

# Making Connections in Hartford

A quarterly publication of the Annie E. Casey Foundation

## Residents Are Standing Up To Violence in Upper Albany

There is a self-defense component in the civic participation that is being encouraged in Hartford's Upper Albany neighborhood. It has been shown that when parents, homeowners and small business owners don't actively participate in their own community, they effectively surrender their streets to gangs and drug dealers and a tide of intimidation and violence floods their neighborhoods. When they push back, however, the tide flows the other way and parents and their children and their neighbors find they can reclaim their streets for themselves. It may not be easy. It may, in fact, be downright dangerous, but today in Upper Albany, thanks to a grassroots effort by residents, supported by the Hartford Mayor's Community Building Initiative, Hartford Behavioral Health, *Making Connections in Hartford* and other organizations and individuals, the tide is turning.

*Making Connections* Results Steering Committee member Andrew Woods is in a position to see positive changes happening at street level. A social worker and

substance abuse counselor for Hartford Behavioral Health, a founder of Stump the Violence, co-chair of the Mayor's Community Building Initiative and a member of the *Making Connections* civic participation committee, Woods says the balance of power on the streets is shifting. There are still random acts of violence, there are still drugs sold on the corners where the school buses stop, but there are also more parents walking their kids to school and, in countless small ways every day, the responsible, caring men and women who live in North Hartford are taking their community back. This is precisely the kind of positive change that *Making Connections*' Civic Participation Work Group, led by co-chairs Aldwyn Alland and Karen Brown, hopes to replicate throughout the community.

Woods is currently engaged in a project supported by the Mayor's Community Building Initiative to encourage residents of Upper Albany to participate in their community in ways that will specifically help to reduce the high incidence of violence that plagues their

neighborhood. At the vanguard of this effort is the Upper Albany Task Force that involves 10 families that are at risk or are currently affected in some way by violence. A key objective of the research is to undercover what it will take to get the individual members of the task force actively involved in their community.

"We are going to ask the residents what they think are the critical issues and how we can help them solve the problem," Woods says. "That's going to be our first point of entry. We are not going to do anything until we see what the residents think the problems are; then we can put some resources on the table that could help solve the problems."

### Communities That Care

Woods says the Mayor's Community Building Initiative is following the national "Communities That Care" model and applying it to Hartford. A research-based social development strategy, the initiative is a data driven process to evaluate what the trends are in

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## Civic Participation



*"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has"...Margaret Mead.*

*“Residents Are Standing Up” (Continued from Page 1)*

Hartford, identify what groups are doing things related to anti-violence and drug prevention and then develop a needs assessment that matches both the resources and the needs. “Our goal,” Woods says, “is to complete the process by mid-spring 2004.”

That would put the initiative well ahead of the usual 18-month timeline suggested by the Communities That Care model, but Woods says the program started with some major advantages. “We had a lot of elements already in place,” Woods says. “The plan calls for collaborative efforts and involvement with local government and school officials. Well, Fox Middle School has always been the official home of Stump the Violence. And we already have the support of Robert Henry, the superintendent of the board of education. We have the support of the mayor’s office, the local clergy; almost everyone who has done anything for anti-violence in the north end of Hartford is on our board already. All of the critical stakeholders that it would normally take several months to bring to the table are already here.”

Woods says once the planning stage of the community building initiative is complete, recommendations of the best-practice models that the city should apply to help reduce violence in the city will be submitted to the mayor’s office. A major thrust of the recommendations will be the civic engagement of residents not just as the recipients but as the creators and implementers of programs designed from within the neighborhoods they will serve.

## Stump the Violence

Woods has the distinct advantage as a researcher and program leader in North Hartford in that he not only grew up in this area but works here as a substance abuse counselor and knows, first hand, what the streets can be like. Before joining the HBH, Woods was Prevention Coordinator of the Alcohol and Drug Recovery Centers (ADRC) and it was while he was at ADRC in 1999 that he became involved in the formation of the Stump the Violence campaign.

Stump the Violence is a peer-to-peer outreach initiative launched by students and administrators at the Fox Middle School with the help of Woods, the 21st Century Community Learning Center and other organizations who came together to say a collective “NO” to violence in Upper Albany. One of the most visible productions of Stump the Violence is the annual SAFENIGHT event which draws hundreds of students, parents and their neighbors to a night of workshops, music and entertainment at the Fox Middle School in celebration of their shared commitment to stop violence in their community.

