



Building Resident Engagement in a Community Collaborative

A *MAKING CONNECTIONS* PEER TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE MATCH BETWEEN
OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA AND LAWRENCE, MASSACHUSETTS

PEER TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE LEADS TO ACTION

*Part of a Series from the
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Building Resident Engagement in a Community Collaborative Oakland and Lawrence Peer Match Lawrence, Massachusetts

January 31-February 2, 2005

INTRODUCTION

Through the *Making Connections* initiative, the Annie E. Casey Foundation is working with Oakland, California, and several other communities across the country, to improve outcomes for children and families living in tough neighborhoods. One of the principal aims of *Making Connections* is to link neighborhood residents with economic opportunities, social networks, and effective services and supports that can help families grow stronger and achieve what they want for their children. A central premise behind *Making Connections* is that residents need to be meaningfully engaged in efforts to making change happen within their communities.

As part of this initiative, the Foundation offers participating sites access to technical assistance that can help them reach their goals for strengthening families and neighborhoods. Peer technical assistance is a particularly valuable resource that *Making Connections* communities can use to address issues and solve problems they have identified in their own contexts. Peer technical assistance allows sites to meet with innovators in other communities across the country who have successfully achieved similar goals and to capitalize on the practical knowledge they gained from their experiences.

On January 31 – February 2, 2005, a diverse team from Oakland *Making Connections* traveled to Lawrence, Massachusetts to participate in a peer technical assistance match that focused on learning about effective resident engagement strategies in a neighborhood context. Oakland *Making Connections* has been building a broad-based community collaborative that has succeeded in establishing quite a few partnerships and levels of participation. The collaborative is currently exploring options for developing a resident engagement strategy and wanted to learn from Lawrence's success in building a base of engaged residents in its community. This report summarizes the results of that peer consultation and highlights the main lessons learned and the next steps the Oakland team committed to pursue to make progress in this area.

SETTING THE CONTEXT FOR THE MATCH

The Lower San Antonio Collaborative

The Lower San Antonio Collaborative (LSAC) is a coalition of neighborhood organizations that formed shortly after the Annie E. Casey Foundation chose Lower San Antonio as its target neighborhood in 1999. Organizations represented in the LSAC ranged from very substantial community development corporations to new non-profits struggling to find their niche. A good

number of the organizations have long histories in the neighborhood and significant connections to families and other residents. As such, the LSAC represents a very strong connection between the initiative and the neighborhood, its residents and its leaders.

During the initial phase of the Initiative, the bulk of the work was directed at building relationships among groups and organizations seeking to strengthening families and to develop a results-oriented vision for that neighborhood. The second phase, which started in January 2002, has focused on refining the results that the initiative is seeking on behalf of children and families and identifying and implementing strategies to achieve those results. At the same time, there has been a strong focus on establishing a base to support this work by strengthening resident leadership, building the capacity of local agencies, and fostering deeper relationships with significant partners such as government officials, business leaders, and the faith community.

In the past three years, *Making Connections* Oakland has devoted considerably energy to strengthening the LSAC. Community organizing, the creation of partnerships and alliances, and the need for accountability make up the core components of LSAC's theory of change. While there are challenges to be resolved regarding the collaborative, it undoubtedly constitutes a major investment by neighborhood leaders in *Making Connections* and provides the initiative with a powerful, deeply rooted voice in support of family strengthening.

The collaborative has several work numbers groups that address issues such as early childhood education, family economic success, health, the 23rd Avenue Corridor, housing, and newspaper. These work groups recently engaged in a self-assessment process and developed work plans that recognized the importance of engaging residents in their efforts. Though there are several innovative resident engagement strategies at play in the neighborhood, the collaborative recognized the need to confront several important challenges in this area. For example, it remains critical that LSAC members don't become complacent that because they are neighborhood-based, they necessarily reflect genuine resident engagement. They also want to figure out how general engagement efforts can lead to real participation in family strengthening projects by regular residents. Moreover, they are interested in develop strategies that can help people get more easily connected to the variety of resources and opportunities that the larger San Antonio family strengthening initiative has to offer. Typically, residents are engaged through particular organizations – some call them clients and some call them members—but there is not a larger mechanism for combining and building a broader constituency for community organizing and mobilization purposes. The LSAC wanted to learn from other communities about effective resident engagement strategies and, in particular, about strategies that weave together that can help weave together these resident engagement strategies more powerfully.

