



Engaging Youth in Community Change

A MAKING CONNECTIONS PEER TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE MATCH BETWEEN
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT; PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND; AND BOSTON,
MASSACHUSETTS

PEER TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE LEADS TO ACTION

*Part of a Series from the
Technical Assistance Resource
Center of the Annie E. Casey
Foundation and the Center
for the Study of Social Policy*

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The Annie E. Casey Foundation

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States. It was established in 1948 by Jim Casey, one of the founders of United Parcel Service, and his siblings, who named the Foundation in honor of their mother. The primary mission of the Foundation is to foster public policies, human-service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families. In pursuit of this goal, the Foundation makes grants that help states, cities, and neighborhoods fashion more innovative, cost-effective responses to these needs. For more information, visit the Foundation's website at www.aecf.org.

Center for the Study of Social Policy

The Center for the Study of Social Policy, based in Washington, D.C., was established in 1979 with the goal of providing public policy analysis and technical assistance to states and localities. The Center's work is concentrated in the areas of family and children's services, income supports, neighborhood-based services, education reform, family support, community decision-making, and human resource innovations. The Center manages peer technical assistance as part of the Foundation's Technical Assistance Resource Center (TARC).

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BACKGROUND

Through the *Making Connections* initiative, the Annie E. Casey Foundation is working with Hartford, Connecticut; Providence, Rhode Island; and several other communities across the country to improve outcomes for children and families living in tough neighborhoods. The principal aims of *Making Connections* are to link neighborhood residents to economic opportunities, enhance social networks, and improve services and supports that can help families grow stronger and achieve what they want for their children. One of the core beliefs of the *Making Connections*



initiative is that family strengthening and neighborhood transformation efforts cannot be successful or sustained unless the residents of those communities are fully engaged and involved in setting the agenda for change. Engaging young residents is an increasingly important component of this effort.

As part of the *Making Connections* initiative, the Foundation offers participating sites access to technical assistance that can help them reach their goals for strengthening families and neighborhoods. Peer consultations, a powerful form of peer-to-peer assistance that allows communities to capitalize on the practical knowledge gained by those who have successfully achieved similar goals in other places, is a particularly valuable resource *Making Connections* sites draw upon to learn about innovative strategies that are useful in advancing their own neighborhood efforts.

On June 21–22, 2004, a diverse team of youth and adults from Hartford, Connecticut, and Providence, Rhode Island, traveled to Boston, Massachusetts, to participate in a peer technical assistance consultation with MYTOWN, a Boston-based, nonprofit organization. In this consultation, the Hartford and Providence teams sought to: (1) develop an understanding of how the MYTOWN model enables youth to build on their assets and be integrated participants and leaders in

community work; (2) understand the connection between community history, research, data collection, and youth as knowledgeable leaders; (3) develop skills to use MYTOWN curricular materials and understand what makes it engaging and relevant to young people; and (4) learn about the strategies their respective communities are using to involve youth. This report summarizes the results of that peer consultation, highlighting the main lessons learned.

SETTING THE CONTEXT FOR THE MATCH

While resident leaders participate in all facets of *Making Connections*, youth have not been engaged consistently in the sites. Many of these communities are looking for substantive and meaningful ways to involve youth in their neighborhood improvement activities.

Through the Foundation's Community Mobilization and Action for Results (CMAR) workgroup, powerful strategies for engaging residents and youth are being developed with many of the sites. CMAR was created to develop and deliver a body of work that is designed to bring clear thinking, useful tools, proven practices, and other resources to support the sites' ability to engage families, residents, and other community partners in their work. The CMAR working group is comprised of Foundation staff, grantees, and consultants who work closely with sites to develop and implement strategies to mobilize the community, build broad and deep alliances among residents and other partners, and focus their mobilization work on supporting community results. The CMAR working group provides consultation to site teams and partners and helps sites conduct analyses of opportunities and challenges, develop options for strengthening community mobilization efforts, and generate ideas for increasing the commitment of residents and other community partners to the work. CMAR has worked closely with MYTOWN and recommended that it be involved in helping *Making Connections* sites think about promising approaches to youth engagement.

