



Creating a Neighborhood Design Center

A *MAKING CONNECTIONS* PEER TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE MATCH BETWEEN
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT, BALTIMORE, MARYLAND, AND LAWRENCE, MASSACHUSETTS
PEER TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE LEADS TO ACTION

*Part of a Series from the
Technical Assistance Resource
Center of the Annie E. Casey
Foundation and the Center
for the Study of Social Policy*

©2003, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Baltimore, Maryland

The Annie E. Casey Foundation

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States. It was established in 1948 by Jim Casey, one of the founders of United Parcel Service, and his siblings, who named the Foundation in honor of their mother. 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. For more information, visit the Foundation's website at www.aecf.org.

Center for the Study of Social Policy

The Center for the Study of Social Policy, based in Washington, D.C., was established in 1979 with the goal of providing public policy analysis and technical assistance to states and localities. The Center's work is concentrated in the areas of family and children's services, income supports, neighborhood-based services, education reform, family support, community decision-making, and human resource innovations. The Center manages peer technical assistance as part of the Foundation's Technical Assistance Resource Center (TARC).

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	2
SETTING THE CONTEXT FOR THE MATCH	3
The Peer Consultants	4
THE CONSULTATION	6
LESSONS LEARNED	8
What is the Role of a Design Center?	8
1. Education.....	10
2. Community Planning.....	11
3. Community Project Design.....	12
4. Project Implementation	14
5. Resident Engagement	14
How Does the Design Center Work?	16
Other Design Center Models.....	18
PARTICIPANT REFLECTIONS AND NEXT STEPS	20
PROGRESS TO DATE	24
LEAD CONTACTS.....	25
WHAT IS <i>MAKING CONNECTIONS</i> ?	26
WHAT ARE PEER MATCHES?	27

INTRODUCTION

Through the *Making Connections* initiative, the Annie E. Casey Foundation is working with Hartford and 20 other communities across the country to strengthen neighborhoods and support families. One of the principal aims of *Making Connections* is to link neighborhood residents to the economic opportunities, social networks, and effective services that will improve the lives and well-being of children and their families. Increasing homeownership and other family assets is one of the initiative's core outcomes.

As part of this initiative, the Foundation offers the participating communities access to technical assistance that will help them achieve their goals for strengthening families and neighborhoods. Peer technical assistance, which allows the sites to capitalize on the practical knowledge that emerges from innovators in other places, is a particularly valuable resource these communities can use to address issues and solve problems they have identified in their own contexts.

On November 12–14, 2002, a team from Hartford, Connecticut, led by the Mayor's Homeownership Task Force, traveled to Baltimore, Maryland, to participate in a peer technical assistance match with a group of "peer consultants" from the Neighborhood Design Center in Baltimore and Lawrence CommunityWorks in Lawrence, Massachusetts. The peer match focused on creating a neighborhood design center as part of a broader strategy developed by the Task Force for increasing the homeownership rates in Hartford.

The Hartford group wanted to learn more about the nuts and bolts of a neighborhood design center: the range of services that it offers, its operational structure, its funding and partners, and the ways in which it assists the city and community groups to devise workable plans for improving neighborhoods. This report summarizes the results and main lessons learned from that meeting, as well as the next steps that Hartford participants committed to undertake in order to move their agenda forward. For more information about *Making Connections* and peer matches, see p. 26.

SETTING THE CONTEXT FOR THE MATCH

Stabilizing Hartford's neighborhoods and increasing opportunities for families is one of the cornerstones of Mayor Eddie Perez's administration. One of his top priorities for achieving this goal is increasing the rate of homeownership in the city. Toward this end, in March 2002 the Mayor announced the formation of a Homeownership Task Force composed of 21 individuals representing community, corporate, religious, housing, real estate, and public-sector interests. The Task Force was charged with developing a strategy and specific plan to increase homeownership by 30 percent during the next five years. This is no small challenge given that Hartford has the lowest homeownership rate relative to all of Connecticut's major cities and the lowest rate in the nation for a city of its size.

In light of the mayor's mandate, the Task Force explored five basic areas of concern: 1) increasing the role of community development corporations and Neighborhood Revitalization Zones (NRZs); 2) creating a marketing strategy and identifying niche opportunities; 3) engaging corporate, institutional, and faith-based organizations in the effort; 4) developing a housing design and approval process, and lowering the costs of producing housing; and 5) streamlining the housing production process.

As a result of this work, the Task Force concluded that the city cannot build sustainable, safe, and desirable neighborhoods unless it invests more strategically and rebuilds using a targeted approach. Thus, a central component of the plan is to invest in concentrated areas in order to maximize impact and ensure long-term viability. Another goal is to produce attractive, well-designed homes that give Hartford a competitive edge in the regional housing market. Among the strategies recommended to create such a competitive edge are to prioritize construction of single-family homes, capitalize on Hartford's wealth of historic housing stock, provide more living space, build new homes with character, and emphasize the public façade of homes.

