

Increasing Transparency and Local Ownership:

Making Connections Denver Turns a Difficult Leadership Transition into an Opportunity to Transform Itself

*By Tory Read
Making Connections Denver Diarist*



When Denver Site Coordinator Cec Ortiz announced that she was leaving to take a position in the administration of the city's new mayor (on the right), Denver Making Connections had to begin a long transition process.

As the Making Connections initiative reaches the halfway point, an increasing number of sites are facing personnel and leadership changes. Making Connections Denver underwent a major leadership transition between August 2003 and December 2004. It not only picked a new site coordinator, it built a new way to govern its work, one that involved a broader range of people — including many residents — in key decisions.

A Growing Initiative Demands a New Governance Structure

A transition in governance had been brewing in Denver for more than a year before Making Connections Denver's founding site coordinator left in August 2003 to head the new mayor's Office of Workforce Development. The departure of the site coordinator forced Denver to grapple with governance issues that had been proving difficult to address.

“The transition rocked everyone’s world. Letting a charismatic leader move on is always breathtakingly painful.”

—Peg Logan

“Her leaving catalyzed something that would have naturally happened anyway, because the initiative was getting too big for the old style of management, which was more informal,” said Mary Cronin, executive director of the Piton Foundation, one of Making Connections Denver’s local partners.

“It’s very easy when you have a charismatic leader to make them accountable for everything,” said Kit Williams, the local Technical Assistance Resource Center (TARC) liaison who served as interim site coordinator. “We knew change had to happen. The initiative had grown beyond one person’s control.”

► “We underestimated everybody’s personal reactions to a charismatic leader leaving.”
—Kit Williams (right) with Cec Ortiz



“For 16 months before the former site coordinator left, we had been having conversations about workload and structure and bottlenecks,” said Peg Logan, executive director of Chinook Fund, a Making Connections Denver partner that provides leadership development through its Social Justice Institute. “She was working really hard, and she was exhausted. Everyone related through her. She was the only person who had it all in her head at one time.”

Shared Vision Leads the Initiative Forward

Leadership transitions are never easy. “The transition rocked everyone’s world,” said Logan. “Letting a charismatic leader move on is always breathtakingly painful.”

“When the site coordinator left, we lost a very powerful leader,” said Mike Kromrey, executive director of Metro Organizations for People (MOP), a community organizing non-profit and Making Connections Denver partner. “A death process occurred. We had a huge vacuum suddenly.”

“The former site coordinator had built such strong relationships with residents and with staff that people were very uneasy and feeling the loss for some time,” said the Piton Foundation’s Cronin.

Despite the fear and grieving that is a natural part of a leadership transition when a charismatic founder moves on, Making Connections Denver turned what could have

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The initiative had grown beyond one person’s control. ”

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▶ The new site coordinator is Susan Motika, who had been Community Justice Director for Denver’s District Attorney.

been a show-stopping crisis into a series of opportunities.

“This kind of transition is all about renegotiating relationships and not losing anybody that’s been really involved,” said Making Connections Denver Site Team Leader Garland Yates of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

“We had enough people who owned the vision that we worked through it,” said Kromrey. “We had people who had already invested for three years and put in tons of time. We owned the vision, knew what we wanted, and pushed aside ideas that were not in line with the vision of Making Connections. It could have been chaos—an outside party

could have come in and tried to sweep away control and sabotage the process.”

A Dedicated Ad Hoc Group Oversees Denver’s Leadership Transition

When the former site coordinator announced that she was leaving, key players in the initiative got together and formed a temporary transition team to assess the initiative’s immediate needs and launch the process of finding a new leader.

Early on, the former site coordinator suggested the team appoint her business colleague Williams, who had been serving as Denver’s local TARC liaison for two years, as interim site coordinator. During the six months between site coordinators, Williams took on the challenging task of facilitating transition team meetings and keeping the initiative on track.

The transition team included representatives from five organizations that had been working together on Making Connections Denver for the past three years: two local non-profit organizations, a local foundation, the city and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Meeting every two weeks over the course of a few months, this team decided how best to communicate with Making Connections neighborhoods and the city at large about the leadership change. It also created a job description and recruited locally and nationally for a new site coordinator.

“With most nonprofits, you have the officers making the decisions about who is going to be in a position like this. But to actually have the people in community who are going to be affected by what that person does have some say in it—it’s a good concept.”

