

OPERATIONALIZING YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES

HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT AND SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

***A MAKING CONNECTIONS*
PEER TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE MATCH**

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**THE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE RESOURCE CENTER
OF
THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION
AND
THE CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF SOCIAL POLICY**

INTRODUCTION

Through the *Making Connections* Initiative, the Annie E. Casey Foundation is working with 22 cities across the country to strengthen neighborhoods and support families. Twelve of the cities are also recipients of Youth Opportunity (YO) grants from the Department of Labor's Peer-to-Peer Exchanges. Hartford, Connecticut and San Diego, California, both *Making Connection* sites, are two of the twelve YO grantees. This peer-to-peer exchange involved matching key personnel from the Hartford Youth Opportunity Coalition with the San Diego Youth at Work component of the San Diego Workforce Partnership. The Hartford team was interested in learning about and observing a YO program already in operation. Although both the programs and the two cities differ greatly, both teams agreed that the exchange could be a valuable experience.

The goals of the exchange were for Hartford to:

- Observe an operational YO program;
- Discuss lessons learned by their San Diego colleagues;
- See and discuss the forms and tools being used by San Diego;
- Learn ways to involve youth in designing and implementing a YO program; and
- Form a working relationship with key colleagues in San Diego.

The exchange took place at the offices of the San Diego Workforce Partnership, with visits to related program sites.

This summary includes the following sections:

- Overview of the Hartford and San Diego Programs
- Narrative Summary of the Exchange
- Site Visits
- Next Steps/Commitments
- Agenda
- San Diego YO Project Participant Descriptions and Duties
- Attendees

OVERVIEW OF THE HARTFORD AND SAN DIEGO PROGRAMS

Hartford

Members of the Hartford team provided the overview of the Hartford Connects program. Hartford was described as the poor center of a wealthy state, with 150 CBOs providing a variety of workforce development services. They stated that Hartford has a school drop out rate of 60%, and double-digit unemployment that compares to the state's unemployment rate of 3%.

Each of the collaboration's partners was identified and a brief history of their changing roles over the last few years was given. Five agencies make up the Executive Leadership Team: Hartford Connects, Progress, the United Way, Hartford Public Schools, the Workforce Initiative Board, and the City of Hartford.

With the YO grant, the team has worked on governance issues and implementation planning. They have developed the broad outline for the project and are ready to begin implementation. Technology, including data development and warehousing, and assisting youth in holistic ways with human services, education, and employment opportunities are central aims of this team. The YO Project Director has been hired, performance measures have been developed, and it is expected that the center will be up and enrolling students by September 4, 2000.

The Hartford Youth Opportunity Project is centered around 20 census tracts, with two centers of operations. One is in the northern section of the city is primarily African-American and one located in the southern section of the city is primarily Latino. Social barriers facing residents of these communities include: jobs located outside of the city, societal definitions of residents, illicit drugs and other illegal activities that tend to be the primary source of economic opportunity for the youth.

San Diego

Greater southeastern San Diego is the target area for the San Diego Workforce Partnership. Latinos and African-Americans are the predominant ethnic groups represented in this targeted area. The unemployment rate of 9% is significantly above the national average. Youth unemployment stands at 40%. The three high schools that serve this population have drop out rates of 54%, 48%, and 11%, respectively. The few businesses currently located in the area are primarily family-owned, offering few if any jobs to residents. Although few public housing units exist in this community, many low-income residents receive Section 8 assistance.

The Jacob Family Foundation has targeted the neighborhoods of southeastern San Diego for significant capital investment and was identified as a critical community asset. It plans to build its headquarters on a 20-acre site within the community served by the Partnership. The site will include a childcare facility, amphitheater, movie theater, youth center and other small businesses, all of which are expected to hire local residents. The foundation has engaged community residents in planning this development. One result of the community input has

been the establishment of criteria for businesses that want to locate within the development: a commitment to making an investment in the community, agreement to partner their businesses with training opportunities for community residents, and assurance of the development of youth owned businesses.

