

What's changed...

In the way Hartford supports children and their families living in very low-income neighborhoods?

After nearly a decade of work, has Making Connections had an influence on policies and practices in Hartford?

A core idea of *Making Connections* is that it will be able to fundamentally change outcomes in very low-income neighborhoods only if it is first able to change the way other funders, public agencies and nonprofit service providers do their work in these neighborhoods.

The thinking is that any privately supported initiative like *Making Connections* will never by itself be able to bring enough resources and other supports to turn around struggling neighborhoods. Instead, it needs to use the money and other resources it can bring to influence others to use their resources in ways that will have a transformative impact over time.

By Mike Salius



A mural in Frog Hollow—one of two *Making Connections* neighborhoods in Hartford—celebrates the Puerto Rican heritage of many of its residents.

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—Rich Gruber

Who was interviewed about *Making Connections’* influence in Hartford?

José Colón-Rivas, Executive Director of the Mayor’s Office for Young Children—The Office for Young Children is working with all the key agencies that provide support services to families with young children in Hartford to create a comprehensive and cohesive citywide Family Support Network. It is building upon MCH’s CHAPSS work and the values and principles on which it is based. It also uses the Results Based Accountability (RBA) framework.

Paula Gilberto, Senior Vice President, United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut—United Way served as close-in partner of MCH for several years and continues to co-fund FES programs with MCH.

Judy Goldfarb, Executive Director, Hartford Childcare Collaborative—MCH engaged Judy Goldfarb and her associates to write the early childhood educational curriculum for the parents of infants and toddlers involved in the MCH-supported Walkers and Talkers program.

Rich Gruber, Retired Vice President, Urban League of Greater Hartford—Urban League partners with the MCH-supported Center for Young Working Families and helps link residents to family-supporting jobs.

Andrea Pereira, Director of Hartford and Statewide LISC—LISC is the managing agent for two collaborations supported by MCH: the Neighborhood Development Support Collaborative and the Hartford Collaborative for Community Organizing.

Eddie A. Perez, Mayor of the City of Hartford—With professional roots in community organizing, Mayor Perez has been a steadfast supporter and champion of the MCH initiative and its values. His administration has adopted the RBA framework, the CHAPSS philosophy and has demonstrated

a deep commitment to resident leadership and involvement.

Luisa Peshiera-Odell, Director of the Hartford Collaborative for Community Organizing at LISC—MCH was a member of the governing body of this collaborative and also supported it financially.

Rick Porth, Former Vice President for Grantmaking at the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving (now President, Connecticut United Way)—The Hartford Foundation has been a co-funder with MCH for several asset-building programs and for the EITC Campaign.

Enid Rey, Executive Director of the Mayor’s Office for Youth Services—MCH was influential in the creation of the Mayor’s Office for Youth Services. Prior to assuming this position, Rey partnered with MCH on FES matters with a large nonprofit provider of services to Hartford’s children and families.

Nancy Roberts, Executive Director, Connecticut Council for Philanthropy—The Connecticut Council has been MCH’s fiduciary and landlord. It also has partnered with MCH in sponsoring several trainings and informational sessions with local nonprofit and philanthropic organizations.

Marilyn Rossetti, Executive Director, HART (Hartford’s oldest community organizing agency)—HART manages the Walkers and Talkers school readiness and social networking program for MCH. It also is evolving into the home for MCH’s resident leadership training.

Donna Taglianetti, Executive Director, Co-opportunity, Inc.—Co-opportunity is the lead agency of the Hartford Asset Building Collaborative that manages Hartford’s EITC/Asset Building Campaign. The organization has been MCH’s key FES partner and will continue in this capacity as MCH transitions toward a statewide FES agenda.

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“MCH played a major role in changing service delivery and changing the policy situation. It definitely influenced how other funders approach the work. This was the single greatest contribution of MCH.”

—Donna Taglianetti

Specifically, *Making Connections* wanted to influence others to:

- Work together more effectively,
- Engage residents more deeply in their work and decision making,
- Understand the need for a long-term, two-generation strategy,
- See the critical role that income and assets play in a family's long-term success, and
- Be more driven by the need to produce results for low-income families, results that can be measured with data, data that can be used by residents themselves.

The question is, after nearly a decade of investment in 10 sites, has *Making Connections* influenced the way work is done in at least some of these ways?

To gauge what people in Hartford thought about *Making Connections*' influence in this city, diarist Mike Salius interviewed more than a dozen people, asking them if *Making Connections* had had an influence in Hartford and, if so, what specifically that influence was.