A key aspect of the SAFENIGHT event is that, like all the programs associated with Stump the Violence, it is organized, planned and run by students themselves in collaboration with various other community based organizations, churches, merchants, local and state agencies.

Another key program run by Stump the Violence is the summer leadership program which is geared



*Youth leaders at a Hartford Board of Education meeting, along with adult mentors, from left to right, Chuck Cummings, Andrew Woods and Abdul Mubhamed.*

toward engaging a dozen or so middle school students in all aspects of the political/social process. During the course of one week this summer, students interviewed Democratic candidates, made a presentation before the board of education, manned the Stump The Violence booth at a community health fair and wrapped up the week being interviewed on WKND Talk Radio about their experiences.

Woods has continued as coordinator of Stump the Violence and brought it with him when he was recruited as a counselor for Hartford Behavioral Health by *Making Connections in Hartford* co-chair Michael Williams. (Williams was then executive director of Hartford Behavioral Health and has since become regional director of the Connecticut Department of Children and Families.) Since 1999, Woods says, more than 10,000 youth and their families have been a part of Stump the Violence campaign.

## Men of Color

Another very positive indication that the tide is turning against violence in Upper Albany is the fact that other grassroots action groups are sprouting in the streets of north Hartford. The “Men Of Color” initiative, formed by reverends Cornell Lewis and James Lane, is a good example. Woods was asked to help build the Men of Color initiative and Stump The Violence is now one of its key supporters.

Woods says the Men of Color initiative was the direct positive result of a violent event. A group of parents had walked their children to the school bus

*“Residents Are Standing Up” (Continued on Page 3)*

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*Youth leaders manning a booth at the Hartford Democratic Town Committee Convention with Councilman Hernan LaFontaine and businessman Winston Kennedy.*

*“Residents Are Standing Up” (Continued from Page 2)*

stop in the morning when violence erupted and they found themselves running and ducking from a shoot-out between drug dealers. No one was hurt... that time, but the incident was enough to motivate parents in the neighborhood to take action.

“The kids need to know they have someone on their side,” Woods says. It is especially helpful if that someone is an African American male in this predominately African-American neighborhood.

Now in the morning at the bus stops, it’s not just kids and drug dealers. The Men of Color have established a presence on the streets. “The drug dealers know who we are, but so far they’ve let us have our way,” Woods says. “It’s dangerous work.”

The net effect of residents becoming actively and openly involved in their neighborhood is that violent crime has, in fact, gone down in the neighborhood. “Perception is everything,” Woods notes, however, and the perception of violence—as almost a characteristic of life in Upper Albany—is the tragic legacy that the neighborhood still struggles to eradicate.

What is the major piece that is still missing? “Youth employment is the big one,” Woods says. “You go to the streets and you try to offer kids alternatives, but if you can’t offer them meaningful employment that’s a huge barrier. We are constantly working to find employment for some of these youth; for the youth and for their parents,” he adds.

For more information on Hartford Behavior Health, please visit its Web site at: <http://www.hartfordbehavioralhealth.org/> ©



*Dignitaries who attended the child abuse summit co-sponsored by the Stump the Violence included, from left to right, Mrs. Carter, Hartford Mayor Perez, Susan Niemitz (clinical director of Hartford Behavioral Health) and the Reverend James Walker.*

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*Khiree Smith participating in a multicultural youth summit.*

## Message from the Results Steering Committee from Marie M. Spivey & Michael Williams, co-chairs of the Results Steering Committee of Making Connections in Hartford

This fifth and most recent issue of our community-wide *Making Connections in Hartford* newsletter covers some of the important activities afoot in Hartford to increase the level of civic participation taking place among our city’s families and neighborhoods. Four of the articles demonstrate the responsibilities neighborhood children and adult family members are taking upon themselves to stem violence, create economic opportunities for themselves, and influence the way their communities are depicted in the media. Three others cover how the collection, analysis, storage and dissemination of data are being used to encourage civic participation and to influence positive change in Hartford’s neighborhoods.

As co-leaders of the Results Steering Committee (RSC), the local governance body of *Making Connections in Hartford*, an initiative of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, we are deeply committed to engaging residents in a collective and community-wide

effort to take ownership of the family and neighborhood problems that affect them and of building their capacity to work together to find their own solutions. We’re convinced that this is the only way positive and sustainable quality of life improvements will occur where they are most needed.