MYTOWN

Since 1995, MYTOWN has used local history as a tool to empower young people and build appreciation for urban neighborhoods. Recognizing that Boston's history, while unique, is not fully represented by popular accounts that focus chiefly on the city's English colonial and early Revolutionary War history, MYTOWN's founders believed that a broader public understanding of Boston's history held the potential



of helping more Bostonians realize the critical importance of their role as community stewards and change-makers. The founders believed that this information would be especially useful to the city's young people and teenagers who make daily decisions about who they are in society and what their personal contributions will be. MYTOWN was born as an idea that would use the history of under-documented communities to inspire and prepare young people for their rightful role as active, engaged, and self-determined citizens.

To fulfill its mission, MYTOWN runs three interrelated programs. MYTOWN's Youth Guide Development Program equips low- and moderate-income urban teenagers with the skills and knowledge that they need to challenge stereotypes and become engaged citizens. Boston high school students are hired as youth guides to participate in an intensive training and employment opportunity that builds essential leadership, communication, work readiness, cultural competence, and critical thinking skills. Youth guides use these skills to research their local and personal histories and then teach what they have learned to a larger public audience by developing and leading Civic Education Projects. These tours, presentations, and educational workshops use the built environment to focus on the accomplishments of ethnic and immigrant communities, the complexities of urban development, and the power of citizen activism. These projects celebrate the diversity and multi-cultural fabric of urban communities and provide a platform for cross-cultural

exchanges between urban youth and diverse audiences. MYTOWN's BRICK (Building Revolutions In Community Knowledge) is a collection of 21 of MYTOWN's most interactive and engaging learning activities. MYTOWN hopes that by sharing these activities it will help meet the demand from other youth-serving organizations that want to integrate community history exploration into their existing programs.

MYTOWN's philosophy is based on an understanding of the importance of connecting history to the current state of neighborhoods and communities. They believe that developing youth leaders who feel a sense of ownership of their immediate surroundings requires knowledge of history.

“History informs our assumptions and transforms our expectations. Every day we are involved with collecting our own history. We notice the built world around us, the state of buildings, open spaces, people, etc. These observations color how we see the world and determine what standards and expectations we hold for our neighborhoods. Learning history and understanding the built environment is more than dwelling on the past. It allows us to develop a game plan for the future based on our ancestor's lessons, struggles, and triumphs.”

MYTOWN employs a number of strategies to bring this philosophy to life. By using what young people see to challenge who they are, what they have learned, and what they think, MYTOWN provokes young people to use their life experiences as a starting point for understanding local, national, and global events. By discussing the accomplishments of local change-makers, MYTOWN demonstrates the need for young people to assume community leadership and ownership.



MYTOWN's youth guides are the heart and soul of their organization. Youth guides are local high school students between the ages of 14 and 18. They are hired based on their desire to learn and teach others about Boston's history as well as their desire to develop their personal and civic leadership. They represent diverse neighborhoods, public schools, and ethnic backgrounds. Youth guides research and develop MYTOWN's public history products that include tours and slide shows. Through a series of community projects, youth guides learn how to identify community needs, galvanize resources, and utilize their talents to promote or change what they see going on within their communities.

THE CONSULTATION

Providence *Making Connections*

The *Making Connections* initiative in Providence is focused on four neighborhoods that have a high concentration of residents under age 18 and over age 65. The average income is well under that of the city as a whole, and a large proportion of the residents are living in poverty. *Making Connections* is working to improve results for these children and families by concentrating on improving housing affordability and availability, neighborhood conditions, and access to jobs and assets, and by providing high-quality education.

The Providence team is trying to create more meaningful opportunities for youth to participate in its *Making Connections* work. For the past few years, the work has been very adult focused, even though youth have been attending and participating in meetings. Providence *Making Connections* has 14 distinct strategies, and with this large range of activities and efforts, an ongoing challenge is involving youth in the work. To reach its goal of having more youth involved, it recently developed a workplan to outline its efforts. The workplan is intended to make sure that youth are able to take action and can create some of their own projects as strategies to help move the overall *Making Connections* work along. The Providence team was interested in meeting with MYTOWN to learn about the best ways for youth to work with adults and how to create true partnerships between them. In particular, it wanted to learn

about specific MYTOWN activities and share ideas and strategies with both MYTOWN and the Hartford team, including learning more about the partner organizations that are involved in supporting their youth work.