A big influence despite significant challenges

Making Connections' long-time Site Coordinator, Ana-María García, thinks that this



Making Connections Hartford's Site Coordinator Ana-María García thinks the work had an impact in Hartford in part because “the time was ripe.”

initiative did have a significant influence. “I do believe that the work we’re doing with our partners is changing the way the community conducts the business of improving outcomes for vulnerable children and families and setting the stage for sustained community change.”

Given how hard she has worked on *Making Connections* over the years, the fact

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that García believes this work has had an impact is not surprising. But all the other people interviewed also said that they thought *Making Connections* did indeed have significant influence on the city. And most of them were very specific in describing this influence.

Several of these people acknowledged that *Making Connections* Hartford, or MCH, didn’t achieve all of its ambitious goals. “*Expectations were really high and not all of them were achieved,*” said José Colón-Rivas, executive director of the Mayor’s Office for Young Children. “*But I think it was right to set high expectations and it is not surprising that all of them were not met. The connections that were made in the community as a result of Making Connections have made a difference here.*”

Seeing the need for families to achieve economic success

Most of those interviewed agreed that the most influential strand of MCH’s work involves family economic success (FES), which involves a series of strategies to increase the income and assets of families living in its target neighborhoods. Donna Taglianetti, executive director of Co-opportunity, Inc., a key FES partner of MCH, said that, “*the focus on the whole*

FES agenda—on asset building and family financial stability—is where MCH has had the biggest influence here in Hartford. MCH played a major role in changing service delivery and changing the policy situation. It definitely influenced how other funders approach the work. This was the single greatest contribution of MCH.”

Co-opportunity leads the Hartford Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) campaign (supported by MCH) and implements the work of the Hartford Asset Building Collaborative. It is also one of three organizations piloting the Center for Young Working Families (CFYWF) in Hartford, which is another Casey-supported initiative.

Taglianetti cites an example of Connecticut’s new focus on FES that *Making Connections* helped bring about. “*I was just asked to make a presentation at a full-day meeting on poverty and economic stability sponsored by the Connecticut Council on Philanthropy. I don’t think they would be doing this if MCH hadn’t put FES in the limelight. It was an interesting group that included some really small family, community and corporate foundations that probably wouldn’t be exposed to this focus on family economic stability if it weren’t for MCH’s influence.*”

She goes on to say that small organizations like Co-opportunity and the Hartford Asset Building Coalition benefited

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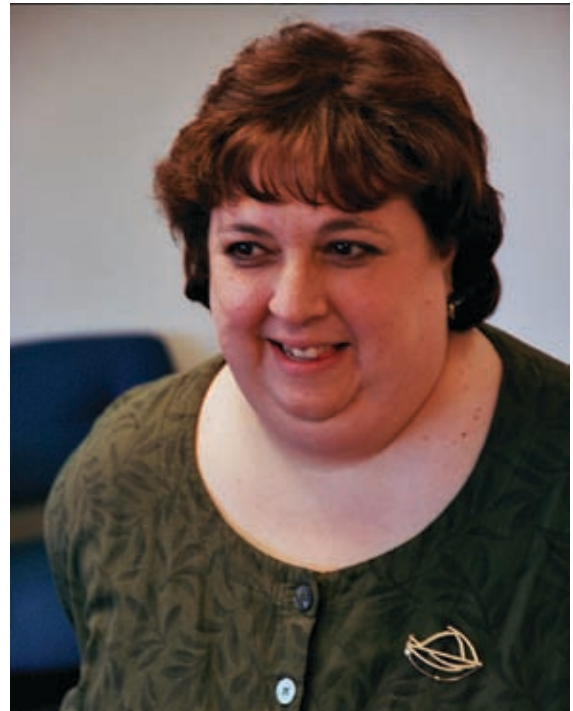
—Rick Porth

from the technical assistance, training and exposure to “best practices” that *Making Connections* made available. “On our own, we wouldn’t necessarily have the flexibility, access or resources to take advantage of the cutting-edge tools and techniques to which MCH exposed us.”

Doing the FES work and having these discussions with other CBOs, advocacy groups and funders has enabled Co-opportunity, working with other MCH partners, to influence policy development on the statewide level.