In late 2004, a number of developments generated new momentum and interest in resident engagement issues. First, a new community outreach workgroup formed to address resident involvement and leadership issues. The workgroup brought together the community newspaper, the neighborhood grants project, and the media outreach initiative. Second, in December, 2004 the 23rd Avenue workgroup held a town hall meeting that g brought together about 100 residents to learn about the most recent plan for the corridor and provide their input for 2005. Third, some key partners of *Making Connections* Oakland had an opportunity to visit Lawrence CommunityWorks (LCW) in Lawrence, Massachusetts and came back very excited about what they saw. This was followed by a visit to Oakland by Bill Traynor, the director of LCW, to talk about the LCW resident

network and how they have gone about building a resident base. As a next step, Oakland requested the help from the Foundation's Technical Assistance Resource Center (TARC) to arrange a peer match with Lawrence CommunityWorks so they could bring a larger team of neighborhood leaders and residents to learn more about their resident engagement strategies.

Lawrence CommunityWorks, Inc.

Lawrence CommunityWorks, Inc. (LCW) is a nonprofit community development corporation dedicated to the sustained revitalization of the city of Lawrence, Massachusetts. LCW had its beginnings in the struggle to build affordable housing in North Lawrence in the early 1980s. It works with residents and local stakeholders to improve both the quality of life in Lawrence's neighborhoods and the opportunities available to residents through organizing, planning and development.

LCW comprises a dynamic group of families, organizations, and institutions. Together, they are creating a network of Lawrence residents who are revitalizing the city by:

- Building family and community assets;
- Contributing their time, skills, and energy to the group; and
- Engaging in collective action to advance the agenda of revitalization.

What is Organizing?

“Organizing is bringing the talents, skills, knowledge and resources of people in the community together to increase their collective power to transform themselves and their community and work for social change. It involves building relationships and consolidating perspectives, ideas and thoughts into collective action”

LCW Website

Under new leadership, LCW took on a vision to build a strong resident base and not be dependent on city money. In the past five years, the organization has grown a membership of over 850 residents, a staff of 20, and an annual budget of over \$1 million.

Community organizing as the engine that drives LCW efforts to advance political, social, and economic development in Lawrence. Community organizing and the belief that community change is powered by people form the basis of LCW's revitalization effort.

Organizing strategies that LCW uses include:

- *NeighborCircles*—the principle organizing strategy of LCW and a fun and engaging method to build community and take collective action.
- *Poder Leadership Institute*-- a self-development and leadership building experience that seeks to support the development of excellent community leadership among Lawrence residents who are part of the CommunityWorks Network.

- *COOL Campaign*-- an organizing campaign led by neighborhood leaders to find a permanent solution to the problem of alleys, vacant lots and abandoned buildings in the North Common neighborhood.
- *Affordable Housing Action Alliance (AHAA)*-- a coalition of nonprofit housing developers and community groups that advocate for policies and resources for affordable housing in the City
- *The Reviviendo Gateway Initiative*— which LCW defines as a **vision and investment strategy** for the redevelopment of the area, a **coalition** of people, institutions and organizations working to implement the community's vision , and a **forum** for informed and democratic decision-making, with an emphasis on accountability for all participants.
- *Our House for Design & Technology*-- an innovative response to the educational and economic needs of low-income youth, who gain skills on design and technology, skills, and adults, who gain the skills to improve their economic situations and build their family assets, through assistance with savings, financial literacy, English as a Second Language, computers and more.

More information about LCW's programs and strategies can be found in their website <http://www.lawrencecommunityworks.org>.

THE CONSULTATION

Peer matches are a rather intensive form of technical assistance that TARC makes available to *Making Connections* sites. They consist of structured opportunities for teams of people from two or more jurisdictions who are working on a similar issue to come together to exchange their expertise and practical knowledge in order to address a particular challenge that has been identified in advance. Careful preparation of a peer match greatly increases the likelihood of success. Before traveling to Lawrence, a series of facilitated conversations helped the Oakland team to clarify its learning objectives and finalize the team's composition. Although the Oakland team developed the initial learning objectives, both teams acknowledged that their intention was to learn from each other in an atmosphere of true peer exchange.