One of the Task Force's recommendations for implementing this strategic vision is establishing a design center that, "would assist the city and developers in developing plans, specifications and standards that will utilize Hartford's historic assets to create attractive, marketable housing and develop new designs which complement and enhance the existing character of the community. The Center could also be recruited to help the City Planning Department on developing plans for community and NRZ activities." (*Coming Home to Hartford: Report of the Mayor's Homeownership Task Force*, 2002, p. 10)

Recognizing the need to further investigate and develop the strategies it proposed in the plan, the Task Force sought and secured technical assistance support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation's *Making Connections* initiative in Hartford. Through its Technical Assistance Resource Center (TARC), the Foundation researched, supported, and facilitated Hartford's participation in a peer match with colleagues from Baltimore, Maryland, and Lawrence, Massachusetts, to learn more about how a successful design center works and apply this knowledge to the implementation of the strategy proposed for Hartford.

The Peer Consultants

The Neighborhood Design Center (NDC) in Baltimore, Maryland, served as the primary peer consultant. The Task Force was especially interested in learning about NDC because of its long track record of success, as well as its connection with Healthy Neighborhoods, an initiative that uses a targeted investment through geographic selection approach. Lawrence CommunityWorks (LCW), a resident-led community development corporation based in Lawrence, Massachusetts, also joined as peer consultant to share its success in engaging residents in planning and design activities.

The NEIGHBORHOOD Design Center

The Neighborhood Design Center (NDC) was founded in 1968 by a group of architects and planners who volunteered their time and talent to help Baltimore's low-income communities rebuild during this period of urban disinvestment and Civil Rights protests. Since then, NDC has been a catalyst for community change—providing support for community-initiated projects that directly improve neighborhood livability and viability. Today, NDC teams of mostly volunteers from the design, planning, construction, and development professions provide technical assistance to:

- Strengthen community participation in neighborhood improvement initiatives;
- Educate the public about the essential value of good design, planning, and preservation practices as community revitalization tools; and
- Serve as a catalyst for increased investment for neighborhood development.

National research conducted as part of NDC's 1998 strategic plan indicated that NDC is the most productive design center in the nation, serving the most projects annually by far. It is also the leanest center in its ratio of staff (small) to volunteers (many). Its teamwork with the local, private-sector design community results in more new funding for the implementation of neighborhood projects than at any other center. A survey of over 50 community project sponsors showed that NDC's designs and feasibility studies were instrumental in helping community-based organizations win over \$4 million in new project funding. Over the decades, NDC has broadened its scope of services and volunteer base to provide a range of design and planning assistance always focusing on community engagement, education, and revitalization.

Lawrence CommunityWorks

Lawrence CommunityWorks (LCW), formerly the Lawrence Planning and Neighborhood Development Corporation, is dedicated to the sustained revitalization of the city of Lawrence, Massachusetts. LCW had its beginnings in the struggle to build affordable housing in North Lawrence in the early 1980s. It works with residents and local stakeholders to improve both the quality of life in Lawrence's neighborhoods and the opportunities available to residents through organizing, planning, and development.

LCW views community organizing as the engine that drives its efforts to advance political, social, and economic development in Lawrence. This work includes promoting resident-driven neighborhood planning, building and supporting grassroots organizations, and organizing around issues that affect the community. Its current focus is Project Reviviendo!, a comprehensive revitalization plan for the North Common Neighborhood, one of the poorest areas of Lawrence. Since 1999, LCW has helped develop the North Common Neighborhood Association into a strong, self-run community organization that is now one of its most important partners and has successfully built an active membership within its organization of over 150 residents.

LCW places a big emphasis on engaging youth and runs a successful Young Architects program centered on actual planning and design projects in the neighborhood. It is currently considering developing a stand-alone design center that can provide services directly rather than operating as an in-house function.

THE CONSULTATION

Peer matches are a rather intensive form of technical assistance that TARC makes available to *Making Connections* sites. They consist of structured opportunities for teams of people from two or more jurisdictions who are working on a similar issue to come together to exchange their expertise and practical knowledge in order to address a particular challenge that has been identified in advance. Careful preparation of a peer match greatly increases the likelihood of success. This process begins with a series of facilitated conversations between the lead contacts from both sites in order to clarify the purpose and learning objectives of the peer match.

The following learning objectives were identified in advance through a series of facilitated conference calls with the lead contacts of the Homeownership Task Force and the lead peer consultants from Baltimore and Lawrence:

- What is the role of the design center?
 - What types of services does the design center provide and how have its services grown or evolved over time?
 - How can it assist the city and developers in developing plans, specifications, and standards?
 - How can it help engage residents more effectively in neighborhood planning efforts (NRZs)?
- How does the design center work?
 - What is its governance structure?
 - What is the right mix of staff and volunteers and how do you attract volunteers?
 - Who are its partners and what role do they play?
 - Where do the necessary resources come from?