Hartford *Making Connections*

Hartford *Making Connections* is currently focused on two neighborhoods and hopes to expand into several other neighborhoods over time. The two neighborhoods are predominantly low income, with high rates of unemployment and single heads of households. Hartford established a broad theory of change for improving the lives of children and families in these neighborhoods that articulated three key activities—resident engagement, community focus and connectedness, and creation of opportunities.

The Hartford team has begun engaging youth in *Making Connections* through its partnership with Cityscan, a local organization that began as a citizen engagement effort and provides tools for citizens to document problems in their community. Using technology, such as video cameras and handheld organizers, it empowers community residents to gather data on neighborhood eyesores, such as graffiti and abandoned buildings, and create reports that are sent to city officials. These citizens have been able to see demonstrable results. For example, three weeks after sending a report about abandoned cars in one neighborhood, 85 percent of the cars had been removed. Often, residents will do re-scans to see if any results occurred. Cityscan is attempting to help the community have a public discourse about issues and conditions they want to address. It has started to work with youth and wants to expand its

efforts to develop a youth leadership program. Its goal is for youth to choose what issues they want to research and focus their efforts specifically on the *Making Connections* target neighborhoods. For example, in Hartford, many youth and recreation centers are not being used, so young people working with Cityscan created a survey to find out why and to develop solutions for increasing use. Cityscan is able to use funding it receives for workforce development to pay the youth, who average about 20 hours of work a week.



Cityscan is beginning to work more closely with *Making Connections*, and youth have completed several projects in *Making Connections* neighborhoods. The Hartford team hoped to learn youth engagement strategies from MYTOWN that could inform its efforts to create a strong leadership development program. In particular, it wanted to build relationships with the other participants from MYTOWN and Providence, learn about what is

happening in these communities, and learn how to develop programs and build youth leadership.

“It’s really sad how many people don’t care about, and choose to ignore, their surroundings. But by working with Cityscan, I now see that it’s all of our responsibility to improve our neighborhoods. If I hadn’t joined Cityscan, I’d never look at my neighborhood the way I do now, and they’ve given me skills in using technology that will be so helpful to me in the future.”

—Priscilla Corales, *Hartford Youth*

Purpose

Before traveling to Boston, a series of facilitated conversations helped Hartford, Providence, and MYTOWN agree on an agenda that provided a framework for the consultation.

The purpose of the peer consultation was to share strategies for youth involvement and engagement and learn from MYTOWN's experience in engaging youth and creating youth leaders. Both Providence and Hartford are in the beginning stages of developing strategies for better involving youth and were hoping to learn about the successful strategies MYTOWN has used to get and keep youth involved, and to identify methods of involving youth in more meaningful ways in their own communities.

Participants

The Hartford team was comprised of one adult and three youth from Cityscan. The Providence team included three youth and two adults working with the *Making Connections* local learning partnership and project staff. Also participating in the match were staff from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, including a site team leader and chair of the CMAR working group, the evaluation liaison to Providence, and two program assistants. The peer consultant team from MYTOWN was comprised of MYTOWN's executive director, youth program director, and several youth leaders/tour guides. Staff from the Center for the Study of Social Policy in Washington, D.C., supported the peer match.

The consultation took place June 21–22, 2004, in Boston, Massachusetts, at the John Hancock Conference Center and the Boston Foundation. It began with an opening welcome and activity, followed by a youth-guided walking tour of the South End neighborhood of Boston. The tour ended with dinner at a local restaurant with community leaders and activists, elected officials, and funders. The second day began with a welcome from the organizational host—the Boston Foundation—

followed by a full day of facilitated dialogue, small group activities, and an opportunity to reflect on the experience. During the match, the peer consultants shared their experiences and provided concrete suggestions to help Providence and Hartford think about new strategies to engage youth in their work. The peer consultation was graphically recorded by Kim Love on large wall charts that were digitally photographed. Images from these recordings are included throughout this report.