“Clearly this influence can be seen in how prominently the push for a state EITC has become. It is generally on top of every policy agenda that has to do with low-income, working families. The state’s Child Poverty and Prevention Council recently formed a work group of five policy experts from around the country. They ranked a list of 40 recommendations. EITC came up number one. I think that raising EITC in the eyes of this community is the direct result of MCH’s influence.”

The executive director of the Connecticut Council for Philanthropy, Nancy Roberts, echoes Taglianetti. “MCH’s resources have helped the whole EITC movement in the city and now across the state. MCH worked in partnership with others but were really the instigators.”



Co-Opportunity’s Donna Taglianetti appreciated the “cutting edge tools and techniques to which *Making Connections* exposed us.”

The local United Way and the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving partnered with MCH to fund Hartford’s EITC Campaign over the past few years. Rick Porth, the vice president for grantmaking at the Hartford Foundation, said the collaboration was quite productive.

“For a modest investment, this program has had a big impact on the people in the city

“The work of MCH raised the profile on the importance of financial literacy and family economic success, especially for vulnerable populations.”

—Enid Rey

Magda Figueroa helps a resident qualify for the Earned Income Tax Credit, which *Making Connections* helped “focus on the neighborhood level,” according to the Hartford Foundation’s Rick Porth.



of Hartford. The EITC Campaign is a great project and MCH’s involvement has been influential in focusing it on the neighborhood level.”

He says that the outreach to *Making Connections*’ two target neighborhoods has been particularly strong and that the data tracking and evaluation that MCH’s Local Learning Partnership provides has been “really useful in determining an actual picture of what has been accomplished and in helping to find ways to strengthen the campaign each year.”

MCH’s strategy has been to use the EITC Campaign as a way to begin a community conversation about the importance of asset building for low-income working families. García believes that the ongoing dialogue has made a difference.

“The conversation about asset building is in a whole different place now than it was just two years ago. I think that Making Connections and our partners have had a huge influence on putting the conversation about asset building at the front and center of people’s minds in the community. This

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“We were definitely influenced by Casey and MCH in terms of looking at community change work through the lens of the people in the neighborhoods, in terms of what’s working and what’s not working for them.”

—Paula Gilberto

focus has attracted the attention and support of CBOs and Hartford’s mayor, as well as the state treasurer’s office and many state legislators.”

Enid Rey, who now directs the Mayor’s Office of Youth Services and formerly partnered with MCH on FES matters when she was with one of the city’s leading community organizations, agrees. *“The work of MCH raised the profile on the importance of financial literacy and family economic success, especially for vulnerable populations. There was a time here in Hartford before MCH when nobody knew what EITC was. In large part, it has been MCH and its partners that have really highlighted the opportunities for vulnerable families to begin to accumulate wealth.*

“Our office focuses on youth and we view it as an essential and very positive thing to try to help families get ahead economically. Family financial security has a direct... impact on the stability of any intervention we can do in the community regarding youth. MCH has always spiced the dialogue on FES and kept it in front of key groups in the nonprofit sector, the philanthropic sector and the government sector.”

The local United Way credits *Making Connections* with helping them to put their local financial stability agenda in place. Paula Gilberto, senior vice president, says that the trainings and technical assistance

A New Tool for Tracking Progress

In early 2007, Capital Workforce Partners, an organization that partners with MCH to build a direct pipeline from the two target neighborhoods to jobs in the construction trades, began using Efforts-to-Outcomes (ETO) reporting software that was developed for human services organizations by Social Solutions, Inc.

Ana María García soon recognized this software’s potential to replace one-size-fits-all data tracking systems that MCH partners were using with a common reporting system tailored to the unique missions of each partner organization while also supporting citywide collaborations. She first enlisted MCH’s partners to adopt the ETO system and then, by working with the Mayor’s office, she helped orchestrate the move of ETO to the Mayor’s Office of Youth Services, where it could be maintained with greater efficiency and effectiveness on a citywide basis.

“For my organization, including the CFYWF, it’s a tremendous benefit,” says Taglianetti. “It’s an opportunity for us to become more effective in tracking outcomes related to our asset-building work. Aside from the data collection we do for the EITC Campaign, we haven’t really had a good way for collecting data about our asset-building work with clients.”

provided through MCH have had a significant influence on United Way’s staff and volunteers.

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“Our partners saw the need to form better and stronger connections with residents, and to connect asset building with efforts to help people find work and increase earnings.”

—Ana-María García



The United Way’s Paula Gilberto says that *Making Connections* helped her organization “develop and implement a highly integrated financial stability strategy.”