The lead contact for the Hartford team was Bob Kantor, who put together a team of 12 people to participate in the peer match. The team included the Task Force co-chairs, Deputy Mayor Veronica Airey-Wilson and Ken Johnson, as well as a city councilor, the city manager, staff from the planning department, and representatives from Hartford 2000 (the leadership that represents the city's NRZs), the architectural community, Hartford's Economic Development Commission, and local foundations. While local universities support the Task Force recommendation to establish a design center in Hartford and had expressed interest in housing it, scheduling conflicts did not permit a university representative to attend the peer match.

The peer consultant team from NDC was composed of its executive director, Mark Cameron, three members of its board of directors, and several of its partners including the city, local foundations, and community-based organizations that have received its services. The team from LCW, led by its executive director, Bill Traynor, included an LCW neighborhood planner, the teen president of its Young Architects program who is also a resident, and a graduate student in urban design who has been developing LCW's design center and organizing a partnership between LCW and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's School of Architecture and Planning. Also participating in the match were Debra Delgado, *Making Connections* Hartford site team leader, and Nonet Thomas, the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Technical Assistance Resource Center liaison for Hartford. Rosa Briceno, a senior associate with the Center for the Study of Social Policy, facilitated the match.

The consultation started with a dinner during which participants had an opportunity to get to know one another and begin informal conversations about Hartford's vision for the design center. The next day and a half consisted of focused, facilitated discussions on the learning objectives identified earlier. The following sections of this report highlight the main lessons learned by Hartford participants and individual and collective next steps identified by the group to move its agenda in Hartford forward.

LESSONS LEARNED

What is the Role of a Design Center?

After the initial introductions, Hartford participants shared with Baltimore their vision for increasing homeownership in Hartford and, more specifically, for the design center. Various expectations and questions emerged about the role that the design center could play. Some team members hoped the design center could serve as a vehicle to help both targeted and nontargeted communities to come up with feasible conceptual plans and designs that could ultimately be implemented. Some wanted the design center to help address the issue of the quality of the housing stock

and help obtain a better product by getting a cost-effective design for projects that emphasize the positive characteristics of particular neighborhoods. There were also questions about the role of the design center in helping to provide an overall zoning and planning template for the city. Some participants wondered if the design center could function as a quasi-public or regulatory body. They wanted to know what kind of authority a design center has and if it can provide leadership on projects at a micro- and macro-level. They also wanted to know if it could be proactive in working with developers as well as in connecting with downtown development.

The main lessons learned from this discussion included:

- *The design center shouldn't be too much at once.* As Bill Traynor put it, there are many things that a design center can be. The critical question for Hartford to answer is: “*What is missing? What capacity is lacking that needs to be filled?*”

It is important to stay focused on what is missing. In Lawrence, for example, what was missing, according to Traynor, “was the ability to have a productive dialogue about anything. The city had shifted from a majority Western European to a majority Latino immigrant community. There was no vision for the city and no institutional memory.” LCW’s strategy, *Project Reviviendo!*, focuses on creating a process for community organizing around land use that builds a network of active residents, helps retain institutional memory, and does it in concert with a community plan.

- *Don't try to duplicate the city's oversight review and planning process.* Bill Traynor from LCW suggested Hartford consider the line between technical assistance and quality control. While it is the role of the design center to provide technical assistance, he cautioned about it trying to provide quality control for a review process. Other peer consultants agreed that there are certain roles the city plays that should not be filled by the design center. For example, NDC works in partnership with the city to provide technical assistance regarding better and safe neighborhood designs. It also serves the city in an advisory capacity with Plan Baltimore, a comprehensive community planning

“We are talking Design with a capital D. For me, as an architect, it was very important to lift the design aspect of it . . . helping people realize the value of good design as well as the value of their neighborhoods that they may not have seen yet.”

Denise Watkins, NDC Board Member

effort developed in 1999. NDC worked with coalitions of neighborhoods to develop a community plan and to help build their capacities to implement the plan. NDC has also helped to extend the capacity of the planning department by forming volunteer teams to work on particular neighborhood planning issues and by addressing systems for engaging the community in the city's comprehensive community planning processes. But it does not get involved in the development and review process.

- *The primary role of the design center is as a catalyst for community change in neighborhoods.* NDC plays this role by serving as a vehicle for assisting communities and community-based nonprofits in their grassroots planning efforts, advocating for good design and helping residents understand the value of good design, and leveraging investments in the rebuilding of neighborhoods. As one NDC board member noted, the primary role of the design center is to push and advocate for what is best for residents, and “by taking the lead on projects, the design center will loose the possibility of being a policy advocate.”