—Loretta Koehler



► “Everyone related through Cec. She was the only person who had it all in her head at one time”

—Pet Logan (right)

“All of us personally tried to recruit people,” said Kromrey, who rigorously worked his cell phone, tapping into his social networks to help attract a strong pool of applicants for the position.

The team appointed a hiring committee with representatives from each of the four Making Connections neighborhoods and

each of the key entities doing the work of and providing the funding for the initiative. In addition, the team also completed a budget and work plan for the upcoming year, 2004, through an open dialogue among the five entities most invested in Making Connections. Finally, the team expanded the conversation about initiative leadership to include the concept of a partnership of committed organizations and neighborhood residents to guide the work of the initiative and the new site coordinator.

A Transparent Hiring Process

Making Connections Denver is proud of the hiring process it developed to choose a new site coordinator. “The process we had enabled us to end up with a candidate without having a lot of controversy about the candidate,” said Yates. “It’s a study in how you go about making major personnel decisions.”

One of the most important components was having residents from all four Making Connections neighborhoods play active roles on the committee.

“With most nonprofits, you have the officers making the decisions about who is going to be in a position like this,” said Loretta Koehler, resident of Baker neighborhood and member of the Community Learning Network, Denver’s Local Learning Partnership. “But to actually have the people in community who are going to be affected by what that person does have some say in it—it’s a good concept.”

“In an initiative like Making Connections, the key feature is to have every process be transparent. The hiring process could very easily have become insular, with a few insiders cutting all the deals. We all pushed hard against that.”

—Garland Yates

“The hiring group included residents, other Making Connections people and partners,” added Koehler. “We reviewed the applications and came together to discuss each one—strengths, weaknesses, and would they fit in. It was a long process of figuring out what we needed. We brainstormed what we thought were the most important things. We had to consider our goals, and where we were going, and then think about who should lead that. We had to come up with a process for rating people and defining what we were looking for. Everybody had input about each candidate, and we had to make a unanimous decision.”

After committee members rated each application, they put together a list of the six highest-scoring candidates to interview. Committee members worked together to draft interview questions as well as craft a writing test for the candidates. Each member of the team got to ask one question during the half-hour interviews.

“Then we had to discuss each candidate after the interview, while they went off and did the written portion in another room,” said Koehler. “We had the second and final interview for three finalists on a weekday evening, and Garland Yates came in from Baltimore.”

The Transition Team

DeQuan Mack, *The Chinook Fund*

Peg Logan, *The Chinook Fund*

Mike Kromrey, *Metro Organizations for People*

Mary Cronin, *The Piton Foundation*

Terri Bailey, *The Piton Foundation*

Hi Howard, *The Piton Foundation, FES coach*

Diane DiGiacomo, *The Piton Foundation, communications director*

Candace RedShirt, *Making Connections Denver, TARC liaison*

Gloria Marrujo, *Making Connections Denver, program assistant*

Kit Williams, *Interim Site Coordinator, Transition Team facilitator*

Garland Yates, *Annie E. Casey Foundation (participating by telephone)*

Resident Participation in the Hiring Process Had Unanticipated Benefits

Resident participation in the hiring process created a new and welcome transparency in Making Connections Denver. “It was one of the first times we really had a voice as residents to say we really want to know what is going on, and we want to be a part of this,” said Koehler. “If the whole goal is to move toward community and residents really owning this, we have to have much more control over it.”

“In an initiative like Making Connections, the key feature is to have every process be transparent,” said Yates. “The hiring process could very easily have become insular, with a few insiders cutting all the deals. We all pushed hard against that and made the hiring

“Resident involvement in the selection process was terrific and it paid off. I couldn’t have done it better. The process produced the right person for the job.”

—Mary Cronin

process open, and involved as many voices from the initiative as we could, so we would increase the possibility that we would emerge with a consensus candidate.”

In addition, the process yielded an excellent candidate. “Resident involvement in the selection process was terrific and it paid off,” said Cronin. “I couldn’t have done it better. The process produced the right person for the

job. The new site coordinator has the structured style I think the initiative needs now to go to the next level of integration, achieving results, and including residents in the overall governance of the initiative. She’s building good relationships across the board, and she also has the compassion needed for this kind of work.”

And the process contributed to a growing sense of local control over the initiative. “The hiring process fostered ownership, which was an ancillary benefit,” said Kromrey.