Learning Objectives

In planning the peer match, differences surfaced among the Oakland participants around what the focus of the learning should be. While they all felt strongly committed to working together to continue to advance the work of the collaborative, they were not of one mind regarding the building of a resident network. The team decided that the learning objectives of the peer match should not focus so much on the resident network concept but, more generally, on acquiring a deeper understanding of resident engagement strategies that could help Oakland do the following:

- Promote resident involvement in the content areas of LSAC's work groups (e.g., housing, early childhood education, etc.);
- Build connections across age, culture, and ethnicity;
- Create a common identity/mission (both for specific work groups and a larger resident base);

- Engage residents for a long period of time; and
- Develop and sustain a broader “resident base”.

Participants

The Oakland team was comprised of 12 people who represent key stakeholders in the community collaborative. They belong to many of the work groups mentioned earlier, including health, early childhood education, family economic success, housing, the 23rd Avenue Corridor, newspaper, and community outreach. To serve as peer consultants, LCW brought together a large team consisting of staff working on the various areas including youth development, neighborhood planning, and community outreach, as well as residents active in the CommunityWorks network.

The peer match was facilitated by Diana M. Lee and Spencer Cronk, from The National Community Development Institute (NCDI) based in Oakland, California. NCDI have been working in various capacities with the Oakland *Making Connections* initiative and were able to provide additional facilitation support to Oakland *Making Connections* to recruit and prepare the team members who participated the match. NCDI also produced the initial draft of this summary report.

The consultation took place from January 31–February 2, 2005, in Lawrence, Massachusetts. It began with a welcome reception and dinner followed by a full day of intensive dialogue with staff from LCW which included a site tour, large and small group discussions, and participation in a community “Network Night”. On the final day, the Oakland team members had an opportunity to spend time reflecting on what they had learned and articulated what next steps they would like to implement in its community. The remainder of this report captures the main lessons learned and Oakland’s next steps.

- Creating a *support* environment, where mutual support is centered on person-to-person, not necessarily person-to-organization;
- Appreciating that “*form follows function*” by not trying to create a structure to fix a problem, but rather allowing a structure to develop organically; and
- Allowing opportunities for *low-level affiliation* by creating an environment that is comfortable and natural, where it is easy to come in and out.

Key Engagement Strategies

LCW has developed four key strategies to engage residents – whom they call “members” – that illustrate how it is using these principles in its organizing work. Through these strategies, LCW sees itself as the interface through which people can participate, get to know each other, build family assets, and have their voices heard in the broader community. In engaging in these strategies, LCW hopes to move toward a vision of repopulating public life by creating a robust demand environment that is coming directly from the community.

Forming Resident Committees

When LCW was just beginning, initial outreach focused on building relationships with community members. LCW started by listening to what people were saying and then organized around those issues that were most relevant. Committees then arose either from particular problems that were identified or around specific projects. For example, the Family Asset Building Program was initially concerned with helping residents establish individual development accounts and then grew to incorporate other economic development activities. A committee that included 12 residents and some LCW board and staff members was formed to oversee these projects. The first committee took a great deal of staff time, but as the work evolved more resident joined, including some youth. Typically, the committees make decisions about whether or not current programs are working and worth keeping, the creation of new programs, fundraising, and space issues.

Supporting NeighborCircles

NeighborCircles are issue-based, and they bring neighbors together to get to know one another and take action. Residents come together in a series of four meetings. The first and second meetings are for discussing the issues, the third meeting is to plan action. The fourth meeting is to introduce residents to LCW resources and to help them to work on their strategy. Some circles have worked together on alley and playground clean-ups, improving street lighting, safety and organizing block parties. A Circle that decides to address an issue identified by its members has the opportunity to become a Property Improvement Committee (PIC). PICs meet regularly so they can continue to work together on the issues they selected. LCW provides technical assistance and support to PICs.