“We’re just hoping this will
make other blocks see what
this block is all about, and
they can become the same ...
I love this block. I like the
neighborly atmosphere.”

Jean Banks, Resident
(*The Baltimore Sun*, 8/27/2000)

Mark Cameron highlighted four of NDC’s program initiatives that illustrate the role a design center can play and the continuum of services that it can provide, including education, community planning, community project design, and project implementation. In addition, LCW’s programs illustrated how residents can be empowered through their meaningful engagement in planning and design activities.

1. Education

- *The design center is a valuable and valued educational resource in addressing critical community issues.* NDC taps the expertise and resources of the design, planning, and development professions to address the information needs of its constituencies, which include community organizations, volunteers, and collaborative partners.

- *In particular, NDC emphasizes the importance of good design, preservation, and development practices in the revitalization of older communities.* A concrete example of how NDC is helping residents realize and capitalize on the historic value of their neighborhoods is the Marble Steps project, which seeks to bring back the lost art of cleaning Baltimore’s famous marble steps. “The marble front steps of the city’s row houses are Baltimore—as much as crab cakes and the Orioles,” said a local newspaper article featuring the project. The project includes how-to workshops and demonstration events together with a Marble Step Cleaning Kit that residents can purchase at low cost.

This emphasis resonated very much with Hartford participants, given that their plan recommends giving special emphasis to the public façade of homes as a means to improve marketability as well as promote a pride of place among the residents of the community. The Marble Steps project is part of NDC’s **Neighborly Places** program, which targets middle-income and working-class Baltimore neighborhoods that currently face population transitions and declining market conditions. Through Neighborly Places, NDC is working to reverse these trends in various neighborhoods. The goals of the program include strengthening residential value and marketability, increasing home improvement resources and incentives, and improving neighborhood safety, social fabric, and livability.

2. Community Planning

- *The Neighborhood Design Center helps communities in need leverage and plan strategically for the effective investment of scarce revitalization resources.* It also serves as a resource for volunteer professionals and “community mentors” that can advise, structure, and facilitate the early stages of a community’s planning process.

Increasingly, grassroots organizations in older communities are facing the challenges of limited financial resources and a growing need for reinvest-

ment by developing comprehensive plans for the use of financial resources that builds upon the community's own assets. In response, NDC is focusing increased resources on the recruitment of volunteer community planners and economic development professionals to help support neighborhood strategic planning efforts. In addition, NDC partnered with the nonprofit Citizen Planning and Housing Association and the Baltimore City Planning Department to author a practical toolkit for communities entitled *You Plan It! A Strategic Planning Toolkit for Baltimore Neighborhoods*.

- *The Neighborhood Design Center helps build safer communities through the application of design principles that make it more difficult to carry out inappropriate activities.* The plan proposed by the Hartford Task Force envisions that its design center will utilize an approach to planning and development that reduces opportunities for crime. NDC noted that often a community's request is motivated by a concern for public safety. Through its **Design for Safety** program, NDC has helped several communities in Baltimore look at the neighborhood as a whole to assess the physical conditions that put the community at greater risk for illegal activity, such as trash dumping or drug trafficking. NDC's training series brings volunteers, agency representatives, and residents together to collectively examine factors such as a neighborhood's pedestrian and auto circulation routes and the level of use and misuse of public spaces to develop Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED) strategies.

3. Community Project Design

- *The various partners and client organizations that attended the peer match concurred that NDC has a strong reputation in the community for providing responsive and high-quality project design services.* Through its **Community Design Works!** (CDW!) program, NDC provides Baltimore's communities and nonprofit organizations with design and planning services for projects such as the reclamation of vacant lots and the rejuvenation of business

district streetscapes. CDW! projects are those that communities have identified as requiring special attention because of their potential impact on the community. They usually address efforts within the following major categories:

- Public Spaces;
 - Building and Site Development, including Interior Space Planning;
 - Neighborhood Business Districts; and
 - Adaptive Reuse of Existing Facilities.
- *The design center needs to come up with a clear set of criteria for deciding about projects.* Given that resources are finite, Hartford wanted to know how NDC chooses projects. The peer consultants stressed the fact that NDC won't undertake any projects where it is clear that someone is just trying to cut costs on architectural fees and drawings. NDC considers applications two times a year, which helps it manage its time better, and has developed some criteria for evaluating applications that include:
 - The degree of support that the project has from community residents and/or members of the applicant organization.
 - The sponsoring organization's commitment to participate in the planning, implementation, and ongoing stewardship of the project.
 - The importance of site control, either actual site ownership or documentation of lease or other type of agreement with the site owner.
 - *The Neighborhood Design Center plays a strong role as community advocate.* An example of a cause where NDC has come to play an increasing advocacy role in the city is **Playing Safe**, a youth and community safety initiative that was born out of a need to provide a safe outdoor place to play for every young person in Baltimore. Led by a coalition of nonprofit and community-based organizations, Playing Safe teams provide playground design and planning assistance, partnership building, and advocacy for communities and

school groups. Civic Works, a nonprofit group that has worked closely with NDC on the Playing Safe project, noted that the design center has done an incredible job of taking the lead and driving this initiative forward. In 2001, NDC completed fundraising of \$900,000 to rebuild nine playgrounds at neglected Baltimore City parks.