While the articles in this issue demonstrate that more and more residents are engaged in family strengthening and neighborhood transformations activities and that the data infrastructure is being assembled to measure progress, there’s still a lot more work to be done, by a lot more people. We encourage you to get involved and for you to get your neighbors and friends involved. All of the RSC work groups need more residents to help us achieve the results Hartford’s families and neighborhoods so rightly deserve.

To learn how you can get involved, call our Hartford offices at 860-293-0097. If you have ideas for topics to be covered in future editions of this newsletter, call our editor, Mike Salius, at 860-482-2978. ©

## Participatory Action Research: Data You Can Use

The collection of data about families and neighborhoods is one thing. Bringing data to life in ways that adds something of value to people's lives is often a different thing all together.

A tremendous amount of data has been collected over the years by outside researchers who have explored conditions in Hartford's neighborhoods. These researchers may have brought a scientific detachment to their work, but their lack of engagement with the communities they studied more often than not resulted in stacks of written reports that never got read, certainly not by the people who were the subjects of their study.

A new approach to research—called participatory action research—is emerging that not only engages local people in the study area, but is actually led, carried out and acted on by them. It explores a topic from the inside. The Institute for Community Research (ICR) takes this approach to research. Through a partnership with *Making Connections in Hartford*, ICR has worked on a series of studies in the Frog Hollow (Please see the article: "Acting Out" on page 5.) and Upper Albany neighborhoods. ICR asks residents to identify the issues that are important to them as a first step. Then, by working with groups of residents who care deeply about an issue, they develop a research project that gives residents information they can use to improve conditions in their communities.

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### Buy-in

"People are tired of outsiders doing research and then never seeing the results, much less the benefits of the study," says Ken Williamson, a community based research educator at ICR. An anthropologist by training, Williamson brings an educated awareness of group dynamics to his work. "Our approach to research is all about buy-in from the residents," he says.

A key aspect of this approach to research is focus and, for a recent study in the Upper Albany neighborhood in north Hartford, ICR focused on just one square block bordered by Albany Avenue, Kent, Adams, and Baltimore streets. The premise of the research was simple and straightforward: "We wanted to know how to improve conditions on this one block."

The first phase of the research involved recruiting a group of ten block residents to participate in the project. Asked how he goes about recruiting, Williamson laughs. "We use many methods," he says, "basically, it's whatever works." The prerequisites are simple: "We look for committed people, people who want to create a change in their community; that's the main thing we look for"

Joining a research group does involve a personal commitment. The groups generally meet for three hours once a week for 15 weeks. Their first order of business is to identify a specific issue to explore, then

together they develop a research model they can use to explore it. In the process they learn the various skills involved in conducting research, including observations, interviews, surveys, and the collection and interpretation of secondary data.

The cohort for the Upper Albany study involved seven people who lived on the actual block being studied, and three from the surrounding area. All the members were adults and all of them were women. "It's harder to attract men to certain types of activities," Williamson notes. "We knew that would happen when we did school based programs."

For the Upper Albany project, Williamson says, "We looked at physical conditions: houses, streets, vacant lots, debris. We looked at social conditions: crime, drugs, violence; economic conditions; environmental conditions from rodents to air quality."

Team members also conducted interviews with residents on the block. They asked: What were the most critical problems? How involved were they in the neighborhood? What type of relationship did they have with their neighbors?"

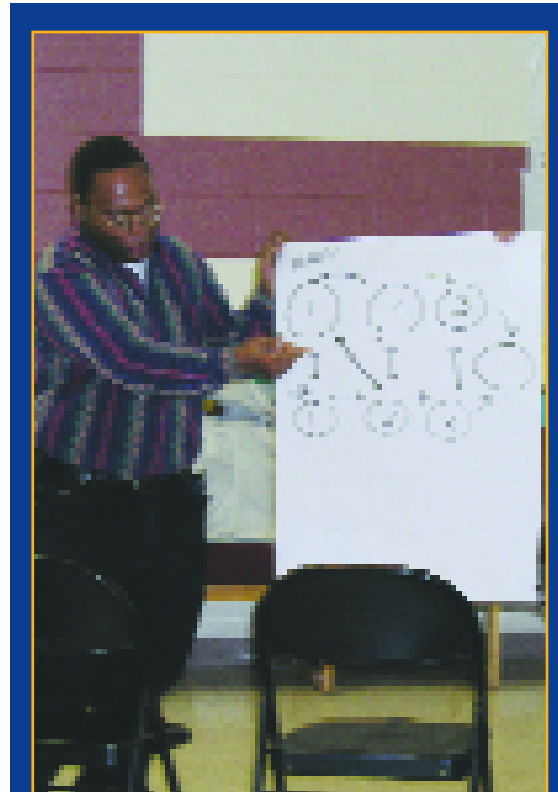
### The Ownership Factor

One particular theme the Upper Albany research group considered was whether or not increasing homeownership among residents would tend to improve conditions. "We thought it would," Williamson says. "It's in line with Mayor's homeownership initiative."

