

# CONNECTS

CASEY

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A REPORT FROM THE  
ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

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## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IS KEY INGREDIENT IN CASEY RECIPE FOR RESULTS

Visit any community where the Casey Foundation supports a major initiative, and you'll find a common denominator: talented, passionate residents deeply involved and assuming leadership.

Take Dreema Jackson, for example, who recruits neighbors to join a grassroots network striving to improve their Louisville, Kentucky, community. The work, she says, provides form to a function she was already serving: "I was always talking to people, trying to get them to realize that they had more power."

Helping residents become meaningfully involved in efforts to address community challenges has become a critical, distinguishing feature of Casey's efforts to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and families.

Community engagement has become increasingly integral to Casey's mission since the mid-1990s, when it got residents involved in shaping and directing an initiative known as Plain Talk. The initiative was aimed at protecting sexually active youth from pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease in five U.S. cities.

After several years, an independent cross-site evaluation found the approach worked. Young people were less likely to have an unwanted pregnancy or sexually transmitted disease if they talked with knowledgeable adults in their neighborhoods who learned to communicate effectively about reducing risky sexual behavior and had more access to contraceptives.

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Dreema Jackson, center, who connects her Louisville neighbors to resources, with the Fowler family, from left, Robert, Angelica, Ciera, and Jerry.

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*The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States. The primary mission of the Foundation is to foster public policies, human-service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families. In pursuit of this goal, the Foundation makes grants that help states, cities, and neighborhoods fashion more innovative, cost-effective responses to these needs.*

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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The evaluation by Public/Private Ventures, a national nonprofit organization, tracked changes in young people's attitudes and behaviors in three Plain Talk communities. It found that the percentage of sexually experienced youth who had been pregnant or caused a pregnancy went from 33 percent in 1994, when Plain Talk began, to 27 percent in 1998.

Without Plain Talk, the pregnancy rate in 1998 would have been 38 percent, according to projections based on increases in other similar communities during the same four years. Most of the 11 percent decrease was due to better communication, the data analysis suggested.

As a "Walker and Talker" first for Plain Talk in the neighborhood where she grew up in

New Orleans and now for the Health Care for All program, Peola Trumble-McKinnis shares information about health issues.

"You try to help people become self-sufficient by giving them information. Sometimes all people need is just a little hand to get them up and going."

Practiced in a variety of forms and formats, community engagement cuts across and shapes every major area of the Foundation's work, including family strengthening, community and urban development, health, mental health, housing, child welfare, education, system reform, and leadership development.

"Paying attention to the voices and viewpoints of community residents is an essential component of any strategy to achieve and sustain improved outcomes," says Ralph Smith, the Foundation's senior vice president.

## MANY STRATEGIES, ONE GOAL: EMPOWERING RESIDENTS

Resident engagement strategies supported by Casey are as varied and diverse as the communities they serve. But they all work to give residents a voice and a meaningful role in shaping solutions to local challenges and in linking residents to each other and needed resources. Following are a few examples.

- **STUDY CIRCLES, STORY CIRCLES, FAMILY CIRCLES:** Drawing on methods—adapted by the Foundation and by specific Casey sites—from the Study Circles Resource Center ([www.studycircles.org](http://www.studycircles.org)), residents work together, often meeting in homes or community centers, to act on pressing issues. Family Circles in Indianapolis, for example, have helped launch new playgroups, after-school programs, and youth-mentoring programs.
- **NETWORK ORGANIZING:** *Making Connections* residents and local partners

have formed powerful networks that help connect families to jobs, education, child care, and civic involvement, attracting members through incentives like free public transportation and discounts at local retailers. Such a network in Louisville, Kentucky, has drawn more than 2,000 members and is helping connect families to jobs in health care and other sectors. The Edgewood Family Network in San Antonio, Texas, runs programs that help families get job, health, and education services and ensures that service providers heed resident voices and priorities.