“I realized the importance of thinking through the human development side as well as the physical development aspect.”

Chris Hall, The Hartford Foundation

4. Project Implementation

- *The Neighborhood Design Center is a valued resource for community-based organizations needing access to the design and development expertise required to implement critical community-driven initiatives.* Through selected, hands-on demonstrations, such as the marble cleaning project described above, Playing Safe, the **Youth Art** projects, and others, NDC:
 - Empowers communities and involves volunteers in implementing the revitalization designs upon which they collaborate;
 - Expands the funding and in-kind resource pool available for community-driven projects;
 - Illustrates issues related to critical community concerns; and
 - Promotes the role of good design and best practices in achieving livable communities.

5. Resident Engagement

- *The design center can serve as a tool for helping Neighborhood Revitalization Zones (NRZs) conceptualize and realize their plans for neighborhood improvements.* Hartford participants made special note of this important lesson. The city of Hartford is currently broken up into 17 discrete neighborhoods with no history of working together. Rather, as one participant put it, there tends to be lots of competition and posturing for access to resources. Fourteen NRZs were created in the mid-1990s but the legislation was lacking in

financial and planning support and never gave them the tools or resources to really come up with credible plans. Participants got a much better sense of how the design center could assist the NRZs in devising workable plans for improving their neighborhoods.

- *The design center could also empower residents by actively involving them in planning, design, and project implementation activities, as well as other learning opportunities.* Hartford participants were particularly inspired by the video that LCW showed featuring some of the programs that this organization has initiated in Lawrence to mobilize, educate, and engage residents, including youth, in revitalizing their vibrant but troubled North Common community. LCW's Project Reviviendo! focuses on creating community organizing and a resident-driven planning process around land use.
- *Investing in people is an essential ingredient.* Closing the learning gap in Lawrence is a priority for LCW. Only 37 percent of the city's population has the equivalent of a high school diploma, causing a major barrier to employment and financial security for vast numbers of Lawrence's diverse immigrant population. To address this challenge, the resident-driven organization has formed a Family Asset Building Committee and initiated a number of community-driven strategies, including several young professional programs: Young Architects, Webmasters, Film Makers, Fashion Designers, Young Marketers, and a Youth Individual Development Accounts program.

Of special interest for Hartford participants was the Young Architects program, an architecture and design "studio" course centered on actual planning and design projects in the North Common neighborhood. Youth ages 14 to 18 who have an interest in architecture, design, drawing, building, or community involvement team with graduate planning and architecture students from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and other professional volunteers on projects designed to improve their neighborhood. At the same time that the youth are getting involved with real projects in the community, the program is helping them develop professionally.

How Does the Design Center Work?

NDC considers itself an independent, nonprofit, volunteer-driven organization. Its volunteer corps includes professionals with expertise from the full development continuum, including project feasibility, conceptual design, funding/financing, and implementation/construction. The experience of its volunteers range from new architect interns to highly experienced professionals. NDC has 400 people listed as volunteers, of which 250 are active. About 150 are architects, 75 are landscape architects, and about 50 to 60 are planners and others. NDC is focusing increased resources on the recruitment of volunteer urban designers, community planners, and economic development professionals to help support neighborhood strategic planning efforts.

The main lessons learned from working with and recruiting volunteers include:

- *Offering architectural services for free has the danger of devaluing the services.* So as a volunteer-driven organization it is critical to make it very clear that NDC provides services for communities that cannot pay for them.
- *What motivates many of the volunteers is their sense of service, “a desire to use their skills and knowledge for doing good.”* There is also a sense that by helping other neighborhoods, they are making the city a better place to live.
- *For new architects, volunteering also provides an opportunity to develop additional skills that they may not have exposure to in their firms or regular work, such as schematic design, meeting facilitation, and cost estimating.* For architectural interns it is also an opportunity to satisfy requirements for the Intern Development Program (IDP).
- *Any person can become an NDC member, which provides benefits such as free admission to workshops and discounts on attendance to various events.*

What is the governance structure? NDC has a diverse board of directors that includes members from the architectural community and other private and public agencies. “We can’t be everything to all groups. Our board mission is to stay on focus,” said

one board member, “and to make sure that the organization remains solvent.” The staff, which is very small, plays an important function as program coordinators and project managers working to ensure that communities and volunteers are working effectively together.