“What’s really important is that this peer learning exchange is an opportunity for young people to come together and learn from each other and allows us as adults to learn from youth. The Casey Foundation is interested in doing more to recognize that youth have assets, skills, and value to offer, and hopes to find more ways to involve young people in bringing their energy, ideas, and strengths to collecting and using data for social change.”

—Audrey Jordan, Senior Evaluation Associate, Annie E. Casey Foundation

LESSONS LEARNED



During the peer consultation, lessons learned and strategies for success were shared by participants. Through experience, MYTOWN has learned that there are several critical factors necessary for successfully working with youth. These are described below:

Reinforcing positive youth development to build youth leaders

A key to working with youth is being intentional about promoting youth development.

A list of what is meant by positive youth development was compiled by the participants. These characteristics include:

- Being youth-centered
- Supporting youth empowerment and engagement
- Creating opportunities for action
- Being flexible and open to change
- Having passion
- Creating an atmosphere of safety, trust, honesty, and respect
- Supporting opportunities for skill building and utilizing existing skills
- Affirming who the young people are
- Recognizing that youth have varying levels of interest and energy
- Being a mentor and helping youth find their own voices
- Recognizing that speaking up doesn't mean being disrespectful
- Building on existing youth assets
- Listening
- Taking time and dedicating energy
- Having a shared purpose
- Valuing diversity
- Honoring friendship and family
- Allowing peers to lead each other puts more onus on them to empower each other and build their own capacities

- Building confidence and utilizing that confidence to make a difference
- Letting youth know and be able to tell their own stories

“People think youth development is about changing young people to be the way they think youth should be—youth are seen as ‘developed’ because they ‘got out’ of the neighborhood, have money, have a job, went to college, have a nice car, a family, and a house. None of those things necessarily have anything to do with personal growth.”

—Liz Miranda, Director of Research and Training, MYTOWN

Meeting youth “where they are”

Youth face a variety of issues, but many want to find a way to make positive changes in their communities. Working with youth requires a balance between acknowledging their own personal situations and providing an opportunity and space for them to focus on other things. MYTOWN strives to create an atmosphere like a family, and by building strong relationships, youth are able to tackle issues like drugs, violence, guns, and gangs.



Activities such as “H.O.M.E.” are one way that MYTOWN helps to reinforce the values and experiences that youth bring with them. The H.O.M.E. activity asks youth to draw a picture of what home means to them and then share their drawings with other youth. This fosters relationships and team building and creates a sense of community. It also recognizes and validates each youth’s unique life history.

In addition, youth are often generalized as having the same issues and concerns. The young people involved with MYTOWN, and youth in both Providence and Hartford, are diverse, with different cultural backgrounds, different skills, and different needs. “You can be any kind of kid and learn something from MYTOWN,” said one youth tour guide.

“Adults need to realize that young people are not all alike, young people are not static, and each youth has different skills and needs. These differences should be understood and appreciated.”

—*Sarath Suong, Providence Making Connections*

Creating a sense of ownership by youth

“People who aren’t connected and don’t feel a place belongs to them will likely feel that since they don’t have any authority to make decisions that what happens there doesn’t matter.”

—*Liz Miranda, Director of Research and Training, MYTOWN*



The heart of MYTOWN’s work is youth exploring and researching the history of their communities—a process by which all the youth involved reported feeling more connected to their neighborhoods and to the city as a whole.

MYTOWN’s strategy of having youth research their own communities helps to reduce stereotypes about urban neighborhoods. Youth who are bombarded with negative images about their communities (violent, dirty, uneducated, lazy, etc.) are able to dispel those stereotypes for themselves and others who are outside their communities. This helps develop both a sense of pride and respect for what is valuable about, and what assets exist in, their neighborhoods.