To get a measure of homeownership, the group reviewed the records at the city assessors office. What they found there was something of a surprise. The percent of resident-owned homes on the study block turned out to be higher than most had suspected. Research revealed that 52 percent of the housing structures on the block were owner-occupied. Of the balance, 41% were occupied by renters and 7% were boarded up or vacant.

Combining data from the assessors office with their own observations, it became obvious that the houses that were in greater need of repair were, in fact, renter occupied. Additional research—including personal interviews—however, showed that the homeowners who lived on the block were finding it increasingly difficult to maintain their homes. In general, both they, and their properties, were getting on in years. This insight tempered the emphasis on increasing homeownership with more consideration for helping the existing homeowners maintain their properties. Another insight from the research indicated that while homeowners were more directly concerned with the condition of their homes, renters tended to focus their attention more on the quality of the neighborhood schools.

The Upper Albany group was engaged in its research from October to March. In the end, the



*ICR's Ken Williamson gathering input from Upper Albany residents to develop a research action plan.*

research did not uncover any handy solutions to the complex issues being faced on this one block in Upper Albany. It did contribute to what may, in fact, result in substantive improvements in the neighborhood in general by setting in motion a process of involvement based on personal commitment and empowered by an ability to acquire and act on knowledge.

"In general, we have contributed to a sense of access to the issues," says Williamson. "That's a key piece of it. Another goal of the work that we do is that we keep group participants in contact with each other, so, in the end, you build a network of committed action researchers; people who have used research in creating action. Participatory action research is about studying particular issues, but it's also about building up that sort of informed network so that when other issues emerge, people already have someone to call on as resources and advisors. They know where to look for the information they need. That empowers all of them. And the point of this kind of research is to be able to act effectively, not just to study, but to do."

For more information about the Institute of Community Research please visit its Web site at: <http://www.icrweb.org>.

You can learn more about ICR's Participatory Action Research in Hartford at <http://www.incommunityresearch.org/programs/residentengagement.htm> ©

## Acting Out: Residents of Frog Hollow Express Their Issues

Residents of the Frog Hollow neighborhood in Hartford are not often asked what issues they think are important to research in their community, so when Nelba Marquez-Greene of the Institute of Community Research (ICR) asked a group of Spanish speaking residents what issues they felt needed to be studied to help them improve economic conditions in their neighborhood, the residents gathered together that evening were initially at a loss for words.

### No problemo!

Marquez-Greene organized the residents into smaller groups and had them perform skits that showed what a day was like in their lives. Working together to prepare and perform their skits broke down any reticence to participate and the performances clearly communicated the kinds of issues that residents of Frog Hollow contend with every day that impact their economic well being. These became the issues that the Frog Hollow research group set out to examine and understand better.

“Because it’s all driven by the residents,” Marquez-Greene says, “we have to kind of come in prepared for anything. What they chose as their issues and their action strategy determines how we structure the research over the 15-week program.” Besides expressing the issues that need to be researched, the skits eloquently established the fact that the residents were in charge of this research project. It was, quite literally, their show.

Four issues stood out in their skits: education, language, discrimination, and the quality and quantity of services available in Spanish. These were the issues that the residents felt they and their neighbors needed help with to improve economic conditions. Once they had the issues, then they could drill down into each one. “We compiled a list,” Marquez-Greene says. “And it’s very specific to Frog Hollow. People need jobs, for example—and not just jobs that are going to pay \$6 an hour—so we wanted to know what kind of training and services were needed for Spanish speaking residents to, in fact, get good jobs. We also talked about the level of services given. What kind of training do you want? What would make you go to a training session, and what would make you not go back? Interestingly, one of the key educational issues that came up was teacher preparation. Residents felt that too often the teachers in courses they attended did not know their subjects well enough to give them any information they could actually use.”