Where does the funding come from? NDC has an operating budget of about \$500,000. About 50 percent of its income comes from public sources (Community Development Block Grants and other such as anti-crime grants), 39 percent comes from foundation grants, about 10 percent from corporate and individual giving, and 1 percent from nominal project fees.

Who are the key partners and what role do they play? NDC has built strong partnerships with government, community-based organizations, and foundations and works collaboratively with all of them to realize its mission. Representatives from all these sectors joined the peer match for a session in which they shared their experiences working with the design center. Some of the lessons distilled from this discussion included:

- *NDC has built a reputation of bringing professional expertise for supporting and empowering community efforts, not replacing them.* Glenn Ross, with the McEldeberry Park Community Association, described the various ways in which NDC helped the residents in his neighborhood understand the housing development possibilities, structure work committees, and figure out reasonable timelines. “It taught residents how to do it, it didn’t take over,” he said. It also helped to cut through red tape with the city as a credible partner.
- *NDC is seen by communities as a trusted third party in neighborhoods targeted by the Healthy Neighborhoods Initiative.* “NDC was the perfect partner that allowed us to think through programs to help improve design elements and get neighbors interested in investing in small ways,” said Barbara Aylesworth, executive director of Belair-Edison Neighborhoods, Inc.

“We have to make sure that we don’t compete with the architectural community and make it very clear that we are serving community organizations that cannot afford those services.”

Denise Watkins,
NDC Board Member

- *NDC has partnered with and helped to extend the capacity of the city's planning department by forming volunteer teams to address citywide issues and to recommend systems for community engagement.*
- *NDC has played an advisory role with the city and has been an important partner in neighborhood planning and citywide initiatives.*
- *NDC has been an ombudsman to the foundation community by bringing them information on ways that technical assistance is happening or should be directed.*

Other Design Center Models

Mark Cameron noted that in addition to the independent, nonprofit, volunteer-driven organization exemplified by NDC, there are other models around the country for Hartford to consider in structuring its own design center. Some other design centers are university-based and some are hybrids. Given Mark Cameron's familiarity with the different models, the group spent some time learning about other models that they could investigate further. The Association for Community Design was noted as a good resource. Its website is www.communitydesign.org.

Hartford was particularly interested in learning about university-based design center models. The University of Hartford currently has accredited architecture, construction, and civic engineering programs as well as an Art School that has a design component, and they are all interested in partnering with the city on the homeownership strategy. The Hartford team noted that such partnership could bring students to assist with design in some projects and that through these relationships they might be able to attract other professionals to contribute their time and skills to the design center.

What are good examples of design centers affiliated with or based at universities? Among those highlighted for Hartford to investigate further were:

- *The Columbus Neighborhood Design Assistance Center*, which is a nonprofit organization affiliated with Ohio State University and funded by the

university, the city of Columbus, and other public and private sources. Interns, who are students from several departments at Ohio State University and who typically commit to work with the center for a year, do design work. Center architects oversee the students. The center focuses primarily on commercial revitalization areas, has urban guidelines for the commercial areas, and has a staff that works with business people to maneuver through the financing and permitting process.

- *The Community Design Assistance Center*, housed at Virginia Tech, is run by faculty from the College of Architecture and Urban Studies. Both graduate and undergraduate students work as paid interns.
- Other examples worth exploring are the *Hamer Center for Community Design Assistance* at Penn State and the *Detroit Collaborative Design Center* at the University of Detroit.
- The Hamer Center provides communities with education and technical assistance as they seek design solutions related to land use and transportation, community and economic development, the environment and quality of life.
- The Detroit Collaborative Design Center is a nonprofit center located within the University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture. It was established in 1995 as a multidisciplinary center whose vision is to renew the city by building upon the strengths of its neighborhoods. It engages four constituents as part of its educational directive: architectural students, recent graduates, professional architects, and the urban community.

What are the pros and cons of using students? The main benefit for universities is that the design center experience makes their students better professionals. There is also the consideration of whether to use undergraduate or graduate students. Using graduate students allows for greater design capability. Among the drawbacks of using students are:

- The time factor, since students are on a semester or quarter basis;
- Students need a lot of oversight and guidance; and
- The work can be hit or miss.

There are, however, quality controls that can be put into place through:

- Having mentors or faculty who can closely oversee the work;
- Developing learning objectives that are doable in a short time period; and
- Spending time prepping students and clarifying the expectations.