The San Diego Workforce Partnership views its work as community building, of which the Youth Opportunity grant is a component. Partners are expected to support the principles and values that support community development. Neighborhood organizing is seen as a necessary strategy to ensure that the community will be able to sustain the gains made by the YO initiative. The San Diego YO project seeks to achieve sustainable employment for 80% of target youth.

NARRATIVE SUMMARY OF THE EXCHANGE

The exchange was a series of discussions and observations. These discussions addressed the functional aspects of:

- Program vision and mission
- Staff recruitment, training and retention
- Methods to engage youth both as program participants and in the program decision-making process
- The politics of engaging key constituencies, and
- Program evaluation needs.

Key points included:

- Working with two facilitators from the Institute for Cultural Affairs of Phoenix, Arizona, the San Diego Partnership developed vision and mission statements during a two-day retreat. Through this process about 30 staff, partners, and youth were able to establish their desired outcomes and identify strategies for achieving them.
- A key to staff retention is the Partnership's position on salary. Salaries in CBOs are typically lower than comparable jobs in other markets within the city. The Partnership insists that Partners sign agreements to pay industry-standard wages rather than the typical pay. Continuing education is both a benefit and an expectation for staff at all levels. Life enrichment issues as well as opportunities to gain professional skills have been made available through the community colleges and universities in the area.
- The primary tool for effective engagement of community residents is building relationships. Participants enter the program voluntarily and are then grouped into peer units designed to enhance honest information exchange, improve motivation and provide positive support. Community investment for participants may include

monthly service projects or eventually community-wide efforts. The Partnership encourages participants to view service not as just traditional voluntarism, but as investing in the community in which they live. Asset mapping is an ongoing activity and is seen as an effective avenue for identifying potential and existing leaders. Workforce Partners, staff members, and youth participants who joined the discussions all reflected a commitment to the YO project, their community, and each other that indicated this connectedness.

Some of the San Diego Youth Advocates also presented a PowerPoint presentation they have recently developed as a recruiting tool. The Advocates described their roles and functions, discussed their selection and training, and what they believe makes the program work. They indicated that successful recruitment requires an emphasis on authenticity, relationship building, and intimately knowing the community. Some also shared powerful stories about the impact of the program on their lives.

- The San Diego program evaluation process was described as a system of performance measures determined through the use of a series of evaluation tools. The Partnership engaged the Charter Oak Group to develop its evaluation system. The discussion focused on identifying potential strategies to overcome or avoid evaluation pitfalls or barriers.
- Strategies to engage, work within, and utilize the expertise of schools were identified through exploring the San Diego Partnership experience with their local school district. For the San Diego team, working with the school district has been particularly challenging. Local schools are currently involved in a large school reform initiative that focuses on literacy, so the Partnership has struggled to get attention for workforce development efforts.

San Diego uses a single team that combines both in-school and out-of-school activities. The current in-school program includes career exploration, drop out prevention activities, and a Soft Skills Academy open to all students. The YO does a mass mailing to all Gompers High School Graduates offering services to those that choose not to go on to college at this time. The San Diego Partnership also plans to establish ten urban technology centers within the target area, for which training will be provided by the local community college. The Hartford coalition provided information regarding its technology focus as well, and explored potential strategies for utilizing the lessons learned from San Diego for their planned school programs.

- The San Diego Partnership also shared strategies for engaging and resolving differences among partners. A primary role for partners is resource development, particularly identifying external sources of support for the Partnership. A key strategy for managing relationships has been to seek solutions that both provide direct benefit to each partner and achieve the goal of community building.

Partners are encouraged to collaborate in ways that reflect their strengths while still ensuring that a full continuum of services is available to clients. For example, one partner may provide supportive services to clients, while another provides case management services. This kind of cooperation allows smaller programs to use their grant dollars more effectively. Ensuring quality programs is emphasized over giving excessive attention to monitoring the financial aspects of partner programs. When difficulties arise, a one on one meeting is scheduled to achieve resolution.