Once the group had explored the issues among themselves, they took questionnaires to their neighbors to collect their thoughts. In all more than 150 parents and residents of Frog Hollow were interviewed. From there members of the group went to the organizations that offer services and asked them questions and evaluated their services. “Some places say they have child care but it’s only one day a week,” Marquez-Greene explains. “We had them do some investigative reporting.”

and supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, that seeks to further the development and use of neighborhood-level information systems in local policy making and community building.

NNIP fosters the democratization of information concentrating on facilitating the direct practical use of data by city and community leaders. The partner cities share lessons learned, successes, and strive to establish a core set of neighborhood indicators across the country to help understand the conditions in our neighborhoods.

Among the resources available through NNIP is The National Survey Indicators Database which is designed to help users find survey questions, measures, and instruments that might contribute to their own data collection activities. The database was designed primarily as a resource for survey work in the *Making Connections* communities, and focuses on the issues and results most important to that Initiative. You can search the National Survey Indicators Database by visiting this page at the Annie E Casey Web site: <http://www.aecf.org/initiatives/mc/mcid/index.php>

The Hartford Library, with assistance from Annie Casey foundation maintains the Hartford Community Information Database, a searchable database of organizations and social data for the Hartford area. It is available for searching at <http://www.hplct.org/comminfo.htm> ☺

“If all you did was watch the TV news or read the paper, you’d think that parents here [Frog Hollow] don’t want to be involved. The truth is parents in Frog Hollow are civic-minded, and they do want to get involved in their neighborhood.”

The results of their research cut through stereotypes that too often tend to go unchallenged. “A lot of times what is said about our community is that the people don’t want to work, and they don’t care about their children’s education. What the survey showed,” Marquez-Greene says, “is that the people of Frog Hollow are very concerned about their children’s and their own education. They are very motivated to take classes, but they want to take classes that are meaningful. They didn’t want another parenting class that tells them they failed to educate their children adequately. They want to get jobs not lectures.”

Members of the group were clearly energized by their findings. Marquez-Greene says the Frog Hollow group is now hooking up with different groups in the city like Hartford Community Partnership to advocate for the kinds of services and opportunities that the research showed residents want. They are also having meetings with other neighborhood groups to empower other parents to ask questions and to expect answers.

The research also provided insight into the complexity of the issues that impact residents of Frog Hollow. “For me as a person who was raised in this community,” Marquez-Greene says, “it was difficult to see that, although a lot of times we are very well intentioned, still we are not providing the services the residents need to improve their lives. One of the things I took away from this was, Wow. You can’t just look at the surface. If you are not familiar with Hartford, and all you did was watch the TV news or read the paper, you’d think that parents here don’t want to be involved, that they don’t care about their children; that they don’t care about much. And it’s just not the truth. Parents in Frog Hollow are civic-minded, and they do want to get involved in their neighborhood. We just have to find a way to open the doors for them to do this.” ☺

## The Hartford Community Information Center Gives Data A Home

Data about all aspects of the greater Hartford community are going to get a home with the help of some friends. The Hartford Community Information Center (HCIC) is planned as a clearinghouse of information on neighborhoods in and around Hartford. Not only will it collect relevant data from a variety of sources, but its staff will work with individuals and organizations to use the data to write grants and/or influence public policy.

The HCIC is being readied by a collaborative that includes the Hartford Public Library (HPL), the Connecticut Association for Human Services (CAHS), the Connecticut Policy and Economic Council (CPEC), the Citizens’ Research and Education Network (CREN), and the Institute for Community Research (ICR). When it is complete—probably within the coming year—the center will be housed at the Hartford Library.

The HCIC is modeled on the National Neighborhoods Indicators Project (NNIP), a network of cities coordinated by the Urban Institute

# Making Kids Count: "A Tale of Two Connecticut"

Too often, when kids are not heard, they are not seen, either. Constituents without clout, kids are routinely overlooked in political considerations, especially poorer children who tend to be concentrated in cities. To help make children and the issues that effect them more visible, the Annie E. Casey Foundation each year compiles data on the health of U.S. children and generates the Kids Count Data Book. The project looks at 10 health indicators, ranging from infant mortality to the percentage of children living in poverty, and compares states and tracks improvement. The annual Kids Count Data Book is intended to make data on kids available so that their advocates can use it to support policies and programs that improve conditions for all children.

Kids Count is compiled by different agencies within each of the 50 states. The Connecticut Association for Human Services (CAHS) is the organization that is responsible for collecting the data for Kids Count in Connecticut. CAHS recently published its Kids Count Data Book for 2002-2003 and gave it the compelling title, "A Tale of Two Connecticut."