PARTICIPANT REFLECTIONS AND NEXT STEPS

As they prepared to wrap up the work, the participants took a few minutes to identify their most important learnings. Participants from Hartford found the peer match to be a highly informative, helpful, and energizing experience. Their “take aways” included the following:

- “The Task Force now has a much better idea of what a design center can be.”
- “We can adapt ideas for a design center in Hartford based on our strengths.”
- “The design center cannot solve everything; it shouldn’t try to be too much but be focused based on analysis of what is missing.”
- “The role the design center plays as an advisory body to the city.”

- “The issue of how we can achieve the best possible design at the best possible cost, and how the design center can help make the best possible visible impact.”
- “There is a void in terms of design, and it is important to analyze where the weaknesses are, how they can be fixed, and who should be responsible.”
- “The value of good design.”
- “The realization that the NRZs are a strong base and that the design center is a tool to give reality to their plans and for effective engagement.”
- “The importance of paying attention to the human development side.”
- “The importance of proactively marketing neighborhood assets.”
- “The need to be better at communicating successes.”
- “The realization that trying to include downtown development is too much.”
- “The need to tie design to resources in order to ensure implementation; there are lots of resources but no communication.”
- “The notion that the independence of the design center is critical.”
- “The realization that we can definitely do this in our city.”

In their written evaluations, all Hartford participants indicated that they acquired new knowledge, information, and ideas, which will help them move their effort forward. Key learnings included a clearer conceptual vision, a sense of the possibilities, and practical information about existing design centers with feedback from actual users. Hartford participants also indicated that the peer match was helpful for building relationships and influencing specific decisions that need to be made about their effort. Their responses to what was the most important thing they got from the consultation that will help them with their local strategy included:

- A better focus regarding the purpose and objectives of a design center.
- A better sense about the options and models that might be applicable to Hartford.
- Do not try to do too much with the design center, and do not duplicate the city's oversight role.
- Clarity of focus and what's achievable and what is not.
- A clear recognition of the connection between the Economic Development Commission and the Mayor's Homeownership Task Force.
- Group dialogue and building consensus on concept and urgency.

At the end of the peer match, the participants from Hartford identified the following next steps for their effort:

- *Follow-up meeting:* The Hartford group will meet again to chart next steps. This group will work together over the short term to help the city develop a set of recommendations. The city manager will contact participants via e-mail to coordinate the date and time of the next meeting.
- *Task List:* A preliminary list of tasks will be drafted for discussion at the next meeting. It will include some concrete priorities (e.g., determining operating parameters, identifying desired outcomes—as set by elected leaders—and developing an implementation plan).
- *Additional Design Center Research:* The Hartford group will conduct the additional research needed on other design centers around the country, including: Community Design Center of Pittsburgh, the Asian Neighborhood Design Center, Assist Inc., Community Design Collaborative, Environmental Works, Columbus Neighborhood Design Assistance Center, and Community Design Assistance Center. Participants

agreed to come to the next meeting prepared with suggestions on the piece of research that they are willing to take on.

- *Engage Others in the Design Center Conversation:* The group agreed that they needed to brief and bring into this conversation other partners, institutions, and organizations, including: the University of Hartford; the architectural community and local AIA chapter; other design professionals; other staff from Hartford's planning department; and other politicians.
- *Identify Lead Person:* The city manager agreed to identify a lead person responsible for this work within the city. The group recommended to check if the development of a design center fits within the priorities of the city.
- *Funding:* There is a need to think through how funding will operate and where it will come from. The group agreed to look at where the city is currently spending its money to see if there is a way to redirect those funds.
- *Changes to the Existing Design Review Process:* It was suggested that the city staff who were present at the peer match identify immediate key changes that are needed in the current design review process within the city's planning department.
- *Other Research:* Some participants wanted to explore why it is so expensive to undertake development in Hartford. Representatives from Hartford's Economic Development Commission volunteered to do some research to see if it is more affordable for the city to conduct environmental clean-ups and then sell the land/property to a developer, rather than selling the land/property to a developer who then abates the hazards and ultimately comes to the city for funds to subsidize this cost.

PROGRESS TO DATE

Upon returning to Hartford, the group continued to work toward the realization of the Hartford Design Center. Following up on the next steps that were identified at the end of the peer match, the group completed its research on the characteristics of other successful design centers and broadened its participation to include representatives from the University of Hartford and Hartford 2000. The expanded group met several times to reach consensus on both the structure and functions of the design center. This process culminated with a proposal entitled “Towards the Establishment of the Hartford Design Center,” which represented the recommendations of the city manager and incorporated many of the ideas discussed by the peer match participants.

On April 14, 2003, the city council approved a resolution instructing the city manager to facilitate the implementation of the Hartford Design Center. The primary partners in its creation would be the city of Hartford and the University of Hartford. The design center would be established as a nonprofit organization and work with the “Rising Star” Neighborhoods and “Pride Blocks” to implement the recommendations of the Mayor’s Homeownership Task Force. A consultant has been hired to put the operational details, board recruitment, staff hiring, and other components in place.