For those who are recent immigrants, or live in immigrant communities, developing a sense of place can be an additional challenge. Last year, MYTOWN youth based their learning objectives on immigrants and migration. The majority of youth participating in MYTOWN are the first generation in their families to be born in the United States. Some of the youth had family living overseas who they called on while doing research. The basis of much of the history they discovered is that of the ethnic, immigrant working class, and these are the stories they share on tours. Much of the information they gathered is based on oral histories, and they are using this as a foundation for ongoing community change work.



MYTOWN uses several activities to encourage youth to think critically about the world around them. One of these activities—the Model City—was shared with the Hartford and Providence teams. In small groups, participants were asked to draw a version of their ideal city, taking into consideration population (size, racial/ethnic composition, age breakdown), type of government, kind of transportation, jobs and industry, and recreation.

Each group created a different ideal city, but there were common themes among them. All created diverse communities with opportunities for people of different faiths to worship together. Citizen democracy, parks and recreation, access to schools, affordable housing, and good transportation were also common elements.

“We believe that if young people see connections to places they live, light bulbs can come on and they say, ‘Since I care about where I’m from’—I will do something differently.”

Utilizing skill-building activities tailored to youth

The MYTOWN youth guides are able to develop and utilize a range of skills through participation in personal and community exploration activities structured in such a way to foster empowerment, team building, and positive behavior. MYTOWN staff created two core materials to guide their work—the Youth Development Urban Field Notebook and the BRICK Kit. The Urban Field Notebook outlines MYTOWN’s approach to positive youth development and creating an environment in which youth can thrive and learn new skills. The Notebook is written to inform and influence those who work with youth to help them build upon the unique strengths that youth bring. Based on principles highlighted in the Notebook, youth at MYTOWN are encouraged to work together to agree on rules, expectations, and guiding principles, and to create a safe space for exercising positive and shared leadership. Having clear concise activities, allowing for consensus decision-making, and identifying who works well together helps to

ensure that youth continue to grow and expand their skills. Youth also learn work readiness skills in creative ways, such as using skits to teach lessons and act out what they are learning. Rather than telling them what to do, or having them read a policy manual, these activities are tailored to the ways in which youth learn best.

MYTOWN's second material, the BRICK Kit (Building Revolutions In Community Knowledge), includes the activities it has found to be particularly effective and can translate to many different environments.

This Kit was developed to help those who want to incorporate an exploration of personal and neighborhood history into their work with youth. The BRICK Kit has activities that help users learn about themselves, their families, their neighbors, and surrounding communities. Youth are encouraged to lead their peers in these activities, further developing their own facilitation and leadership skills.

Some examples of the 20 activities from the BRICK Kit include telling a neighborhood story and the H.O.M.E. and Model City activities previously mentioned. The Kit was shared with the Providence and Hartford teams, and the activities will be useful as each site develops strategies for working with youth.



Engaging youth in community change work

“Community change efforts led by youth and that start with people who live and work in these communities are much more likely to be successful.”

—Garland Yates, Senior Associate, Annie E. Casey Foundation



Since *Making Connections* targets specific neighborhoods, learning about MYTOWN's focus on developing a sense of ownership to bring about social change was especially significant.

Several lessons were shared for engaging youth in this work:

- *Let youth choose their own direction.* Encourage youth to choose what issues they want to focus on and expand their notions of where they can go and what they can do to affect positive change. Allow them to pick their own interests and choose their own projects.
- *Compensate them in some way for their efforts.* MYTOWN youth are employed and receive a competitive salary for their time. This helps both with increasing their motivation and their commitment to following through on the work. People tend to see youth as free labor, but youth are often more engaged if they view their work as a job.
- *Provide challenges and rewards.* Many of MYTOWN's youth guides shared that knowing selection to the program was competitive made them value being chosen to participate even more. Having the ability to move up in responsibility and begin to teach their peers was also a good incentive. MYTOWN also encouraged the group to celebrate and be proud of every accomplishment, no matter how big or small. For example, if youth work hard one day, give them pizza the next and let them relax and have a good time.
- *Look for opportunities for action.* Hartford's efforts to collect neighborhood data and send reports to the city are impressive. One suggestion from the other participants was instead of sending a report, Hartford could do a historical review of abandoned buildings and tell the story, the history of them. They could then ask elected officials to take a tour that would bring the issue to life.