"We wanted to draw attention to the stark differences that we have in this state," says CAHS executive director Jim Horan. A quick look through the book supports the literary reference to Charles Dickens' classic "Tale of Two Cities." It is clearly the "best of times and the worst of times" in the state of Connecticut. On one hand, Connecticut is the richest state in the union in terms of per capita income. On the other hand, Hartford, it's capital city

is the second poorest major city (with over 100,000 people) in the county after Brownsville, TX.

"That's astonishing," Horan says, "and you would think it would be a wake-up call to public officials around the state who would all be working feverishly to figure out policies and programs to change that. In fact," he notes, "that is not the case."

The contrast is particularly apparent in the research this year because, for the first time, the Connecticut Kids Count Data Book makes information available by individual town. "The discrepancies between the city of Hartford and the rest of Connecticut are something we think needs to be addressed on a state public policy level because the towns themselves don't have the ability to make the necessary changes to turn things around."

A key point Horan says the research makes clear is that, although conditions in the city of Hartford are in particularly sharp contrast to conditions in more affluent cities and towns around the state, it is apparent that the troubles that Hartford struggles with are creeping into its suburban neighbors East Hartford and Bloomfield as well as into other metropolitan areas like Hamden, West Haven and even smaller cities like Willimantic. "The problems are not isolated to Hartford," Horan says.

Horan points to two key sets of data to dramatize the different levels of educational opportunity within the state:

- \* The Connecticut Mastery Tests (CMT) are given to 6th graders around the state. Comparing

1996-1997 test scores to 2000-2001 scores, Connecticut students generally improved from 24.3 percent, who scored above state goals, to 46.5 percent. It could be said that 6th graders in Hartford improved six-fold on their scores, but, it would have to be noted that they started from 3.2 percent above state goals and climbed to only 18.5 percent. Students in nearby Simsbury, by contrast, went from 69.1 percent to 80.7 percent.

- \* The Comprehensive Assessment Program Tests (CAPT) given to tenth graders suggests that the flow of education dwindles to a trickle by high school in Hartford. On the 1996-97 tests only 0.7 percent of Hartford tenth graders met state goals. By 2000-01 the scores climbed only to 1.7 percent. The average for the state in the same period was 12.3 percent in 1996-97 and 23.7 percent in 2000-01.

The point of Kids Count, Horan emphasizes, is not to measure failure but to encourage success. Horan also draws attention to the fact that several scores were up over the five year period. "That indicates that if there is a focus on an issue by the state as well as at the local level, you can make a difference," Horan says, "and that runs counter to the presumption by a lot of people who think, 'Why pour money into government programs that never make a difference anyway?' There has been improvement. There just needs to be more. The idea," Horan adds, "is to try to build both public will and the political will to change the underlying situation that causes kids in Hartford and these other towns to have lower test scores and higher mortality rates."

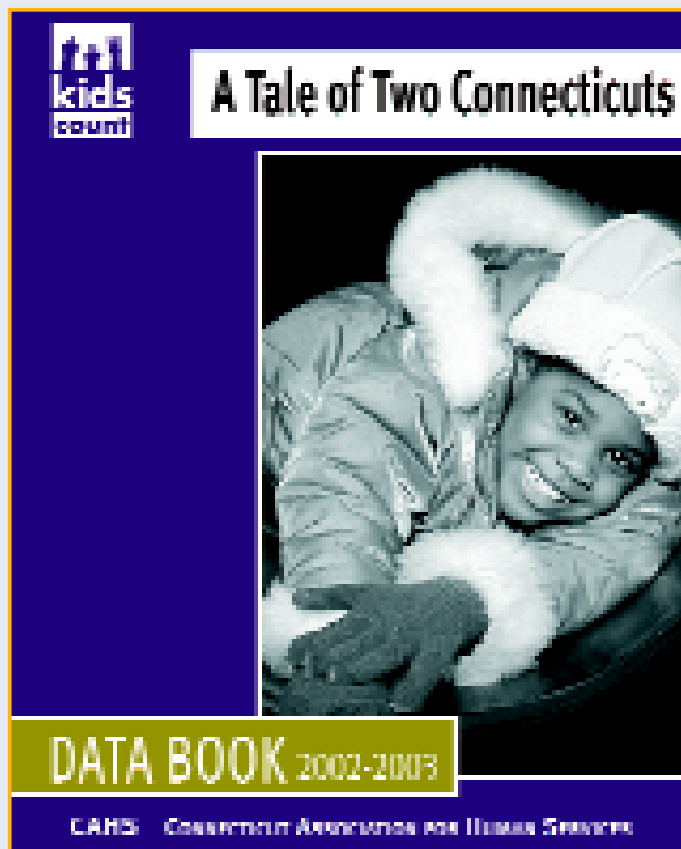
CAHS has been using data to support social services for more than ninety years. Founded in 1910, CAHS is an independent, nonprofit public education, research and policy development organization committed to decreasing poverty, neglect and inequality in Connecticut. CAHS works in coalition with diverse groups, including concerned citizens, policymakers, human service providers, corporate leaders, labor leaders, academics, state and municipal organizations, and religious organizations, to use data to support positive change.