- Members of each team talked about ways to sustain the changes that the programs achieve. San Diego's emphasis on developing community investments rather than developing a program is the core of its sustainability efforts. Its strategies include: partnering with employers to increase employment within the community, working both within and outside of local schools to develop a functional community workforce, and providing needed social services to local residents and families.

Hartford is using the development of enterprise skills among youth as one of its sustainability strategies. Through a project known as "Our Piece of the Pie," youth identify business interests, receive assistance with developing business plans and training. Successful youth micro-businesses include a greeting card company, an organic food company, a catering service, and a boat building and sales company. Three of the businesses produced a combined profit of \$60,000 last year.

SITE VISITS

Administrative offices of the San Diego program were adjacent to the location in which the exchange was conducted, so the Hartford team was able to see a part of the daily operation. Members also visited the connected one-stop employment office supported by both the Partnership and the county employment program. Partnership staff indicated that they are able to help most applicants, even when they don't fit YO criteria. This responsiveness greatly enhances their standing in the community and provides valuable access to potential participants who do meet the eligibility criteria. The team was able to observe Partnership coaches orient new enrollees, watch residents accessing automated job bank information, and talk with the President of the local UPS facility who was interviewing YO participants for potential employment.

The Hartford team also visited a job development workshop and debt management seminar hosted by the Partnership at the local Coca Cola bottling plant attended by current and potential YO participants and their family members. The final stop was a tour of a childcare facility at the site of a local church that is part of the Partnership, at which program participants are trained for credentialing as childcare providers and receive social services from community-based programs.

LESSONS LEARNED

From the discussion that took place during the exchange, a number of lessons learned were identified for effective implementation of successful YO programs. They follow below:

- Developing authentic relationships among partners, residents, staff and participants is critical.
- Using PSAs on television and radio, and advertising in local community English and Spanish newspapers creates community awareness of the program, increases credibility and assists in recruitment.
- Residents must be involved in the development, control and benefits of any community development plan, and must be given opportunities to identify community needs and desires.
- Community asset mapping is essential. It improves participants' and other residents' views of their own community, and identifies key local resources that can enhance the program.
- Take services into the community. Laptops and cell phones can be used to enroll participants on the spot, connect them with needed services, and to provide case management activities from the participants' homes.
- Operate according the community's definition of neighborhood rather than the official, externally established, community boundaries.
- Using peer support groups aids in participant retention.
- Effective staff are recruited and retained when they feel that their participation matters, the approach is strengths-based, and ongoing training is provided.
- Be flexible in program implementation. Encourage staff and participant feedback and incorporate it into program improvement strategies.
- Though the YO grants are designed to increase the employability of youth, the whole family unit must be the actual target. A seamless system of services must be made available to the family unit to sustain long-term community change. YO program staff must be knowledgeable about resources available that meet participants' diverse needs.

NEXT STEPS/COMMITMENTS

The teams decided to maintain a working relationship in which both programs benefit from the experiences of the other. Their commitments included the following:

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- Program tools will be exchanged as they are developed.
 - Robert Lewison would seek out the new project director from Hartford during the academy meeting both were to attend.
 - Performance measures will be exchanged.
 - Hartford will assist San Diego's efforts to work with its school district on the issues that arise around the district's literacy initiative.
 - Hartford will provide San Diego with additional information about its micro-business and computer repair programs.
 - The sites will share grant management strategies.
 - San Diego will provide Hartford hard copies of its vision and mission statements.
 - Debra Delgado will assist in arranging a meeting among *Making Connections* participants in Boston, New York, San Diego and Hartford with Eugene Rivers about successful methods for reaching hard-to-reach youth.
 - Debra Delgado will explore the possibility of purchasing a portion of Ed deJesus's time to make him available to San Diego and Hartford to assist in developing strategies for adapting the knowledge and skills of youth involved in illegitimate enterprise to legal ways of making money.
 - Sites will use electronic and surface mailings, scheduled phone conversations and periodic meetings to maintain contact, share materials, and information.