“Because the hiring process was guided by a search committee that had lots of resident involvement, there was lots of interaction between the resident leadership and the initiative,” said Yates. “The residents played a significant role in the selection of the new site coordinator. They felt good about what she stood for, and they could trust her, because some of them had worked with her when setting up the community court in the Cole neighborhood.”

The Hiring Committee

Loretta Koehler, Baker neighborhood, Community Learning Network (CLN)

Tracey Saulters, community organizer, La Alma/Lincoln Park neighborhood, CLN

Stella Yu, La Alma/Lincoln Park neighborhood

Sandy Douglas, Cole neighborhood, Denver Community Court staff

Debra Johnson, Cole neighborhood, Denver Community Court staff

Phil Kaspar, Sun Valley neighborhood, CLN

Peg Logan, The Chinook Fund

Mike Kromrey, Metro Organizations for People

Michael Miera, City of Denver, Housing and Neighborhood Development

Myrna Hipp, City of Denver, Housing and Neighborhood Development

Terri Bailey, The Piton Foundation, CLN staff

Mary Cronin, The Piton Foundation

Garland Yates, The Annie E. Casey Foundation

The Hiring Process Tested the Initiative

The multi-stakeholder hiring process was not without its hurdles. Site Team Leader Yates saw the hiring process as an opportunity to demonstrate a commitment to local control. “If local ownership is important, and we understand this as a given, then one of the first challenges is figuring out how to transfer authority over our resources,” said Yates. “In the end, that’s what transition is.

“They had trouble not expecting that the foundation would in the end do what foundations always do. That’s why our behavior in this kind of situation is so important.”

—Garland Yates



▶ “I think it’s critical in any systems thing to know what things I can decide and what I can’t.”

—Mike Kromrey

This event gave us an opportunity to ratchet that up.”

However, based on their history with other national funders and recognizing the significant resources that the Annie E. Casey Foundation brings to the table, people on the hiring committee had trouble believing that they had more than advisory power.

“This position was a Casey position,” said Garland. “When the local team got together all of these different people for the hiring committee, there was a question: are we just advisers? Do we have any power? How much does our voice really matter? Should we really bother to put in all of this energy? Because

Casey can just say, ‘No, we don’t want that person even though you just spent 25 meetings selecting her.’ They had trouble not expecting that the foundation would in the end do what foundations always do. That’s why our behavior in this kind of situation is so important.”

There was much discussion throughout the process about the degree of power the hiring committee actually had in selecting the candidate. “It’s Casey’s money, so I always saw the group as an advisory group to Garland,” said Kromrey. “We had quite a bit of discussion about this, and some people said, this is a lot more than advisory, because there was a lot of responsibility. I think it’s critical in any sys-

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“There was a nervousness all of the way through this whole process, I think, that in the end, Casey would pull rank,” said Yates. “So I had to make the commitment up front that whatever decision gets made, as long as I can get my two cents in, I will abide by it. But what I also had to do was to figure out how to put in the mix that, from the Foundation's standpoint, the local site coordinator is our first line of contact. That needs to be one of the responsibilities for this hire.

“I had to commit to following through, and that was a risk,” added Yates. “In a sense,

I made an agreement to abide by something without knowing whether it was going to turn out my way or not. That was the scary part. But I was encouraged to do it by the process people here created.”

Including residents in the hiring team presented a number of challenges. First, residents had a steep learning curve about the role of the site coordinator and all the activities and components of the initiative across four neighborhoods.

“It was painful at times,” said resident Loretta Koehler. “For me, part of it was, I didn't know everything that the site coordinator did. Also, how can we gauge things accu-

“It took time for residents to get up to speed, and at times I think we frustrated other people, because we kept having to stop the conversation for explanations.”

—Loretta Koehler

rately when we don't have a completely clear understanding of what is going on across the entire initiative? It was a learning experience to figure out what is really going on with Making Connections overall.

“The institutional people knew more about what the site coordinator actually did, including who she has to answer to. We had to have the institutions there to help us understand it all. It took time for residents to get up to speed, and at times I think we frustrated other people, because we kept having to stop the conversation for explanations.”

Second, residents were unfamiliar with salary levels for a position like that of site coordinator. “Residents were put in a position that was unfamiliar,” said Yates. “They didn't seem quite comfortable in one area, which was that of compensation.”