“The learning we gained about increasing family income and assets has helped us to develop and implement a highly integrated financial stability strategy that advances both our community goals and our organizational goals. We were definitely influenced by Casey and MCH in terms of looking at community change work through the lens of the people in the neighborhoods, in terms of what’s working and what’s not working for them.”

A more collaborative environment

When MCH first came to town, there was little collaboration among the various public and private agencies that serve Hartford’s vulnerable families. Many service providers and funders were doing very good work, but most were operating independently. Many were getting frustrated that, despite their best efforts, conditions citywide continued to stagnate or worsen over the years.

García believes that MCH came to Hartford at a time when people were beginning to see the need to change the siloed approach to community building and many were open to participating in the platform MCH provided.

“I believe we had a degree of influence on resident engagement and asset building because the time was ripe. Our partners saw the need to form better and stronger connections with residents, and to connect asset building with efforts to help people find work and increase earnings. Together with our key partners, we saw the need for change and we developed a collective vision for bringing it about, with the help of Casey Foundation’s resources and other support.

“I think our focus on listening to the wants and needs of residents and our partners,

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combined with our ability to enroll others in the collaborative process, made it possible for us to have an influence in the community.”

José Colón-Rivas, executive director of the Mayor’s Office for Young Children, acknowledges the changes that have occurred due to MCH’s influence. “MCH has brought individuals and organizations to the table that otherwise would not have had the opportunity to communicate with each other. The connections that were made in the community as a result of MCH have made a difference here and helped a lot of families, while also helping a lot of organizations do a better job for families.”

Many other leaders of Hartford’s non-profits who have partnered with MCH share this view. Colón-Rivas’s colleague in city hall, Enid Rey, believes that “MCH has helped the various agencies around the city to finally start capitalizing on each other’s efforts.” She also believes that MCH’s work to support families with young children helped pave the way in 2007 for the creation of her office, which coordinates citywide youth services.

The recently retired vice president of the Urban League of Greater Hartford, Rich Gruber, says that, “MCH has been influential in establishing a kind of collaboration among different kinds of community and public agencies in the city that I’ve not seen before in Hartford.”



LISC’s Andrea Pereira says that MCH created a “platform” that helped people in Hartford “bring the pieces together,” such as combining job training with asset-building strategies.

Andrea Pereira, the local and statewide director of LISC, which partners with MCH on community development and community organizing initiatives, credits MCH with fostering a productive environment for partnerships.

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—Andrea Pereira

She creates a safe place for people to talk about their thoughts, what they need and what they bring to the table. This helps bring people and groups together.

“By emphasizing the importance of alliances and collaborations and not really making resources the issue, Ana-María and MCH have allowed more creative and comprehensive delivery system solutions to come about. For example, connecting IDAs [Individual Development Accounts] with job training and asset building has been really effective. In the past, people talked about doing these things, but there wasn’t a platform available to bring the pieces together. MCH seems to be creating the platform.”

A focus on results and data

MCH’s emphasis on data and on getting results has significantly influenced the strategies and actions that many of its partners have developed in recent years. Some CBOs and public agencies have adopted the Results Based Accountability (RBA) approach to planning, an approach that *Making Connections* advocates. Taglianetti says that RBA is a good example of MCH having influence on the way organizations conduct business.

“The RBA train-the-trainer sessions really took hold in some organizations. Several agencies adopted it and have been using it as a framework for their outcomes. It has been em-



Making Connections spent a lot of time getting people to sit down and talk with each other.

braced on the state level in the legislative and executive branches.”

The state Office of Budget and Management has used the RBA planning model for the past couple of years, as has the Governor’s Connecticut Cabinet on Early Childhood Education. In Hartford, the Mayor’s Office for Young Children also plans to use the RBA process.

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“My office and the agencies we’re connected with are planning to integrate what we learned from the RBA training into one large RBA process that advances all of our shared interests,” says Colón-Rivas.

He like Taglianetti observes that, even though a number of groups in Hartford were trained in RBA and thought it was great, *“not everyone followed through on getting the process in place correctly. The connectivity between the different groups did not quite take place as it should have.”* He plans to make sure that isn’t the case as his department implements the RBA model across his network of partners.

Engaging residents

In its efforts to create a sustainable pathway to opportunities, MCH has advocated for making residents’ needs and wants central components of its partners’ strategies. According to García, MCH’s partners now fully accept and support the notion that the voices of residents must be included when decisions that impact them are being made.