“How can we do community building without involving youth in the neighborhoods? It’s hard to imagine turning around these conditions without youth participation and involvement.”

—Garland Yates, Senior Associate, Annie E. Casey Foundation

Using innovative strategies to gather data

Engaging community members in social change often requires building a bridge between information and those who are on the ground wanting to make change happen. Often efforts are unsuccessful because people don’t have the appropriate information they need.

MYTOWN encourages and supports youth efforts to gather information, teaching the youth valuable skills in the process, such as public speaking and communication. One of its strategies is called a “neighborhood plunge,” which asks youth to choose a neighborhood they want to focus on and investigate and gives them a small amount of money to buy something that describes the neighborhood. After this initial exploration, the youth go back and conduct surveys, do oral history research, interview neighborhood residents, and record this information with the consent of the interviewees. They then use this information to write a presentation that eventually becomes incorporated in the neighborhood tours they conduct.



Engaging community partners to support youth work

MYTOWN partners with many organizations that support the work of their youth and play an important role in helping youth become leaders. These organizations include community development corporations, Main Streets programs, public libraries, and community-based multiservice agencies.



The relationships developed build a network that youth can access and can lead to internships, jobs, mentoring, and long-lasting personal and professional contacts. The organizations it partners with are trusted in the community and share a commitment to empowering youth. The partnerships help youth expand their social networks and support for MYTOWN to continue to grow. Through word of mouth and tours, many people in the community know about MYTOWN's work and are eager to support the youth or become youth guides themselves.

“Good youth work can’t be afraid of empowering the whole young person—can’t succeed without recognizing youth have issues—they have a life outside of work, they need leaders, mentors, guides, and this is what is different about youth work that leads to actions and results.”

—Liz Miranda, Director of Research and Training, MYTOWN

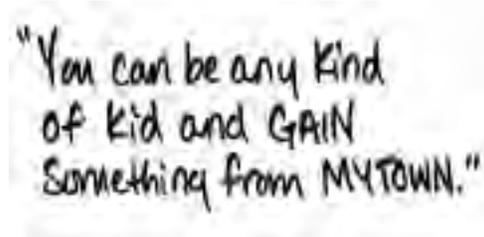
PARTICIPANT REFLECTIONS

As the peer consultation drew to a close, the participants reflected on what a worthwhile learning experience it had been. Participants shared a strong sense of excitement and hope and were grateful for the opportunity to learn and share their knowledge and experiences. The following are some participants' reflections on the highlights of the match:

- “It’s wonderful to see youth taking the lead on activities.”
- “I am inspired by all of the young people. It was great to hear about MYTOWN, Providence, and Hartford trying to work within their context and widen that space to do more of the things they would like to do.”

- “Personally, I am now more inspired to learn about where I live and find youth who may want to help. I’m not a historian but your materials and tools are simple enough that I can do it!”

- “Young people came together from three different communities and all participated, which is fantastic! I’m inspired by Providence’s workplan and I will definitely do what I can to support it.”



- “I like seeing what other youth like me are doing.”
- “I really enjoyed the format—not just talking about it, being able to do it and apply it—this made it much more real.”
- “For us at MYTOWN, this is encouraging for our youth. I am very proud of them and thankful for all the support they’ve received from you.”
- “Usually we come into a room having to prove something to adults, and in here it feels like an equal playing field, and we are able to be on the same page.”

- “I really want all the *Making Connections* sites to have an opportunity to see this great work MYTOWN is doing.”
- “Other adults doing the work in *Making Connections* need to be a part of this and figure out a forum for more interaction between youth and adults.”



“Working with youth requires an understanding of positive youth development to be able to see the most a young person has to offer and nurture their skills. People who run youth programs need to have certain skills—know how to engage youth and see youth not just as future leaders, but see that youth are and can be leaders right now.”