- **COMMUNITY ORGANIZING AND MOBILIZATION:** Helping residents work with community leaders, faith-based groups, government, schools, foundations, and others for more equitable policies and practices to meet community needs is a Casey hallmark. In *Making Connections*

“We are at our best when we see ourselves helping people to help themselves.”

Engaging residents means more than ensuring that their voices are heard. “Our commitment to authentic engagement means ensuring that residents have a seat at the table, a voice in the debate, and the information to participate in the decision,” says Smith. “Authentic engagement means having a meaningful opportunity to change your own or someone else’s action and behavior in order to produce improved results.”

## ADDRESSING HEALTH AND SOCIAL BEHAVIOR

Plain Talk worked to build grassroots consensus on a sensitive topic—the need to encourage the use of contraception to protect sexually active youth. A core group of residents and community agency staff gathered to develop a shared vision about the need to act and spread important information in the community.

Residents were recruited and trained to collect data on neighborhood beliefs and behavior regarding teen sexual behavior. This “community mapping” often produced telling data that helped direct efforts to prevent teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted

disease. At one site, 65 percent of the teens surveyed said a girl didn’t need birth control if she had sex only occasionally.

Residents shared valuable information about teenage sexual activity and reproductive health with other community adults and gave them skills to discuss sexuality with adolescents. This sharing was done by “Walkers and Talkers”—trusted residents trained as peer outreach workers—who went door-to-door in neighborhoods and held small workshops in residents’ homes called “Home Health Parties.”

The Plain Talk evaluation found that the two sites using Walkers and Talkers in conjunction with Home Health Parties educated larger numbers of community adults—800 in New Orleans and 1,350 in San Diego. They also delivered training with more explicit information.

Having residents, including parents, working in partnership with health professionals “provided a greater level of moral authority, and that’s what made the huge difference,” says Debra Delgado, a former Casey senior associate who managed the Plain Talk initiative until 2006. “The reach into neighborhoods also became even deeper. Residents became ambassadors for the health organizations.”

This created the network of support young people need. “There’s no other way of addressing social behavior than by engaging directly the people for whom this problem is significant,” says Delgado, now a program executive at The Atlantic Philanthropies in New York City. “Residents took ownership of the problem and the solution.”

Other Casey-supported public health work relies heavily on engaging respected community residents to build relationships, trust, and credibility. In Washington, D.C., paraprofessionals help post-partum women with health and depression issues. Similar work is being done in San Diego with the East African community. In Boston, volunteer health educators do preventive health work with the Haitian community, addressing AIDS, tuberculosis, diabetes, and obesity.

“Most low-income folks and immigrants really are not trusting of public systems,” says Dr. Patrick Chaulk, the Foundation’s senior associate for health. “If you really work with the community and use community residents to do the work, they’re more likely to be trusted and believed.”

## HELPING RESIDENTS COLLECT AND USE DATA

Community engagement is a key feature of *Making Connections*, a ten-site Casey

Denver, for example, community organizers from an influential group called Metro Organizations for People (MOP) have helped residents advocate for improved early childhood education opportunities and stronger schools. Similar efforts have helped Denver residents and other partners achieve an unprecedented Community Benefits Agreement with the city and developers of a multimillion dollar commercial, residential, and retail center. The agreement sets aside jobs, apprenticeships, and affordable housing for neighborhood residents.

• **RESIDENT LEADERSHIP INSTITUTES:** Leadership institutes in many Casey sites help hundreds of residents develop skills to increase their civic participation. The Resident Leadership and Facilitation program in Indianapolis offers training in developing results-based and data-driven strategic planning. Hundreds of residents graduate from resident leadership training in San Antonio, Providence, and other *Making Connections* cities each year. Some go on to become school board members or city council officials.

• **TRUSTED ADVOCATES:** Well-respected residents in many Casey sites—known as “walkers and talkers,” the Spanish “promotoras,” or resident ambassadors—canvass their communities; engage friends and neighbors in strategies to address neighborhood issues; and connect vulnerable families to opportunities and support. Trusted advocates in White Center/Seattle play key roles in the community’s strategic planning and represent their neighborhoods at the decision-making tables of local public and private agencies and funders.