“As I speak with partners about the transition to a statewide agenda, I hear a lot of questions about the future participation of residents. It’s clear that the work we’ve done to encourage resident involvement and resi-

dent leadership has taken root throughout the community. Many more public and private agencies are reaching out to residents to gain a better understanding of their preferences than ever before.”

Colón-Rivas, who heads the Mayor’s Office for Young Children, also sees firsthand the influence MCH’s work with residents has had on the policies of the agencies that serve parents and families.

“With the training that parents received, many of them were empowered to go to agencies, question them and encourage them to be more responsive to their needs. I know that some of the trained parents were instrumental in changing the agendas of certain agencies, specifically CBOs. Some CBOs now make sure to include resident input into their plans and programs to a degree that did not happen in the past. This is a direct result of MCH’s influence.”

Luisa Peshiera-Odell, the director of the Hartford Collaborative for Community Organizing (HCCO), which received support from MCH, believes that *“MCH’s efforts have been influential in creating a new emphasis on resident leadership and on encouraging people that they can be agents of change.”*

She also believes that having MCH as an active HCCO member has kept the focus of the work on the grassroots level.

“MCH’s involvement has had a huge impact in a few areas. It brought new money to the table, which is always essential when you’re trying to make change and do things differently.”

—Nancy Roberts

“Ana-María’s involvement has helped influence the dialogue of the other funders.”

Nancy Roberts of the Connecticut Council for Philanthropy, who represents her organization at HCCO meetings, agrees with Peshiera that MCH has helped keep the collaborative’s focus on residents.

“MCH’s involvement has had a huge impact in a few areas. It brought new money to the table, which is always essential when you’re trying to make change and do things differently. Secondly, having Ana-María sitting in the room as another funder has been influential. She was there at the beginning of HCCO and offered consulting help in addition to cash, which was very helpful. She also was able to expose the group to experiences the Casey Foundation had in other communities.

“Ana-María’s own critical mind being at the table was influential as well as her connection to how Casey operates from the ground up. This grassroots perspective was needed to balance the perspective of other funders who sit around the HCCO table. MCH put a lot of time and energy into the HCCO.”

“Another thing that MCH brings is to help us blend strong accountability standards with very supportive organizational development for the groups we work with,” says Pereira of LISC, HCCO’s managing agent.

“We try to set high standards and then support the groups we work with in attaining these standards.

“Ana-María and her MCH team understand this. You have to develop a supportive environment, give organizational resources... but at the same time you have to hold groups accountable for what they produce and you have to be very open and honest about that.

“MCH has that balance more so than many funders and has really communicated it to our other funders, which has helped create a model of how to do that—especially in the HCCO, where some real tough stuff is going on [in the effort to build rapport and cohesion among the community organizing grantees and the funders]. This has been a real positive influence.”

Best Practices

Several people cited the value their organizations derived from being exposed by *Making Connections* and the Casey Foundation to programs and practices from around the country that are helping low-income families. Co-opportunity and the Urban League have both been favorably influenced by the idea of life coaching (as opposed to the traditional case management approach) and have applied what they learned about it

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Making Connections began in Hartford with a Casey Foundation staff person who served as a “Site Team Leader,” the late Debra Delgado (left) along with the United Way’s Paula Gilberto (right), who helped coordinate the work locally. (Shown here with the Casey Foundation’s Nonet Sykes.)

in their Center for Young Working Families collaboration.

“This has been a real positive for the community,” says Taglianetti. “Thanks to Casey, we were able to spend considerable time with other agencies around the country that were doing coaching and we also were able to get many of our staff members trained in the techniques of coaching, which they have found very helpful. We have now successfully piloted the concept of applying life coaching when delivering financial support services to low-income people.”

As an outgrowth of the life-coaching approach, Co-opportunity now conducts a financial assessment with everyone who comes to the agency. *“Everyone will have a financial plan that puts them on a pathway to work and to increasing their assets.”*

Gruber, whose agency’s mission is to help families achieve economic self-sufficiency, adds that, *“Being part of and engaged with MCH has really helped us focus on a new strategy that includes what we learned from MCH, like getting a better sense about how to bundle services, connecting financial education*

“Being part of and engaged with MCH has really helped us focus on a new strategy, like getting a better sense about how to bundle services, connecting financial education with employment training, and also changing the case management model to the life coach model.”