“One of the big discussions for us was, we didn't know the whole budget, and we didn't know how much was allocated for this position,” said Koehler. “I don't make \$100,000 a year. I don't even know what most people make. There was not a salary listed on the job description, so people just put in a requested salary. We saw a wide range. Some of us asked, if you are giving up that much money, how come it's not going back to the residents? It's a big issue for me, and I think for some other people it was, too.”

In hindsight, the hiring committee did not represent a significant portion of people in Making Connections Denver neighborhoods: those who only speak Spanish or others who

don't speak English. “There were no mono-lingual Spanish speakers, but then there aren't that many people who are unpaid [leaders of initiative work] who also have a broad and deep understanding of Making Connections,” said Kromrey.

New Transparency in Budgeting and Planning

While the hiring committee was forging new transparency among residents and the initiative, the transition team was fostering new transparency among institutional stakeholders in a new year-end budgeting and planning process. Each of the five entities that had been deeply involved in the work of Making Connections Denver sent a representative to the initiative's first-ever open budgeting and planning discussion.

“People like Piton Foundation Executive Director Mary Cronin, who always had Making Connections activities under Piton, actually got to see the budget and got to make decisions on where the focus would lie,” said Interim Site Coordinator Williams.

“The budget conversation was excellent, because nobody had ever seen it,” said Kromrey. “It required people saying, what's this? And it helped give voice to concerns that people had. The way business was done before was, many of us found ourselves wondering, why the heck is that being funded? This change has been incredibly healthy. I think transparency is critical.”

“Urban policy has failed in the United States because those of us in policy-making positions and funding positions sit around and try to figure out what to do to help low-income people in our neighborhoods, and yet we have excluded them from the major conversations.”

—Myrna Hipp

An Evolving Governance Structure: The Partnership

Finally, the transition team picked up a conversation that had started in 2002 at an initiative retreat in Keystone, Colorado, about the evolving structure and governance of the initiative. This evolving governance structure, currently called the partnership, is Denver’s experiment to transfer control, foster transparency and alleviate the decision-making bottleneck that had developed in years three and four under an ever-growing initiative.

“One of the reasons why the partnership was envisioned was because a lot of the major players didn’t feel they had the ownership,” said Williams.

“It is a great thing to have some kind of council structure, made up of people who give the site coordinator and the staff some programmatic direction, deal with [major] budget decisions, strategize about how to bring other partners in with money, and build relationships,” said Logan. “If you have ten people, then you can get something done.”

Initial conversations about the partnership included five entities that were either providing the primary financial support for or doing the bulk of the work of Making Connections Denver. They included the Chinook Fund, Metro Organizations for People (MOP), City of Denver, Piton Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Core criteria for a seat at the partnership table began to emerge among these stakeholders in late 2003 and included:

- A clearly articulated commitment to Making Connections Denver’s guiding principles.
- A demonstrated commitment to achieving results based on a community-led process.
- A demonstrated long-term commitment to the work of the initiative.

From the outset, the partnership conversation included an acknowledgement that resident representatives from each of the four Making Connections Denver neighborhoods, as well as a resident representative from the Community Learning Network (CLN), should sit at the table.

“I think people in urban neighborhoods are very intelligent and have a lot of the answers,” said Hipp, deputy director of the Mayor’s Office of Economic Development and the city’s representative to the Making Connections Denver partnership. “Urban policy has failed in the United States because those of us in policy-making positions and funding positions sit around and try to figure out what to do to help low-income people in our neighborhoods, and yet we have excluded them from the major conversations.”

“The partnership is where the stakeholders come together and make the decisions at Making Connections to guide the direction,

“Community involvement in the central leadership of the initiative needs to have a thoughtful process, because it is key that the residents on the partnership are accountable to their neighborhoods.”

—Kit Williams

so it has to be a place where there’s accountability to the residents,” said CLN resident partner representative Tracey Saulters. “Residents should be the ultimate benefactors of all of this. That is what this work is all about.”

However, the institutional partners agreed to wait until the new site coordinator was in place before beginning a process whereby resident representatives would be democratically selected by communities to sit on the partnership.

“Community involvement in the central leadership of the initiative needs to have a thoughtful process, because it is key that the residents on the partnership are accountable to their neighborhoods,” said Williams.

Bringing Residents on to the Partnership

After Susan Motika came on board as the new site coordinator in February 2004, institutional partners and neighborhood residents met to discuss the idea of the partnership. A resident-led subcommittee formed to hash out an announcement about the resident seats on the partnership and to discuss likely resident information and training needs.

