

Dealing with the Here and Now

Making Connections in Hartford's resident-run small grants program



Group facilitator
Magdaly Font
(far left) with the
residents who
made up *Making
Connections in
Hartford's* original
small grants
panel: (L to R)
Deborah Johnson,
Aida Díaz,
Ramona Obacz,
Carmen Roig and
Annette Womack.

Making Connections in Hartford's long-term outlook and ongoing commitment to help residents and local organizations take on the responsibility to transform their neighborhoods makes it a unique initiative with growing support throughout the community.

Yet for many residents, *Making Connections'* long-term outlook is frustrating. Their families, friends and neighbors have immediate needs. While they understand that it takes time to bring about community-wide change, their interest and attention is mostly focused on the here and now.

In its struggle to increase the scope and scale of resident engagement, the *Making Connections in Hartford* site team realized that getting residents to understand this initiative's principles was not that difficult. Getting them to accept and meaningfully support them was, however, a major challenge.

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—Ana-María García

To address this challenge in 2005, the site team looked for ways to concretely demonstrate to residents that their involvement can make a real difference in the well-being of families and neighborhoods. Eventually, the site team came up with a plan to implement a small grants program in Hartford modeled after successful small grants programs in other *Making Connections* communities such as Boston and Denver.

Hartford site coordinator Ana-María García and Magdaly Font, the then-administrative assistant to the site team, felt that a small grants program had the potential to enhance their overall resident engagement efforts. They believed that it could be the means they were looking for to engage residents in a decision-making process that would have immediate impact on the lives of people in their neighborhood. It could also serve as a concrete example to help draw more residents into the *Making Connections* process.

García and Font had two objectives in mind before they began the search for a team of residents to run the small grants decision-making panel.

- They wanted to reach a fresh group of potential resident leaders rather than the “usual suspects” of residents who were accustomed to participating in community meetings and who often play the role of community gatekeepers.
- They wanted to minimize organizational structure and give residents the authority to design a small grants program that made sense to them and that quickly and effi-



Ana-María García believes that residents can make decisions about their neighborhoods that are at least as good as anyone’s.

ciently made funds available to individuals and groups within their communities whose proposals could measurably improve conditions.

Since Frog Hollow and Upper Albany are the two neighborhoods where *Making Connections* focuses, five residents from these two neighborhoods were selected as members of the small grants panel. They were Aida Díaz, Deborah Johnson, Ramona Obacz, Carmen Roig and Annette Womack. Two from Frog

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Hollow spoke only Spanish and Font provided the communications link.

“These folks designed and implemented the entire process,” says Font. “They came up with the criteria for the grants, issued the RFPs, reviewed the proposals, decided who should receive the grants and how to notify the winners and losers. They were given the authority and they handled it like a group of seasoned professionals.”

García feels that this panel of residents supports her long-held theory that, given the opportunity and the resources, residents can make decisions on matters that affect their neighborhoods just as effectively as anyone else — perhaps more effectively. “I think the freshness and innovativeness of how they look at things can inform traditional funders who want to support local communities. This group proved to be excellent stewards of someone else’s money.”

Making Connections served as the fiduciary agent and made \$10,000 available over an 18-month period from July 2005 to December 2006 to fund grants of between \$500 and \$1,500. Of the 17 proposals that were submitted, nine grants were awarded.

Font was most impressed with how well the group worked together to design the process, work through disagreements and ultimately make grant decisions with which all the participants could live.

“Although they were from different neighborhoods and separated by language and culture, this group took complete advantage of

Deborah Johnson says that the English and Spanish speakers began to understand each other through body language and their mutual passion.



the opportunity, which hasn’t been available very often in the past, to work together in a way that ultimately benefited both their communities,” says Font. “After awhile my role as translator became less and less important. The Spanish-only and the English-only speakers began to understand each other on a nonverbal level. It was something quite special to be able to observe.”

As Deborah Johnson, one of the participating residents from Upper Albany said, “We started to understand each other through the body language and the passion everyone brought to the table.”

The overall effect of the small grants program has been much larger than originally anticipated. The *Making Connections* work has advanced in a number

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Making Connections in Hartford

Small Grants Criteria

Objectives

1. Encourage greater participation of residents in their community or parents in their schools.
2. Improve conditions in the neighborhoods.
3. Increase families' access to services and resources including youth programs.
4. Improve the economic situation for families.
5. Promote unity among residents across neighborhoods and racial lines.

How much money are we going to award?

- \$500-\$1,500 per grant

How are we going to award the money?

- The proposal must include at least three unrelated individuals or a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that is located in or serves the Frog Hollow or Upper Albany neighborhood.
- Grants to individuals will be made through a line of credit: individuals will be reimbursed for their expenses when they turn in receipts. Grantees

have the option to submit invoices for supplies to be paid directly to the vendors.

