to make people mad at us.... Why do they have to be like that?”*

Aikoregie says that when her organization got started, even with her best efforts, repeated negative experiences gave her a bad feeling about collaboration.



Terry Hernandez brought a group of women and girls to the statehouse to help communicate the Alliance’s public policy agenda.

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—Denise Aikoregie

“When Pathways started, we used the textbook approach to collaboration, and over and over people take your stuff and exclude you from the rewards. You would write a part of a grant and then get excluded when the funding came, or you weren’t communicated with or given the courtesy of being told.

“That was my actual experience three or four times. So it pushes you to a place where you say you’re not collaborating any more,” she says. “But you know really that collaboration has to happen in order to have true change.”

“We’ve kept important ideas up front: Where is the client at this point in time and what is their need? It doesn’t start with what service we provide. It starts with where they are and what they need.”

—John Patton

How the Women’s Alliance has built a better collaboration

Despite all the challenges, many people still understand that collaboration is needed. Indeed one factor that helped the Women’s Alliance is that its members seem to clearly understand the benefits of collaboration, not just for their programs but also for their clients.

They see that effective collaboration can create a system of supports that can be a roadmap for people in crisis and serve as a model for clients, demonstrating how important collaborative relationships can be.

“When CBOs problem solve, network and develop solutions to their own problems,” Hernandez explains, “that translates over to women and girls and how they work with them. Then those women and girls begin to think of developing their own assets, solving their own problems and planning for their own futures in a different way.”

Brewton of Primary Health Care says that what keeps her investing time in collaborations is a sense of how valuable they can be. *“It’s neat when a collaboration is put together in a seamless manner. When it really works is when it is seamless and no client knows how many different funding streams make things happen.”*

How do you achieve a seamless collaboration? Hernandez knew that it couldn’t simply be another funder telling them to collaborate. Instead, she felt a new vision of collaboration was needed because *“the basic understanding of what it means is often lost”* after so many bad experiences.

When she called organizations together to renew the Women’s Alliance, Hernandez encouraged them to have a vision for what the Alliance could accomplish and to *“think beyond agency walls to a sense of mutual intent.”* She thought that the research being done on women’s issues in Des Moines could act as a framework, focusing individual organizations on the broader needs.

In the interviews with agency directors, the amount of agreement that existed about the priorities and the issues became clear. *“The voices of woman and girls in the focus groups said the same things,”* Hernandez says.

She asked CBOs to *“look at what each of us brings to the table, and what barriers we can address together.”*

“They’re not being taught something, which is a different approach. Chrysalis is learning from them rather than coming to teach you something.”

—Margaret Wright

Planned Parenthood’s John Patton says the Women’s Alliance keeps the needs of clients “front and center.”



The Alliance has succeeded in getting its members to do this, according to Planned Parenthood’s Patton. *“We’ve kept important ideas up front: Where is the client at this point in time and what is their need in whatever area? It doesn’t start with what service we provide. It starts with where they are and what they need. The Alliance keeps that front and center.”*

The Alliance has also been working because it is helping meet the needs of the people and organizations that are coming together. *“An unexpected outcome was that, as people met, they shared ideas,”* Hernandez reports. One person talked about a transportation issue they had. Someone else suggested whom she should talk to. *“They learn from each other. It opens doors.”*

Through the Women’s Alliance, Chrysalis has been able to create a learning community, says Wright, *Making Connections* site coordinator. *“They’re not being taught something, which is a different approach. Chrysalis is learning from them rather than coming to teach them something.”*

The role the Chrysalis Foundation has played has been critical, according to Renfrow and others. *“I wish we didn’t need an assist, but we do, otherwise collaboration just wouldn’t happen,”* she says.

“But the assist needs to come from an entity that really has a good positive vision of what it is supposed to be and not just something that is going to bring money.... It has to be an assist with a really good intention, and people at the

"I wish we didn't need an assist but we do, otherwise collaboration wouldn't happen. But the assist needs to come from an entity that really has a good positive vision of what it is supposed to be, and people at the table need to come with trust."

Sue Renfrow

table need to come with trust.... Otherwise you'll just be at that table out of fear or coercion."

Kathy McFarlin agrees about the critical role Chrysalis has played. *"Chrysalis has been key in keeping a focus on the work and bringing the leadership. I wouldn't have had time to define the outcomes and goals, but Chrysalis does that. It's a collaboration of not the usual suspects. It really is involved in the work that we want to do around social change and not just to get us together to hang out."*

Hernandez thinks Chrysalis was able to be a catalyst because *"we are different than a CBO"* and because it had a "leg up." That leg up was *"a relationship that is very open and not threatening and an appreciation for the work they do."*

Hernandez's willingness to listen was key, according to Wright. *"Chrysalis showed skills as a gifted leader and a connector weaver in the community. They have emulated the role of Casey as a funder convener."*

The fact that the Casey Foundation through *Making Connections* was also trying to get organizations and funders to work together – and to get them to listen to the voice of the people living in lower-income neighborhoods – also helped, Hernandez thinks. Casey's work *"to build neighborhood leadership and demonstrate how people can develop their own voice"* was a model for her.