The Circles meet in residents’ homes and usually have between five and twenty people in attendance, although ten is the ideal number. Attendees often belong to the same church, or have kids at the same school, or have some other common link. LCW staff typically begins by recruiting

hosts where there is interest or where an issue resonates with the residents. The staff then supports the host but does not play a facilitative role. Other supports that LCW provides include assistance with language translation and child care. Groups are often multi-cultural and need to have English and Spanish translation available. Additionally, families bring children to the circles, and LCW offers two options: a stipend for child care or parents can bring them to the meeting. Although these are specific examples, the general idea is to reduce the barriers to participation. Neighbor Circles often have the added benefit of getting people involved in LCW projects that they did not know about beforehand.

Developing a Resident Network

LCW has created a network that is intentional about connecting people. They use "network cards" to recruit and have registered 850 people since 1999 using this method. Other recruiting strategies include an annual meeting that always has a sign-up for new members, as well as a radio show that encourages residents to join. LCW uses a network organizer that follows up with residents that have filled out the card by holding orientations or one-on-one meetings. Orientations usually include 10 to 15 people and are co-facilitated by a resident and a staff member. After members are engaged in the network, LCW also uses "weavers", who are network members that go out and actively seek new members. LCW has found that the more the network grows, the less the staff has to go door-to-door to recruit members.

Tracking Engagement and Leadership Development

LCW uses an Access database where all new member contacts are stored and tracked. Sometimes members are concerned about their resident status being tracked, so LCW does not ask for that kind of information. They use the database for three main activities: 1) to track participation and attendance; 2) to distribute mailings and quarterly newsletters; and 3) to track where each person and family is getting involved.

Members that are actively involved in the network as facilitators, hosts and other leadership roles are given an opportunity to participate in the PODER Leadership Institute. As a college-level course, PODER provides intensive training for emerging leaders who want to increase their efficacy in rebuilding Lawrence. Typically, the Institute trains 20 people at one time. It focuses on developing the skills for a "21st Century" collaborative, participatory, and transformational leaders. Together, these leaders work to create conditions for self-empowerment and to leverage the wisdom and resources of multiple constituencies by:

- Cultivating their own leadership skills
- Deepening their analysis of economics and power
- Understanding the social, political and economic history, myth and reality of Lawrence
- Applying tools, strategies and tactics for making collective change
- Challenging themselves to take on greater leadership challenges
- Strengthening the network of engaged and skillful leaders in Lawrence

Some Best Practices for Engaging Residents

During an afternoon session, participants from both teams broke up into mixed, small groups to go deeper in their dialogue about what is working well with their resident engagement strategies. From those discussions, the following main lessons and best practices for resident engagement surfaced:

- *Be Flexible.* An important lesson learned is that the network structure must change to reflect the resident engagement dynamic. At LCW, there is a flexible membership structure where anyone over 18 can join. Membership is free, and there is only a simple form that residents are asked to fill out. There are both formal (orientation meetings) and informal (ongoing mailings) ways to connect and be engaged with the network. Staff of LCW noted that it was important to keep the orientation focus light: it is mainly about neighbors getting to know each other and less on providing information and details about LCW.
- *Offer many and varied opportunities for participation.* One of LCWs' key practices centers on ensuring that residents can enter the network in a variety of ways and at a variety of levels. In Lawrence, this includes having parent committees at community schools, resident committees in the neighborhood, peer-to-peer networks, and affiliations with churches or other community institutions. People may become involved in these networks through a variety of means, such as arts and cultural events, and youth programs. It was noted that youth mix better than adults and finding a place where youth can congregate and socialize is also a way to engage their parents and other community members.
- *Address the issues that matter to residents.* As one participant stated, "Let your belief about whether or not residents know more about the neighborhood than you inform your structure and offerings." Many residents became involved in the network when it began to address important community issues, particularly those that everyone had a stake in regardless of class or race, such as concerns related to zoning overlay, canals and alleyways.
- *Provide multiple ways to access network.* It is important to use strategies that allow residents access to the network in a variety of ways. This may include providing materials in different languages, having simultaneous translation at community meetings, and ensuring that there are staff members that are able to provide this language support. Community newspapers or other outreach publications also help residents stay in touch and encourage them to become involved.
- *Invest time and energy in building trust and relationships.* It is important to begin building relationships by providing opportunities for people to learn about each other: where they came from, their journey in life, how they ended up where they did, and so on. Peer consultants stressed that there is great benefit in giving people an opportunity to connect and share before problematic issues and conflicts arise so that they have the base of understanding that is needed to be able to deal with issues constructively as a group. It clearly helps if there is some level of trust and connection established up front.