Who can apply for the small grants?

- Any resident can apply as long as the residents who benefit from the grant are in the Frog Hollow and Upper Albany areas.

What kind of projects are we going to fund?

- Recreation for young people
- Neighborhood improvements
- Education and empowerment
- Unification

Final report criteria?

- A final written report will be due after the grant to explain the results/outcomes. It should state if the overall goal was met and explain why or why not.

of ways from building upon what was learned from the process followed by these residents, according to García.

- The grants and the process of making the grants have helped *Making Connections* engage a new group of resident leaders, some of whom have subsequently joined the Results Steering Committee, the locally-led body that advises the *Making Connections'*

site team on strategy and policy. Other new residents have now become part of the site's resident leadership work group. This is a group of 12 resident leaders who reach out to residents of Frog Hollow and Upper Albany and connect them to formal and informal social networks and public benefits, as well as to other programs offered by *Making Connections'* partners.

“Making Connections’ small grants program is an excellent example of what positive things can happen when folks like us in the community are given the support and resources to make decisions that affect our community as a whole.”

—Annette Womack

- The process has become an important way to train new leaders while bringing together people from diverse neighborhoods, cultures and ethnicities who have never before interacted.
- The process provides an excellent model for how to identify what residents really care about.
- The small grants have helped the initiative put into practice its notion of resident-led change.
- By directly supporting residents, these small grant dollars help them to believe in their ability to transform their neighborhoods.

Besides being a way to allow residents to quickly accomplish small projects, it is a way to gain a degree of control over conditions in their community, García believes. It gave these residents the opportunity to think about, discuss and recommend actions that have a discernable impact on their surroundings.

The process also gave them a lot of confidence in their ability to make change happen. “*Making Connections’* small grants program is an excellent example of what positive things can happen when folks like us in the community are given the support and resources to make decisions that affect our community as a whole,” says Annette Womack, an Upper Albany resident who served on the small grants panel.

The recipients of the grants benefited not only from receiving financial support for their projects, but also from building a new set of

María Caez, an advocate for families’ legal rights in her day job, uses the funds she received from *Making Connections’* small grant program to offer a course where first-generation Latinos learn how to improve their financial literacy.



relationships with the emerging community leaders who make up the small grant panel. They also learned how to prepare a grant application.

María Caez, Frog Hollow resident and legal educator and advocate in her day job, applied for and received funds to help advance her efforts to teach first-generation Latinos in her community — who are mostly non-English speakers — how to effectively manage their financial affairs.

“A lot of them are really confused about how to handle banking and other financial transactions,” she observes. “These classes are something I was going to try to provide anyway, but the grant I received allows me to help more Spanish speakers in my neighborhood to improve their financial literacy. I see this course as a first step toward creating an ongoing peer support group of monolingual Span-

“We hope to teach them skills they can carry into high school in order to do well athletically, academically and personally and hopefully stay away from drugs and violence.”

—Troy O. Toland



Troy O. Toland, who volunteers to help run a youth football league, was awarded a *Making Connections* small grant to provide jerseys for his players. He says the small grant panel understands that, besides teaching football, his program keeps kids off the street, advocates self-discipline and encourages the youth to do well at school and at home.

ish speakers who would meet regularly and become integrated into the family economic success programs that *Making Connections*' partners provide so that they can begin to save for a better future for their families.”

Another recipient, Troy O. Toland, who volunteers to help run a youth football league that engages 75 young men from the neighborhoods, received a grant that allowed him to provide football jerseys for each boy in the league.

“*Making Connections*' small grant group saw the value of our league and decided to support our efforts,” says Toland. “Our program not only teaches football and organizes games, it keeps kids off the street, advocates self-discipline and encourages them to do well at school and at home. Our players must maintain a “B” average in school to stay on their teams. We hope to teach them skills they can carry into high school in order to do well

athletically, academically and personally and hopefully stay away from drugs and violence.”

Four of the grants supported courses that helped residents acquire skills such as jewelry making, photography and sewing. The instructors took the approach that some of the residents would apply these new skills as hobbyists while others would try to parlay them into income-generating activities and permanent jobs.

Ellen Mathis-Wright, who headed-up the sewing classes in Upper Albany, connects the adults in her classes with professional tailors in the community.

Joel Cruz teaches the adult learners in his jewelry design classes “where they can buy affordable supplies and how to prepare a display table at farmers’ markets and arts and crafts shows.”

All in all, this small grants program has proven to be a good model for the future resident-engagement work that the *Making Connections in Hartford* team plans in order to broaden the scope of its work, reach a meaningful scale and sustain the work. As Deborah Johnson said, “This program meets residents where they are and helps to bring us where we can be.”