PALMA EBNER

Martina Ventura is able to drive with her daughter, Alexandra, to the grocery store, thanks to a driver's education program in Lowell, Massachusetts, launched in response to resident input.

initiative to improve outcomes for children in tough or isolated neighborhoods by connecting families and neighborhoods to economic opportunities, social support, and high-quality services. “From the beginning, there was a commitment to residents playing a central role in this work,” says Frank Farrow, the Foundation’s director of Community Change Initiatives. “Now the sites have made a direct link between engaging residents and achieving and sustaining better results.”

In fact, residents have played an important role in collecting and using data to document problems, design policy, advocate for change, and measure results. When a major cross-site survey was launched to gain a more in-depth understanding of neighborhood strengths, needs, and priorities, residents helped design the survey, collect data, reality-check the findings, disseminate the data, and set the agenda for future surveys.

“There was more investment on the part of the community,” says Cindy Guy, the Foundation’s research manager overseeing the cross-site research. “We wanted the survey to speak to local priorities and values and to reflect residents’ interests.”

### SUPPORTING RESIDENT LEADERS

Having residents involved in the survey process helps produce more relevant questions, more enthusiastic responses, and more reliable answers to better inform policymaking. “These communities have been studied to death. Sometimes they’re downright hostile to more data collection,” says Smith. But they’re more likely to respond if they see residents involved and if they “see the relationship between

the data they’re providing and stuff that will impact positively on their lives.”

Casey’s Leadership Development unit also works with *Making Connections* and other initiatives to develop resident leaders. Working at individual *Making Connections* sites, a specially trained coaching team presents a two-day program teaching residents skills needed to chair meetings and to encourage constructive participation in group decision-making. This Resident Leadership and Facilitation training is a collaboration between the Leadership Development unit and Casey’s Technical Assistance Resource Center (TARC).

Community engagement is pivotal not only in Casey’s efforts to prevent poor outcomes, but also in supporting families

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# RESOURCE CORNER

## CASEY WEBSITE GETS A MAKEOVER

If you click on [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org), you'll find the Casey Foundation's website has a new look and format that provides reader-friendly, user-friendly access to a wealth of information about Casey's work, approach to philanthropy, and knowledge base on building thriving communities for vulnerable children and families. The website features an interactive "Casey Places" map, which guides the user to major initiatives in various cities and states; a wide range of customizable data on child well-being from every state in our KIDS COUNT database; and an online Knowledge Center with nearly 2,000 resources published or funded by the Casey Foundation. The site also allows you to sign up for a new e-mail newsletter and other publications and to stay up to date on the latest resources and announcements. Visit [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org) soon!

*All publications listed below can be found in the Knowledge Center on Casey's website, ([www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org)).*

## EMINENT DOMAIN: IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNITY REDEVELOPMENT EFFORTS

Eminent domain, the power of government to condemn blighted private property and take it for public use, has been a controversial subject in recent years. In the 5–4 U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in the *Kelo* case in June 2005, New London, Connecticut, was allowed to use eminent domain to acquire additional property to complete a redevelopment project over the objections of property investors and homeowners.

This monograph summarizes a session Casey convened in September 2006 to explore the impact of *Kelo* on the development of affordable housing and mixed-income communities and on the low-income families affected by revitalization projects. Hosted by Casey's Neighborhood Development unit, the session brought together advocates and experts to discuss how common ground can be achieved on the use of eminent domain as a tool in neighborhood redevelopment.

## GROWING UP IN NORTH AMERICA: CHILD HEALTH AND SAFETY IN CANADA, THE UNITED STATES, AND MEXICO

Do children raised in North America have the best chance at health, education, and safety? Can they face the challenges of globalization today and in the future? These questions cannot be answered without sound data. This new report is the second in a series prepared through a joint project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Canadian Council on Social Development, and Red por los Derechos de la Infancia en Mexico. The first report looked more broadly at child well-being; this one focuses on indicators of health and safety. It concludes that in all three countries rates of obesity among young people are too high; that respiratory illness is epidemic in portions of the continent; that exposure to lead and other chemicals continues to be alarming; that depression is a serious problem among young people; that cancer is the second leading cause of death for children age 5 to 14; and that unintentional injuries, many preventable, are the leading cause of death for children and youth.