The resulting call for neighborhood representatives to join the partnership went out to the four neighborhoods and to the CLN in the summer of 2004. The CLN and the Cole Neighborhood Organizing Alliance held elections in early fall to choose their representa-



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—Tracey Saulters (right, with Candace Redshirt)

tives. Through the Westside Vision Coalition, residents of the Baker and La Alma/Lincoln Park neighborhoods each selected one interim representative to attend partnership meetings in the fall of 2004, until the coalition had a chance to spread the word in these two neighborhoods and hold elections, planned for early 2005. Sun Valley residents are currently reorganizing and will select their representative later in the year.

“I was the first resident to join the partners. At my first meeting, I was alone—there were no other residents. Right away, I felt a disconnect in terms of the jargon and the acronyms and other things I wasn’t familiar with, and I’ve been working on this initiative for three or four years.”

—Tracey Saulters

Acknowledging the power differential between residents new to the partnership and institutions that have been involved in strategic planning and implementation for the initiative for a number of years, the resident-led subcommittee designed a resident partner training and needs assessment to level the playing field.

“I was the first resident to join the partners,” said Saulters. “At my first meeting, I was alone—there were no other residents. Right away, I felt a disconnect in terms of the jargon and the acronyms and other things I wasn’t familiar with, and I’ve been around this, working on this initiative, for three or four years.”

“We are working out an entire plan for training residents to deal with the partnership,” said Local Site Coordinator Motika. “In

the first of two trainings, residents on the partnership did an inventory of their skills, as well as their training, information and resource needs. We also created a glossary of Making Connections terms—the CLN has recommended this, and it is vital. A second two-hour training will focus more on relationship-building between the existing institutional partners and residents.”

Residents on the Partnership Make the Work of MCD More Relevant

“From a foundation perspective, we (traditionally) spend too much time making decisions without interacting with those who are helping us carry out our mission,” said Cronin of the Piton Foundation. “I’m referring to the tradi-



► This is the first meeting of the transition team after Cec Ortiz announced that she was leaving Making Connections. It was not a joyful time! The team’s first decision was to expand its membership.

“This is very different. The diversity of viewpoints is fabulous. We learn from each other, and we make better decisions collectively.

This is part of transforming institutions.”

—Mary Cronin

tional grant-making approach, where they submit something, you might talk to them briefly, then you make a decision. This is very different. The diversity of viewpoints is fabulous. We learn from each other, and we make better decisions collectively. This is part of transforming institutions.

“Decision-making definitely takes longer, and it’s worth it,” added Cronin. “We all learn from the process. Residents learn more about foundations and how we operate. We learn more about what residents think is important and what will work. And we are constantly aware of how effective the nonprofits are.”

Wrestling with the Power Differential: An Ongoing Effort

One of the most promising aspects of Making Connections is its experimentation with different kinds of entities collaborating to improve the lives of families and children in vulnerable neighborhoods. This innovation also poses challenges. Although the partners openly discuss power differences in the partnership, these power imbalances don’t disappear.

“A huge challenge is the power differentials,” said the Chinook Fund’s Logan. “We have residents at the table, then we have million-dollar-a-year funders, then we have a few nonprofits who are grantees of those million-dollar partners. So there are lots of internal power dynamics, as well as organizational differences. The bottom line is, if Casey or Piton doesn’t want to do something, it could be a

deal-breaker. If Chinook or MOP or the City doesn’t want to do something, it’s not.”

“The biggest thing I’ve learned is developing the ability to analyze the power dynamic of Making Connections,” said Candace Redshirt, local Technical Assistance Resource Center (TARC) liaison and transition team member. “I haven’t worked before with anything with so many levels of power and the dynamics involved. What happens when a little institution like Chinook, and a somewhat bigger institution like MOP, and a big institution like Piton, and a big institution like Casey try to work together?”

“We are a big player, but we are also receiving a lot of money,” said Kromrey of MOP. “We are vulnerable and yet powerful. It’s weird, yet it has aspects that are groundbreaking in terms of relationships with funders, and in many ways more healthy than, ‘Write your proposal and we’ll see, I’ll talk to you some day.’ The only way I know to somewhat level the playing field is to make a multi-year commitment based on production and yearly evaluation. We could experiment with a three-year contract.”

“Regarding the leadership of residents in the initiative and how it’s going to mix with the power structure of the foundations, we are learning as we go,” said Motika. “It’s a new form of governance and civic participation.”