In reviewing the grantees’ reports about how this first small grant cycle worked in Hartford, the residents who served on the decision-making panel and *Making Connections* staff are coming up with recommendations for improving the program’s next round, which is slated to kick off in October 2007. Another \$10,000 in grants will be awarded.

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—Deborah Johnson

Small Grants Awarded by the Resident Committee July 2005 to December 2006

Each of the small grant activities summarized below provided an important social benefit to the residents who participated. It created new social networks for people, many of whom had previously been somewhat isolated from interaction with others and connected them with peers who shared similar interests and who had similar needs.

Heavenly Express received a \$1,500 grant to teach residents of Frog Hollow how to make jewelry out of every day items for fun and profit. The residents learned where to acquire low-cost supplies and how to market their products.

Roberto Photo received a \$1,250 grant to provide Frog Hollow residents with the experience of using various cameras to develop their photographic skills that they can apply as hobbyists or as an entry into the profession. Since many Frog Hollow residents don't speak English, the grantee feels that photography is an effective nonverbal way for them to express themselves to both English-speaking and Spanish-speaking audiences.

Teeny Weeny Activity won a \$1,500 grant to provide enrichment activities to pre-school children in the Upper Albany neighborhood. The grantees teach basic skills such as identifying ABCs, numbers, colors and shapes, as well as social skills. The children were taken on nature walks and visits to the library. Parents of pre-K, kindergarten and first grade children in one of Hartford's most troubled schools also received free educational services from the grantees.

First Sewing Class at Mi Casa Community Center (July – December 2006): The grantees used most of their \$1,000 grant to purchase five sewing machines, fabric and related supplies. The adult participants from Frog Hollow learned how to sew curtains, pillow cases, pajamas and other simple

items such as drawstring bags. These skills were taught in order to help them obtain a position. At the end of the course, the adults held a fashion show to present what they learned and produced.

Second Sewing Class at Mi Casa Community

Center: Due to the popularity of the first sewing class, the small grants panel decided to make a \$1,500 grant for a second class to accommodate more Frog Hollow residents. The residents of both classes have formed a supportive social network.

Sewing Class at Upper Albany: This \$1,000 grant also supported a sewing class, this one involving residents of both Frog Hollow and Upper Albany.

Basic Culinary Arts: A \$880 grant was awarded to Mi Casa to conduct 10 cooking classes for residents of Frog Hollow and Upper Albany who want a career in the culinary arts. Participants learned the basic concepts and techniques of food preparation and could practice what they learned as well as visit a preparation center to observe the process.

Redskins Midget Football was awarded a \$1,000 grant to purchase 75 football jerseys for elementary and middle school boys who can't afford to join expensive little league football teams and who don't have any other avenues open to them for participating in organized sports. Besides learning to play football, the boys gain basic life skills and are encouraged to pursue higher education.

Financial literacy classes for first generation

Latinos: This grantee received \$1,000 for supplies to support her 10-week course designed to empower monolingual Spanish-speaking adults to better manage their money; challenge cultural myths concerning money management and using financial institutions; and form a peer support group that will be integrated with other FES resources.

“The small grants program has been such a positive influence on our overall effort to engage residents. It has fostered a real can-do attitude.”

—Ana-María García



Sporting the jerseys paid for by a *Making Connections*' small grant are (L-R) Larry Johnson, Treqwan Long and Louis Nunez of the Redskins Youth Football League.

Their recommendations include convening a bidder's conference where neighborhood groups could learn the essentials of grantwrit-

ing well in advance of the next deadline. The conference would teach the grantees how to write reports that clarify the progress of their work as well as the final results. They also recommended that the decision-making team should conduct site visits during the funding period and report on what they learn.

As of March 2007, the second small grants panel of residents has been formed with the help of the local technical assistance liaison, Mayra Esquilin. It includes some of the residents from the first time around as well as some new residents. The new panel members are organizing a bidder's conference and drawing up plans on how to implement the other recommendations made by the previous group.

“We're continuing the small grants program because it has been such a positive influence on our overall effort to engage residents,” says García. “It has fostered a real can-do attitude and reinforces the fact that when residents are involved in the decisions that affect their neighborhoods, good things happen.”

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Photos by Mary Ann Dolcemascolo (pages 2, 3), Richard Bergen (5, 6, 8) and Mike Salius (1).

This is one of a series of stories and reflections about the work of *Making Connections*, a long-term community change initiative supported nationally by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. These publications have been produced by The Diarist Project, a new approach the foundation is using to learn from this initiative. This story was written by Mike Salius, the diarist for *Making Connections in Hartford*. For more information about *Making Connections in Hartford*, contact Ana-María García, 860-293-0097 (www.mchartford.org). To see more diarist publications, go to www.DiaristProject.org.