## THE CULTURE OF MONEY: THE IMPACT OF RACE, ETHNICITY, AND COLOR ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ASSET-BUILDING STRATEGIES

Casey's emphasis on "asset building"—developing strategies to help low-income families start saving and building wealth for the future—grew out of a recognition that promoting financial "literacy" is not enough to stem entrenched poverty, particularly in communities of color scarred by longstanding patterns of discrimination and uneven economic opportunities. The focus on building assets has sparked many innovative and successful programs in Casey communities, but the dynamics of race and ethnicity still play a complex role in people's ability to meet their basic needs, much less accumulate wealth. This report discusses the importance of considering these factors in planning asset-building strategies and highlights emerging lessons and promising practices.

## LEADERSHIP IN ACTION PROGRAM

Casey's Leadership in Action Program (LAP) delivers hands-on training for people from diverse fields and backgrounds who are working hard to improve results for vulnerable children and families. The program—used for agency managers, educators, business people, nonprofit leaders, public officials, parents, and child advocates—works with local groups to focus on improving a specific result, like reducing the number of low-birthweight babies or increasing the number of children ready for kindergarten. This brochure explains how the program works and how to tell if a community is ready to participate.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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already in crisis who need intervention and services. The goal is to get the parents, families, and other residents involved in designing approaches that best serve their needs and to help them build the formal and informal networks they need to access opportunities and support.

## HEARING FAMILY AND COMMUNITY VOICES

In its work to provide all children with a permanent and caring connection to a family, Casey Family Services, the Foundation's direct services agency, makes sure that decisions about a child's welfare involve family, community members, and other caring adults connected to the child as well as the young people themselves. In seeking a permanent family connection, Casey Family Services taps into and involves the child's extended network of family, friends, and significant adults.

The Foundation's Family to Family initiative also uses several methods to engage parents and other residents to generate better information and options for children. This includes a Team Decision-Making process whereby major players from the community involved in a child's life—parents, relatives, friends, perhaps a favorite teacher—meet with social services staff to develop a plan that best provides a safe, nurturing, and stable environment for the child.

Casey efforts increasingly have worked to make sure young community members' voices are heard in decisions that affect them and other young people. "Kids need to know what they're getting into," notes Gloryanna Renshaw of Omaha, Nebraska, whose life changed for the better when she had the chance to speak out in court hearings about her future after growing up in multiple foster care settings.

The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative (JCYOI) seeks to expand opportunities for foster care youth transitioning into adulthood by engaging the youth. Formed by the Casey Foundation and Casey Family Programs, a national child welfare agency headquartered in Seattle, Washington, JCYOI offers young people in foster care a voice and role in forging policy to improve the services and opportunities when they age out of the system.

While the Casey Foundation has developed a rich body of knowledge about community engagement, the search continues for new ways to empower and mobilize residents to produce better results for children and families. "The bedrock of the work... is resident engagement, connections, involvement," says Dana Jackson, site coordinator of *Making Connections* in Louisville, Kentucky. "We have gone through several iterations of what that looks like. With each one, the work has gotten clearer and better, more deeply rooted, and much broader."

This strategy is considered key to empowering the most vulnerable, disconnected residents of very tough neighborhoods—and to sustaining improvements once outside help leaves. "If you don't start engaging people at the grassroots who are the recipients of services and supports, you're not going to make durable change happen," says Audrey Jordan, a Foundation senior associate who works in Community Change Initiatives.

"Many people from the community have ideas but they don't have ways to achieve them, and people are afraid of the big institutions," notes Ramona Obacz, a resident of Hartford, Connecticut's Frog Hollow neighborhood who has served on the decision-making panel of a local grants program supported by *Making Connections*. "Here, people come to us, and it's more personal. This is a way to make a difference."