LEAD CONTACTS

Hartford

Bob Kantor
Fannie Mae
207 Main Street, Second Floor
Hartford, CT 06106
Phone: (860) 278 3937
E-mail: bob_kantor@fanniemae.com

Baltimore

Mark Cameron
Executive Director
Neighborhood Design Center
1401 Hollins Street
Baltimore, MD 21223
Phone: (410) 233 9686
E-mail: mcameron@ndc-md.org

Lawrence

Bill Traynor
Executive Director
Lawrence CommunityWorks, Inc.
60 Island Street
Lawrence, MA 01840
Phone: (978) 685 3115
E-mail: traynor@earthlink.net

WHAT IS *MAKING CONNECTIONS*?

Making Connections is the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s initiative to improve outcomes for some of the nation’s most vulnerable children and families. The initiative is conducted through deep and durable partnerships with selected cities and neighborhoods across the United States—currently 22 cities that make up the broad *Making Connections* network. Several core ideas underlie *Making Connections*:

- *Making Connections* is based on the recognition that the greatest number of American children who suffer from “rotten outcomes” live in city neighborhoods that are in many ways cut off—disconnected—from the mainstream opportunities of American life. Thus, *Making Connections* is “place-based”—it focuses on specific neighborhoods in specific cities.
- *Making Connections* has a simple theory: that children do better when they grow up in strong families, and families do better when they live in supportive neighborhoods. Thus, *Making Connections* strategies are aimed at helping families obtain what they need to be strong, and helping neighborhoods gain the resources they need in order to support families well.
- *Making Connections* focuses on three major types of “connections” that help families grow stronger and achieve what they want for their children. The first of these is helping families connect to **economic opportunities** and to jobs that provide income, assets, and an economic future. Research and experience suggest that this type of connection is unlikely without two others: strong connections to the **social networks** of kin, neighborhood groups, and other informal ties that sustain families when times get tough, and to high-quality, **effective services and supports** that help families reach their goals.

Making Connections focuses on improving results for children and families in tough neighborhoods. Core results that *Making Connections* communities are mobilizing around include:

- Families have increased earnings and income;
- Families have increased levels of assets;
- Families, youth, and neighborhoods increase their participation in civic life;
- Families and neighborhoods have strong informal supports and networks;
- Families have access to quality services and supports; and
- Children are healthy and ready to succeed in school.

A key task in ensuring the success of *Making Connections* is making available the learning and technical assistance that the participating sites need to move forward with their work. One of the ways that the Foundation provides this kind of support is by making peer matches available.

WHAT ARE PEER MATCHES?

Since 1995, as part of a broader effort to rely more intentionally on the experience of people working in the field, the Center for the Study of Social Policy began working with several partners and funders to develop and offer a rather intensive form of peer technical assistance known as peer matches. Peer matches are structured opportunities for teams of people from two or more jurisdictions who are working on a similar issue to exchange experiences and practical knowledge toward resolving a particular challenge that has been identified in advance.

The rationale behind peer matches is straightforward. Often, the people best able to provide hands-on help are the “doers” themselves—people from states and communities who have successfully addressed a problem or created an effective new policy or strategy. These are the people who have an acute sense of what has and hasn’t worked, and why and why not. They have developed good tools and strategies they can share. And they are usually eager to help others because of a strong sense of shared mission. But while good peer matches are informal, they are never

casual, using a carefully designed process and structure to focus the common interests, roles, and goodwill that exist between peers on producing meaningful change for a community.

Peer matches are a resource and time intensive strategy. Careful consideration of when, where, and how to use this approach is therefore always warranted. Experience has shown that careful preparation and execution of the matches are critical factors for their success. This approach tends to work best when the following conditions are in place:

- A specific problem or issue has been identified, and the people looking for help are at a key decision point with respect to the design or implementation of a state or community strategy;
- Stakeholders are invested in and have a high degree of ownership in solving a problem;
- The timing is right—e.g., a decision or action that will affect the community’s family strengthening agenda is going to be taken and/or someone needs to be convinced to take action; and
- A reasonably small number of people have the authority and ability to act on what they learn in the match.

To date, the Center has brokered over 60 peer matches on topics ranging from creating resident-led community development corporations and governance structures, to establishing multilingual homeownership assistance centers, to building integrated services models. As illustrated in the case summaries that are part of this series, peer matches help spread good policies and practice, build relationships among different stakeholders who may not always have a chance to work together, and enable people to put changes in place that improve results for children, families, and neighborhoods.



The Annie E. Casey Foundation

701 St. Paul Street
Baltimore, MD 21202
410.547.6600
410.547.6624 fax
www.aecf.org

Center
for the
Study
of
Social
Policy

1575 Eye Street, N.W., Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005
202.371.1565
202.371.1472 fax
www.cssp.org