

TAKING IT TO THE PEOPLE: Engaging Residents in Community Change Efforts

Executive Summary

This report looked across 10 of the 29 communities engaged in the Annie E. Casey Foundation's *Making Connections* initiative¹ in 2002 to identify the strategies they were using to engage community residents as true partners in the process. The information it contains was gathered from a series of interviews conducted with the Foundation's staff, local site coordinators, resident leaders, social service and political partners, technical assistance providers, and others, between the fall of 2002 and the summer of 2004. This report uses the information collected to create a framework for resident engagement that consists of five interlocking strategies.

- 1. Creating opportunities for impact.** Giving residents control of resources and opportunities to serve in key decision-making roles is central to true partnership and engagement. *Making Connections* communities used mini-grants, structured use of community hiring, and specific training on results-based facilitation to help residents acquire important skills and knowledge, build self-confidence, and earn credibility to serve in these decision-making roles.
- 2. Owning information.** To put resident leaders in control of information about their own communities, *Making Connections* communities used surveys, focus groups, and "summit" meetings of families, among other approaches, to build residents' ownership of the data about their neighborhoods.
- 3. Building networks.** Individuals can not implement change without the help, support, and expertise of many other people. *Making Connections* communities helped resident leaders establish, maintain, and utilize networks that extend both throughout and beyond their communities
- 4. Building skills.** *Making Connections* sites implemented leadership training programs that used established, high-quality curricula. They also worked to create less-structured mentoring and learning opportunities.
- 5. Renewing energy.** Resident leaders often feel that their best efforts have too little impact. Many factors that control issues they care about are out of their control. They struggle to find enough time or energy to create lasting change. *Making Connections* communities used opportunities such as family circles (groups of 5–15 people who gather to discuss ways to a strong neighborhood that benefits children and families) and community celebrations can help boost the energy and morale of resident leaders who are feeling discouraged or burnt out.

¹ In 1999, the Annie E. Casey Foundation launched Making Connections, to improve outcomes for families and children in tough, impoverished neighborhoods. The initiative connected families to economic opportunities, strong social networks, effective services, and consistent support.



Inside this report

The report explains why resident leadership is such an important tool for change, which strategies have proven most effective in cultivating it, and specific strategies for meeting the challenges of meaningfully engaging residents in community change efforts.