—*Audrey Jordan, Senior Evaluation Associate, Annie E. Casey Foundation*

PROGRESS TO DATE

After the peer consultation, the teams from Hartford and Providence shared what they learned with other *Making Connections* staff and partners. As a result of their experience, both teams have completed some next steps to further develop their youth engagement strategies. For example, Providence has applied for funding to create a program similar to Cityscan in its communities, and Hartford has expanded its work with youth into additional high schools in the *Making Connections* neighborhoods.

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WHAT IS *MAKING CONNECTIONS*?

Making Connections is the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s initiative to improve outcomes for some of the nation’s most vulnerable children and families. The initiative is conducted through deep and durable partnerships with selected cities and neighborhoods across the United States (for more information, visit www.aecf.org/mc). Several core ideas underlie *Making Connections*:

- *Making Connections* is based on the recognition that the greatest number of American children who suffer from “rotten outcomes” live in city neighborhoods that are in many ways cut off—disconnected—from the mainstream opportunities of American life. Thus, *Making Connections* is “place-based”—it focuses on specific neighborhoods in specific cities.
- *Making Connections* has a simple theory: that children do better when they grow up in strong families, and families do better when they live in supportive neighborhoods. Thus, *Making Connections* strategies are aimed at helping families obtain what they need to be strong, and helping neighborhoods gain the resources they need in order to support families well.
- *Making Connections* focuses on three major types of “connections” that help families grow stronger and achieve what they want for their children. The first of these is helping families connect to **economic opportunities** and to jobs that provide income, assets, and an economic future. Research and experience suggest that this type of connection is unlikely without two others: strong connections to the **social networks** of kin, neighborhood groups, and other informal ties that sustain families when times get tough, and to high-quality, **effective services and supports** that help families reach their goals.

Making Connections focuses on improving results for children and families in tough neighborhoods. Core results that *Making Connections* communities are mobilizing around include:

- Families have increased earnings and income;
- Families have increased levels of assets;
- Families, youth, and neighborhoods increase their participation in civic life;
- Families and neighborhoods have strong informal supports and networks;
- Families have access to quality services and supports; and
- Children are healthy and ready to succeed in school.

A key task in ensuring the success of *Making Connections* is making available the learning and technical assistance that the participating sites need to move forward with their work. One of the ways that the Foundation provides this kind of support is by making peer matches available.

WHAT ARE PEER MATCHES?

Since 1995, as part of a broader effort to rely more intentionally on the experience of people working in the field, the Center for the Study of Social Policy began working with several partners and funders to develop and offer a rather intensive form of peer technical assistance known as peer matches. Peer matches are structured opportunities for teams of people from two or more jurisdictions who are working on a similar issue to exchange experiences and practical knowledge toward resolving a particular challenge that has been identified in advance.

The rationale behind peer matches is straightforward. Often, the people best able to provide hands-on help are the “doers” themselves—people from states and communities who have successfully addressed a problem or created an effective new policy or strategy. These are the people who have an acute sense of what has and hasn’t worked, and why and why not. They have developed good tools and strategies they can share. And they are usually eager to help others because of a strong sense of shared mission. But while good peer matches are informal, they are never

casual, using a carefully designed process and structure to focus the common interests, roles, and goodwill that exist between peers on producing meaningful change for a community.

Peer matches are a resource and time intensive strategy. Careful consideration of when, where, and how to use this approach is therefore always warranted. Experience has shown that careful preparation and execution of the matches are critical factors for their success. This approach tends to work best when the following conditions are in place:

- A specific problem or issue has been identified, and the people looking for help are at a key decision point with respect to the design or implementation of a state or community strategy;
- Stakeholders are invested in and have a high degree of ownership in solving a problem;
- The timing is right—e.g., a decision or action that will affect the community’s family strengthening agenda is going to be taken and/or someone needs to be convinced to take action; and
- A reasonably small number of people have the authority and ability to act on what they learn in the match.

To date, the Center has brokered over 60 peer matches on topics ranging from creating resident-led community development corporations and governance structures, to establishing multilingual homeownership assistance centers, to building integrated services models. As illustrated in the case summaries that are part of this series, peer matches help spread good policies and practice, build relationships among different stakeholders who may not always have a chance to work together, and enable people to put changes in place that improve results for children, families, and neighborhoods.



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