"I think Casey really demonstrated that it's not just about the money, but helping community



Primary Health Care's Bobretta Brewton says that, when done well, collaborations can be invaluable. *"No client knows how many different funding streams make things happen."*

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Margaret Wright

leaders and community members to understand their responsibility to improve the community on their own.”

Aikoregie echoes her awareness of the role that Casey and *Making Connections* played. *“The presence of Making Connections is so important because Des Moines is a peculiar environment with so much competition.... You just weren’t seeing the collaborative process working effectively.”*

Hernandez also saw the need to build an open, honest collaboration, which she didn’t think was possible if it was seen as a strategy to gain funding. She says she worked to keep funding issues out of the conversation.

“By coming together in this way, what I’ve seen is a better network with more camaraderie. They realize they can come to Chrysalis and ask questions that don’t threaten their opportunities. That’s the challenge with [other funders] – showing your pimples to [them] is not so easy!”

“To me, being able to talk about the major challenges without the fear of being judged or losing funding – these are trust relationships that these agencies have.”

The Casey Foundation’s Carole Thompson, whose grant to study healthy relationships helped catalyze the Alliance, has been impressed by this trust. *“When we on the funder’s side ask questions about what more could we learn to help a CBO do their work better, they are often suspicious. They think we want to know what they don’t do well. It’s rare to*

have a safe environment in the funder-recipient relationship.”

Directors of organizations such as Family Directions’ Renfrow responded positively to this dynamic. She says that the Alliance felt *“balanced and not political. There is a trust in this collaboration, which in others I haven’t felt. This is driven by bringing organizations to listen and talk to each other with no ulterior motives.”*

McFarlin says that, in the Alliance, *“it feels like there is a place and need for everyone.”*

Hernandez believes that having people come up with a joint business plan also helps keep the focus on the broader agenda. The plan became the guidepost, not a foundation’s requirement.

Brewton of Primary Health Care says that the plan helps *“create this spirit of unity that the community wants to see. It’s right there in black and white with the business plan: these are the priorities and the action steps.”*

“The business community can look at these pieces and see what fits for them, then decide what they can support. They might want their employees to get involved in volunteer efforts, so here is a place where they can get involved.”

“You take that document to the legislature and it’s clear what you’re trying to do – talk to them more, give them the plan!”

The plan, says McFarlin, *“legitimizes the work. These are real problems that have data behind them.”*

“The presence and example of Casey and *Making Connections* has helped our community partners look at each other in a whole new way. It’s a new collaborative environment.”

—Terry Hernandez

The hope is that this business plan backed by the Alliance will lead to changes on policy issues and funding that will make a difference for both the organizations themselves and their clients.

Aikoregie talked about the Alliance’s potential to go after the kind of funding CBOs need to improve service delivery. “We want to do high impact work for women and their needs, and as this relates to funders, we’ve got to get beyond this every year, chase-the-rabbit thing. We want funders to see how credible Alliance members are, and then give them two to three years of funding so that there’s continuity in their services.”

In addition to jointly developing a business plan for supporting women’s issues in Des Moines and throughout the state, Hernandez also thinks it’s important for the Alliance to develop its own project that involves its members working together on a critical issue.

“How can we collectively serve a population and move it? What is one project that would require a significant investment to launch? My personal vision is to have the ability to approach a large national foundation that supports work in one key area.”

Whether at the policy level or the funding level, Alliance members have started to see the possibilities of acting in unison. “If we could go in with one voice and one ask, and agree that this was what our clients needed, it would be easier to get overall funding instead of being determined individually.”

Aikoregie concludes, “The work in the Alliance is not just a paper tiger, not just a dog-and-pony show for some money. The Alliance says, ‘Let’s deal with the issues.’ Ultimately, that will bring resources for quality organizations. The Alliance is about doing high impact work on real issues of today: not just surface stuff and one more year of funding.”

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Photos by Teresa Zilk

This is one of a series of reflections, stories and reports about the work of *Making Connections*, a long-term community change initiative supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. They are written by The Diarist Project, a new approach the foundation is using to document and learn from this initiative. Diarist publications are available at: www.DiaristProject.org. For more information, contact Tim@CharityChoices.com.

For more information about *Making Connections* Des Moines:

1111 Ninth St., Suite 290, Des Moines, Iowa 50314; 515-282-3561; www.makingconnectionsdm.org.

For more information about the Women’s Alliance and the Chrysalis Foundation:

300 E. Locust St., Suite 150, Des Moines, Iowa 50309; 515-255-1853; www.chrysalisfdn.org.