"The whole concept of the *Making Connections* initiative is critical," Horan says. "Nobody is going to be able to turn things around by themselves, but hopefully, by putting together all these people who have good ideas so they are pulling in the same direction, our hard work will make more of a difference. The numbers show that."

For more information about CAHS, please visit its Web site at <http://www.cahs.org>.

A copy of "The Tale of Two Connecticut: The 2002-2003 Kids Count Data Book" is available to download free at: <http://www.cahs.org/kids2003/odyssey2001.html> ©

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*The cover of this year's Kids Count Data Book, which brings home the point that both public and political will is needed to give Hartford kids an equal chance for success in life.*

# The Board of Education Bulletin: Hotline from the school board to you

The decisions made by the Hartford School Board effect the lives of thousands of students and their families. Most nights at the bi-weekly school board meetings when those decisions are made, however, there are no students in attendance and only an occasional parent. Decisions are made, nonetheless, and another opportunity to participate in the process of self-government is missed.

Greg Vickers, executive director of the Citizens' Research and Education Network (CREN) is hoping to reclaim some of those moments for the residents of Hartford. With funding from *Making Connections in Hartford*, he has been attending and reporting on the meetings in the Board of Education Bulletin since April. The mission of the Bulletin is not only to let residents know what decisions were made at the last school board meeting, but also to let them know what decisions are going to be discussed at future meetings and to familiarize residents enough with the people and the process that they will feel empowered to attend and participate.

CREN has provided information and organizing services to Hartford community-based organizations since 1981. "Our goal is to get information into the hands of the people so that they can make decisions and change their neighborhoods for the better," Vickers says. "We target neighborhood organizations and families, small businesses, non-profit organizations and social activists. We disseminate the kind of information that those folks need to be effective."

Among its many other tasks, CREN covers city council meetings and writes a synopsis of each meeting that is sent to the *Hartford Courant* and an email listserv of more than 100 addresses. Vickers also does a report on the council meeting for public access TV. "We talk about what the council is doing and what is going on in the city from a residents point of view."

School board meetings are notoriously under-attended and under-covered. Vickers says the *Hartford Courant* occasionally sends a reporter to cover school board meetings, but adds, "Typically the news media is looking for some kind of splashy story; something that will sell newspapers. Our criteria is a little bit different: We look for things that are positive. If we hit a benchmark, if a school made accreditation, we like to mention those things. People get enough of the bad news. We also watch for places where people can get involved."

Most parents would like to be involved more in their children's schools. "When you talk to people about what's important to them," Vickers says, "education is always right at the top of the list. We feel it's important to be there and get people the information they need so that the whole process isn't as intimidating or daunting. Those are the exact words that others have used to describe the school board meetings," he adds.

The school board holds two types of meetings: informational meetings at which people make



presentations to the board on a variety of topics, and operational meetings at which decisions are made about the general operations of the schools within the Hartford school district. Vickers says the school board is making an effort to involve the public. All informational meetings used to be held at Constitution Plaza. Now all school board meetings are held at schools in the district on a rotating basis.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to provide very much advance notice of school board agendas. "We get the agenda on Monday for a Tuesday meeting," Vickers says. The city council is only slightly more proactive. It makes its agenda available on the Wednesday before each Monday meeting.

"Meetings are a mixed bag," Vickers says candidly. "Sometimes I find myself thinking: I came out on a Tuesday night for this! I have to admit," he adds, "I was one of the people who didn't go. But mostly I enjoy the meetings. As a parent, it's interesting to see what the school board does and how they look at things."