“If we are talking about equalization of power, and promoting human dignity, it is imperative that residents are the majority of

“A huge challenge is the power differentials. We have residents at the table, then we have million-dollar-a-year funders, then we have a few nonprofits who are grantees of those million-dollar partners. So there are lots of internal power dynamics.”

—Peg Logan

the partnership,” said Saulters. “I would also like to see us residents have more solidarity. Part of it is, some residents are interim representatives, so we are kind of in a holding pattern until all of the elected residents are on board.”

Lost in Transition: A Possible Strategy for Managing the Inevitable Power Vacuum

Looking back on the transition period, Denver had trouble managing the power vacuum that inevitably emerged when the initiative’s founding site coordinator left.

“We underestimated everybody’s personal reactions to a charismatic leader leaving,” said Williams. “The relationship side of things was hard when she left, because she is a very relational kind of person. She was able to bring people in and keep them here by the power of her own relationships with them. When someone like this leaves, we learned that there are going to be people who feel hurt, or lost, or who feel uncertainty over whether the structure is strong enough to hold up the initiative.”

“People were threatened by the loss of the site coordinator and tried to maintain their own power,” said Peg Logan. “The web [of relationships among MC’s leaders] wasn’t checking people. Relationships weren’t working.”

“This has happened at Piton before,” said Mary Cronin. “We had a program officer die in a sudden, tragic car accident. When you lose someone suddenly, turbulence for a time is part of the deal. You just have to weather it and be supportive and you have to recognize that it is going to happen in any leadership transition because relationships are key to this work.”

To other sites facing a leadership change, Williams offers this suggestion. “There was never any formal agreement about leadership—who would lead, how it would be done, what the goal was, what the timeline was,” she said. “If I were to do it again, everything would be written down. We should have had a group hammer out what we need from everyone and who is going to do it.”

Fortunately, a shared vision carried Denver through, and a transparent hiring process with significant resident participation resulted in the hiring of a new site coordinator that people feel good about. “Everything is working again because the new site coordinator is here and we are getting things done,” said Logan. “Now we’ve stabilized, which is wonderful. She knows how to get things done, and she’s getting people involved in decision-making.”

“With Susan, I see things really, really going in a positive direction,” said Saulters. “We’ve had this vision, but how do we take all of it and make it tangible? She’s strong, she’s articulate, and very, very smart. She’s really good at juggling it all – I don’t know how she does it. And she’s made herself very accessible.”

“We did achieve more transparency through the hiring process, at least for the residents who were a part of the process. But then, what about everybody else? It was beneficial for the few, but what do we do next to make it more transparent for others?”

—Loretta Koehler

Looking Ahead

Denver’s experiment in hiring created a useful model for this and other Making Connections sites. In fact, Denver has already adapted this process for two subsequent hires – the deputy site coordinator and the results coach.

“There was an incredible personnel process involving residents in the selection of the deputy site coordinator and the results coach,” said Motika. “There were two panels, each with five people. The first panel included two community organizers from nonprofit partners, residents and Making Connections staff. This panel interviewed eight people out of 72 applicants. There were incredibly tough questions, including a 45-minute written test about the Mercado. [The Mercado is a summer market on land owned by the transit agency in Sun Valley.]

“The second panel included residents, Denver Community Court staff, Making Connections staff and representatives from a nonprofit partner and the city. We had three finalists. This time, there were two hypothetical questions that each finalist answered. They knew that they were giving me advice and that I was going to make the decision, but people were very invested and involved. No one person was dominating in the conversations.”

The hiring process also resulted in a demand for even more transparency in the initiative. “What came from this process was a big quest for more transparency, so that we all really understand what is going on,” said



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resident Loretta Koehler. “We did achieve more transparency through the hiring process, at least for the residents who were a part of the process. But then, what about everybody else? It was beneficial for the few, but what do we do next to make it more transparent for others?”

In addition, people in Denver are excited by the open budget and planning process begun during the transition, and they look forward to it continuing. “Previously, the budget had been done behind closed doors,” said Cronin. “No one really knew what it was

“Coming from community where we work on stuff we are passionate about, with relationships that are so deep, to come to this other table and not really know people... it still feels a little superficial. We need to spend some time on relationship building.”

—Tracey Saulters

about. Now it is very open. It’s a much more inclusive process. Everyone knows how much money there is and where it’s going. We’ve also merged the various silos of the budget. For example, the communications budget is being merged into the main budget.”