- *Help bringing residents together first.* Peer consultants shared that they did not find it to be very helpful to try and bring residents into the organization's work and expect them to assume leadership. Instead, what has been more effective based on their experience has been to help bring residents together so they can interact and learn from one another other first, and only then discuss how they want to engage with the organization (e.g., through NeighborCircles, forums, or committees). The role that LCW staff typically plays is assisting residents by co-facilitating and debriefing meetings, engaging in evaluation and discussion, and just observing what is happening to see what kind of other support is needed. One resident from Lawrence mentioned that he does not call his work with LCW attending "meetings," it is more like attending a "family gathering."
- *Establish an identity for the network.* Often it is difficult for residents to feel connected to something larger, like a "network", but peer consultants stressed that building a common identity and feeling of connectedness is key to releasing community energy. In LCW's experience, it has paid off to invest time and effort to establish an identity for the network--including developing a logo, a common language, and a website--in order to create a shared sense of network and building support and awareness in the community.

Peer consultants noted that when it comes to language and terminology, often it may be necessary to move from jargon-heavy terms to words that are more meaningful to with residents. For example, LCW chose the word "network" because it seemed loose and flexible and seemed to resonate best with "regular folks" in the neighborhood. But what is most important is that people understand the work itself and then the words and terminology will follow.

Residents need to know about the work of the collaborative and how they are part of it. The work requires paying constant attention to developing relationships with participants, being inclusive, investing in leadership, and bridging new and traditional leadership. It is also critical to recognize and respect the different cultures represented in the neighborhood, and to have someone on staff who can relate to the people you are reaching out to, as he or she can play a "bridge-building" role between the residents and the organization.

- *"Just try it"* is an LCW motto that struck a chord with Oakland participants. Peer consultants from Lawrence noted that they often have learned the most important lessons after they went ahead and "tried something." In their view, although it is important to plan and be strategic, community-based groups can sometimes get stuck in that planning phase so long that interest wanes. As one peer consultant put it, "We'll learn more in an hour from doing something than from ten months talking about it." Many of the participants found liberating the thought that there are many paths to addressing an issue and that it is always possible to try more than one way.
- *Keep your eyes on the prize.* Overall, it is important not to lose track of the big picture of wanting to change your community for the better. Bill Traynor noted that it is about "keeping your eyes on the prize" while still remaining organic and flexible throughout the process." It is important to be positive and "to keep the conversation on the things that bring people together rather than dwelling on the issues that keep them apart." It

is also important to value the work already done while focusing on moving forward, and to celebrate and honor yourself as well as the community for its efforts.

Finally, participants reflected on how, in this type of work, it is very important to be transparent. One participant noted, "We need to mirror what we want to create. We are only as good as the communication we have with each other". Communication between different stakeholders and between the organization and residents is an area that needs constant attentiveness.

PARTICIPANTS' REFLECTIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The Oakland team spent the last morning reflecting on what it had learned during the peer match with Lawrence. Several themes arose from the discussion, including the importance of networking between different organizations and among diverse groups of residents, and looking deeper into the identity, values, and structure of LSAC. Participants in the Oakland team brainstormed ideas to move forward in these two areas, and identified some specific steps they committed to undertake in the months following the peer match.

Theme 1: Organizational Networking – Connecting in Fun and Informal Ways

Members of the Oakland team reflected that although they belonged to the same collaborative, many of them were meeting each other for the first time and, in many cases, they only had a vague idea what services other organizations in the collaborative provided.

Take-aways:

- "We need to create and provide spaces for people from the various community-based organizations (CBOs) to know each other and learn about their work."
- "It will be important to provide data about LSAC so everyone knows about the community-based organizations (CBOs) represented, and can connect with other residents to build better resident engagement."