This particular school board has a reason to be responsive to parents. After five years when the Hartford school board was made up of members appointed by the state, this board now has four members who were elected to the board and three who were appointed by Hartford Mayor Eddie A. Perez. The members of the Hartford school board are: I. Michael Borrero, the Rev. Wayne Carter, Robert E. Long, Michael J. Lupo, Ada Miranda, Elizabeth Brad Noel and Eleese Wright. All reside in Hartford.

Vickers says the big thing to watch coming up is the school budget crunch. For the coming school year, the board of education has adopted a \$194.6 million

budget (already \$16 million less than the budget proposed by the superintendent) and \$7 million more than the \$187.7 million proposed in the City Manager's budget for Hartford schools. To save money, the school board has already had to cut 142 positions. If the state legislature doesn't come through with the balance, there will be more cuts in jobs and services, and, conceivably, even schools.

The individuals on the school board have many difficult decisions to make about Hartford's school system. The Board of Education Bulletin is one way for parents of students in Hartford to learn about the issues that will need to be decided and participate in the public conversation that will make it possible for the school board to make those decisions well. "Eventually we want to identify other places we can plug into the school system to support parents and teachers and other folks with information" says Vickers. "It could be PTO meetings or other scheduled meetings. Right now we are doing it spontaneously. Eventually, we want to figure out a way to do that systematically."

For more information about CREN, please visit their Web site at: [http://www.hplct.org/cren/about\\_CREN.htm](http://www.hplct.org/cren/about_CREN.htm)

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For more information about the Hartford School Board, visit their Web site at: [http://www.hartfordschools.org/about\\_us/home.html](http://www.hartfordschools.org/about_us/home.html)

# Media Advocacy Task Force Explores The Civic Issues Residents Care About

A group of people representing organizations involved in improving the quality of life in Hartford have joined together to explore what they can do to favorably influence the way the media covers news issues that affect families and their neighborhoods. This media advocacy task force is comprised of people who represent the Area Health Education Center, Hartford's Health Department, the Institute for Community Research, the Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission, *Making Connections in Hartford*, UConn's WHUS and the Village for Children & Families. During their first couple of work sessions at the Village for Children & Families' new Wethersfield Avenue facility, the group agreed that news coverage of Hartford's neighborhoods is not always balanced, often biased and can benefit from using more minorities as credible sources within news stories.

To effectively address these concerns, the task force has agreed that it needed to create a strategy for bringing about both short term and long term changes. While still a work in progress, below is summary of the change strategy that the task force has been working on:

**Short-term actions:** Identify specific issues/policy goals that specific groups of community activists care about (such as home ownership, parent involvement in schools, job training, safety, health, etc.).

Support the organization of one or two community action groups behind their issue or policy goal and examine how the media covers the issue. Enlist support from communications students at area colleges to devise a media-tracking program.

Meet with the media to listen to their approach to covering neighborhood issues and share the community group's perception of the coverage as well as what they learned from their tracking of the issues they care about.

**Short-term results:** A working relationship is formed between the media people who cover the neighborhoods and the sources within the neighborhoods who care most deeply about the specific neighborhood issues and who know them most intimately.

**Key assumptions about next steps:** Local media coverage will include more residents and resident-serving organizations as sources if the media is held to task for not doing so, and if they get helpful and interesting information and story ideas from residents.

The best way to gain balanced media coverage is to build relationships with the media based on providing feedback about existing coverage and resources that the media can use to tell solution-oriented stories.

**Intermediate results:** More knowledgeable residents and more organizations that serve neighborhood families are used as sources by local reporters.

More positive family and neighborhood messages (in the form of values...such as residents who are standing up against violence or parents who are getting involved in the school system) get included in news stories to balance the good and the bad to better reflect the whole story rather than just a snapshot that reinforces stereotypes.

**Key assumptions about next steps:** Balanced media coverage of family and neighborhood problems being solved through civic involvement will encourage more families and youth to become engaged in civic activities and organizations.

**Long-term result:** Neighborhood family members will increase their civic participation

Still in its infancy, the work of the media advocacy group has begun to get some notice among neighborhood groups that are united by a specific issue. For instance, a dialog has started with a group of parents from the Upper Albany neighborhood who are committed to getting out the message that schools that cultivate parental involvement and ownership have a strongly favorable impact on the overall quality of life in their neighborhood. The task force expects to build more and more momentum as each step of their strategy is implemented and refined in response to resident involvement. ☺