Regarding the partnership, Denver will continue and expand the experiment in 2005. Plans for this year include bringing new institutional partners to the table, with an eye to sustaining the work of Making Connections-Denver beyond the initial 10-year framework articulated by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Current partners are also talking about bringing on more resident representatives, including youth. One of the issues will be balancing a desire to bring on additional institutional and resident partners while keeping the partnership to a size that can meaningfully get things done.

Partners agree that an important next step is building relationships among the diverse people at the table. “I think that everyone at the table, each person is an awesome person,” said Saulters. “It’s an honor, and it helps me build my social network.

“But, coming from community where we work on stuff we are passionate about, with relationships that are so deep, to come to this other table and not really know people... it still feels a little superficial. We need to spend some time on relationship building.

“To do the job the CLN elected me to do, I need to know more about the individuals and the organizations sitting around the table. What does each organization do? What

does each person do at their organization? What is everyone’s self-interest? We need to do some kind of retreat that includes activities like story circles.”

Meanwhile, based on experience with the evolving partnership, Making Connections-Denver partners are expanding their thinking and practice around transformation. “To me, inclusiveness in the management is part of what we should be thinking about in transforming organizations,” said Cronin. “You know, when we talk about transforming neighborhoods, we also talk about transforming foundations as well as city agencies and so forth. We are transforming institutions as well as communities. How funders communicate with grantees, having them at the table, is very important.”

Site Team Leader Yates hopes that the leadership transition process in Denver catalyzed a larger process that is leading to more local control of initiative strategy and implementation. “One of our long term goals is that these initiatives take on lives of their own and they live beyond Casey,” said Yates. “The transition has to be one from this being a Casey-dominated show to a local show.

“To me, transition means deferring more control over Casey resources to local decision-makers. By opening up the hiring process and inviting others to be involved in it and basically asking them to take the lead responsibility for filling it, this triggered a transition step. You’ve got to look for the events and the opportunities to demonstrate that you mean to have open processes and make local ownership real.”

“I needed someone to be an organizer. To move the agenda. To build relationships. To do research. To know what is going on. I relied on Cec to do all this and more.”

—Gerland Yates

How Denver Site Team Leader Garland Yates Approached the Task of Hiring a New Site Coordinator... and What He Learned from the Process

When Denver Making Connections site coordinator Cec Ortiz announced that she was taking a job with the city’s new mayor, Denver’s site team leader Garland Yates had to be disappointed. Yates had hired Ortiz and, being based in Baltimore, he had relied on her to take on major tasks in the development of this long-term initiative.

“I needed someone to be an organizer. To move the agenda. To get clarity about the agenda. To build relationships. To do research. To be aware of events. To know what is going on. I relied on Cec to do all this and more.”

While he hadn’t known Ortiz before he hired her, he quickly came to trust her deeply. “I think we connected in a couple of fundamental ways. We both have a wide assortment of life experiences. We both believe that the focus needs to be on the families themselves. We both share an in-depth knowledge about community dynamics.”

When Cec left, it would have been natural to expect Garland to start looking for someone else who could be his eyes and ears in Denver, someone with whom he could build



Garland Yates with new site coordinator Susan Motika.

the same level of trust that he had built with Cec. But he didn’t. He says now that he knew

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that Denver had reached the point where it needed to decide on its own coordinator even though this person is the Casey Foundation’s representative to the site.

“I had to really think about this. I had to convey the message that this person will be working for Casey while also convincing them that I wasn’t ultimately going to be the one who makes the decision about whom to hire.

“My tactic was to say to Denver that it makes sense strategically that this person is paid by Casey and seen as an extension of Casey. That will keep Casey grounded at the table.”

At the same time he needed to convince Denver that not only did he trust them to make the decision, he also saw the process of hiring a new coordinator as a key step towards local ownership of Making Connections.

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Plus, Yates recognized that things were vastly different in Denver from when he had hired Ortiz. Far more people and institutions were involved in Making Connections and felt a stake in who would be the new coordinator. “How the hell was I going to hire someone from here that everybody in Denver is going to like?”

Yates thought that the key was getting a broad range of people in Denver to own the

decision of who would be the new coordinator. “If we—the foundation and a handful of people in Denver—had decided who to hire, then we would have had to sell that person to everyone else.”

In contrast, if a cross section of Denver people made the decision, then they would be committed to the person they hired. “What you don’t want is to have a lot of people who felt excluded from the process becoming critics of the person who emerged from that process. The way they did it in Denver, they came out of the box committed to the person they hired.