Ways to move forward:

- Network with other CBOs to build common understanding of work and more interaction.
- Use the community newspaper, the San Antonio Unity, which thus far has played a key role in uniting local organizations through a common voice.
- Have different organizations host open houses.
- Encourage CBOs to inform the rest of their staff about the LSAC.
- Hold smaller, cross-site visits (as a way to learn about other organizations).
- Identify where links can be strengthened and deepened with CBOs (create an "events" calendar, etc.).
- Make sure that all LSAC organizations have tables together at the Malcolm X Jazz Festival

Theme 2: Resident Networking – Building Bridges between Residents

In addition to connecting organizational members of the collaborative, Oakland participants also took away ideas for connecting residents in fun and informal ways.

Take-aways:

- *“The most important thing is building the connection of residents with each other, not with community-based organizations.”*
- *It seems to work to combine food and entertainment within an organization as part of an outreach strategy.”*

Ways to move forward:

- Hold three network dinners for residents and wait to evaluate them until we’ve had all three.
- Have an event that is focused on both CBO sharing and resident sharing; be conscious of what our pathway is to community-building.
- Find ways for residents to be able to interact with each other across work groups and CBOs.
- Make sure that all LSAC organizations have tables together at the Malcolm X Jazz Festival (also part of Theme 1).

Theme 3: The Collaborative’s Identity

It was clear to the Oakland team that building a shared identity and unifying message was a strategy that worked in the Lawrence community. While the group noted that it might be easier for single organizations to craft a unifying message, members of the LSAC expressed interest in exploring ways to develop community awareness around the collaborative itself.

Take-aways:

- *“We need to provide more unifying principles in organization and outreach.”*
- *“I believe that we will bring back new vision and intention for this [collaborative] aspect of our work.”*
- *“I feel I gained a vision for membership and connectivity among residents.”*

Ways to move forward:

- Develop a collaborative database that includes contacts from all participating organizations.
- Develop/raise awareness around the LSAC logo and website.

Theme 4: The Collaborative’s Values

Oakland participants found it helpful to distinguish between the collaborative’s resident engagement strategy and the underlying values it brings to the work. They felt that while many organizations share values around resident engagement, having an agreement that articulates these values would strengthen the collaborative.

Take-aways:

- *"It will be important to generate ideas for creating group identity around values so residents know 'what' they are being invited to."*
- *"I learned about the importance and value of personal contact for a community engagement strategy."*

Ways to move forward:

- Determine what the "give and get" is for members. What is the "compact" or deal with residents? It is clear that there is value, but the compact itself is not clear.
- Disseminate information in the community using language and terminology that resonates with us and with the residents.
- Articulate the value of involving residents, including the importance of the resident-to-resident relationship. Ask ourselves, "How we are helping residents to meet other residents?"
- Be mindful of keeping residents in the process (While also noting that many of us are residents too; we shouldn't see ourselves as outside of the process).

Theme 5: The Collaborative's Structure

Oakland participants reflected on the structure of the collaborative and recognized the importance of keeping it loose and adaptable.

Take-aways:

- *"My main take-away that I think we need to look at is the concept that 'form follows function.'"*
- *"I like the emphasis on low-level affiliation as a starting point – offering choices."*

Ways to move forward:

- Be clear about where and at which stage to include resident leaders.
- Don't get too hung up on developing a structure for how to engage residents; let the actual form develop more naturally.

Next Steps

From all of the "ways of moving forward" that were discussed, the Oakland team selected the following three activities for immediate action and identified who would be responsible for the work:

- Hold one resident networking event within the next three months:
 - East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation will organize the event;
 - East Bay Asian Youth Center may be able to help with the organizing;
 - East Side Arts Alliance will provide the location;
 - The newspaper work group will support and help promote these events, and
 - Oakland Ready to Learn will provide supervised children's activities at the events.
- Hold one CBO networking event within sixty the nest days:
 - La Clinica will host a happy hour.
- Approve and support the collaborative's logo and plan that will be presented at the next LSAC meeting.

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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.acef.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: 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 connections 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. The initiative aims for the following core results:

- 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 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 to the sites.

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 or 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 they use 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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