—Rich Gruber

Hartford Mayor Eddie Perez, at a kick-off for his city's EITC campaign, said that he appreciates MCH's understanding that “we cannot have just one approach to the problems associated with poverty.”



with employment training, and also changing the case management model to the life coach model. This new model continues to impact our whole organization. It has changed the way we go about our everyday work.”

On a similar theme, Colón-Rivas feels that his organization directly benefited by connecting with those doing similar work in other cities and states. *“This has had a hugely positive influence on how we addressed problems and opportunities here. To me, it was a vital and fundamental step that helped organizations like mine factor into our plans*

what was and what was not working in other locations that faced similar situations.

“For instance, it was very interesting to participate in a parent-empowering conference in Denver that was sponsored by MCH. It was fascinating to listen to those parents talk about their experiences.

The parents who came with us from Hartford just connected so well to everything that went on at the conference. They realized that they could accomplish so much more here. This was an incredible learning experience for

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“So what started out as one thing—helping parents improve their parenting skills—resulted in the creation of an informal social network.”

—Marilyn Rossetti

both the parents and also for someone like me who is involved in administering programs.”

Early childhood education

Judy Goldfarb, executive director of the Hartford Childcare Collaborative, believes that MCH’s work on supporting birth-to-age-three child development has been influential. *“This is especially true because there’s not much support from the state for this age group.”*

The Walkers and Talkers program that *Making Connections* supports trains community residents, many of whom are immigrants, to provide families in their neighborhood with information about developmentally-appropriate activities for infants and toddlers and on how to connect parents to social networks, public benefits and other community resources.

This program is run by HART, a community organization. HART’s executive director, Marilyn Rossetti, points out that by funding Walkers and Talkers to help vulnerable families prepare their young children for school, *Making Connections* helped to create an unintended outcome.

“The participating parents found that they highly valued getting together with each other.

They built a network of support that they did not previously have where they could share information about what was important to their children.

“So what started out as one thing—helping parents improve their parenting skills—resulted in the creation of an informal social network. A couple of the women who are immigrants who were involved with Walkers and Talkers as mothers and parents have since become involved in the immigrant rights movement, which they learned about through Walkers and Talkers.

“The program helped a number of the participants really gain confidence in themselves. The other night one woman with limited English proficiency had enough confidence to take a leadership position at a meeting that the Mayor attended.”

Goldfarb also says that *Making Connections* has played a role in improving the quality of early childhood education provided by family, friend and neighbor childcare providers. It did this through its support of the Home Links strategy, which uses visits to childcare providers to promote early literacy with a program tailored to help children achieve pre-school learning goals and developmental benchmarks. Parents receive a monthly progress report on their children’s activities in the program along with materials to help them prepare for the transition to school.

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“Making Connections does just that—connects people.
This has made an incredible and tangible difference
here in Hartford.”

—Mayor Eddie A. Perez

Influential connections

Community building is hard work. The challenge of bringing about the level of change needed in Hartford has been daunting. Rossetti from HART believes that, “*Making Connections is the absolutely right premise.*” But she goes on to say that “*because the initiative involves so many individuals and groups and has such a broad goal of community change, it is extremely difficult to keep all the moving parts going in one direction. The biggest influence has been to help individuals and groups to make connections that they would not have otherwise made.*”

The majority of the people interviewed for this report expressed similar sentiments. For example, Colón-Rivas said that, “*All in all, I would say that there were many more pluses than minuses in the*

way Making Connections influenced the community.”

Hartford’s Mayor Eddie A. Perez views the influence of MCH in a highly favorable light as a solid foundation on which to build for the future. “*In today’s economy, we cannot have just one approach to the problems associated with poverty. Making Connections understands this and utilizes multiple perspectives as it looks at the challenges that face too many people in urban communities.*

“*By working together, so much has been achieved: we have seen fathers learn how to manage money, mothers learn skills to help them advance in the workforce, grandparents learn how to organize members of their community, and children learn how to read before they enter school. Making Connections does just that—connects people. This has made an incredible and tangible difference here in Hartford and I am proud to be associated with them.*”

All photos by Mary Ann Dolcemascolo except page 9 (LISC) and page 14 (Mike Salius)

This is one of a series of reflections and reports about the work of *Making Connections*, a long-term community change initiative supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. This reflection was written by Hartford diarist Mike Salius. It was edited by Diarist Coordinator Tim Saasta. Other reflections are available at: www.DiaristProject.org. For more information about *Making Connections* Hartford: Contact Mike Salius, 860-482-2978.

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