“They have rallied around Susan [Motika]. She has picked her own number two person. You have this strange profile: two professional people that the community loves. That shoots down the schism between the professionals and the community.

“We would have focused on whether the person had to be Spanish or bicultural. They dealt with all that stuff and ended up with this white lawyer who was trained in New England. And they gave her the authority to hire this other woman who had just as many professional credentials. Neither of them on paper had community credentials except that the residents hired them. That was something we couldn’t have done.”

He also thinks the Denver people came out of the process with a much stronger sense of owning the initiative. “If we had decided on the coordina-

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tor, the process would have reinforced the notion that the initiative was going to be run by a small group of people.”

It is experiences like this one, where a group of people come together to make a key decision on their own, that ultimately lead to local ownership of an initiative begun by a national foundation, Yates believes.

“The increased sense of ownership that Denver people feel as a result of this process was not an unintended benefit. It was based on a conscious, strategic decision. That was a goal from day one. It wasn’t just a process for hiring someone. It was an opportunity to ratchet up the local ownership question.”

“Moving to local ownership doesn’t always happen because of some agreement or compact. It happens in every transaction. Those transactions may seem unrelated to ownership. But the more things local people decide, the more they become committed to success.”

Plus, Yates adds, the more that residents are involved in making decisions like this one, the more they feel empowered to lead the initiative. “They had to feel confident that they can lead, and the people in the community need to feel confident that they can lead. When they do, it creates an environment where other community institutions have to respond. It is about residents feeling their power to make things happen.

“This is really what we mean when we talk about residents developing power. People hear

the work ‘power’ and they think it means residents bullying people. But it is really about residents feeling able to impose a certain order on their own environment.”

Denver’s approach to including residents in its governing structure—which happened at the same time that a new coordinator was being hired—was another opportunity for residents to lead, Yates thinks.

“We didn’t prescribe what role residents needed to play in decision making. It wasn’t us going to certain residents and asking if they wanted a seat on the board of directors. Instead, it was us going to them and asking how they wanted to be involved. Susan had a conversation with each of the four neighborhoods to find out how they wanted to be represented.”

Out of these conversations, residents put together a proposal. That proposal became the basis for discussing how to include residents. “We had an exchange about the number of residents from each neighborhood, about stipends. All that was resolved and we said, okay.

“If we had decided things like whether these neighborhood representatives should get stipends, that could have been a bombshell. ‘Why do these residents get a stipend but we don’t?’ But with the community deciding this, if anyone starts criticizing this, the residents will say, ‘We made the decision and this is why.’”

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The Diarist Project

This is one of a series of publications about the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Making Connections Initiative put together by The Diarist Project. The project is a new approach the foundation is using to learn from its efforts to strengthen families and transform struggling neighborhoods.

Diarists work to capture strategies and insights of the people who are leading the neighborhood transformation work. In Making Connections, the diarist works closely with the staff people who lead the work in each city, the Site Team Leader and Local Site Coordinator.



*Denver’s new site coordinator
Susan Motika.*

This article was written by **Tory Read**, Denver Making Connections diarist. The section about Garland Yates’ thinking about this transition was written by Tim Saasta, Diarist Project Coordinator.

Making Connections is a Casey Foundation initiative to support work that demonstrates the simple premise that kids thrive when their families are strong and their communities supportive. What began in 1999 as a demonstration project in selected neighborhoods in 22 cities is now an intricate network of people and groups committed to making strong families and neighborhoods their highest priorities.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation works to build better futures for disadvantaged children and their families in the United States. Its primary mission is to foster public policies, human service reforms and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today’s vulnerable children and families.

For more information about **The Diarist Project** or to receive copies of its publications, contact: The Diarist Project, c/o Charitable Choices, 4 Park Avenue, Suite 200, Gaithersburg, MD 20877 (240-683-7100; Tim@CharityChoices.com).

Photos by Tory Read except pages 2, 4, 11 and 17, which are by Mary Ann Dolcemascalò.

Making Connections - Denver is an initiative to improve life for families living in four lower-income Denver neighborhoods—Baker, La Alma/Lincoln Park, Sun Valley and Cole. Its philosophy is that children succeed when their families are strong and families get stronger when they live in supportive neighborhoods. For more information, contact Gloria Marrujo, 303-454-5369. www.makingconnectionsdenver.org