Establishing a Multilingual Homeownership Center

A *MAKING CONNECTIONS* PEER TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE MATCH BETWEEN OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA AND SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

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

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

BACKGROUND

Through the *Making Connections* initiative, the Annie E. Casey Foundation is working with 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.

> "Given the amount of gentrification that was going on in the neighborhood, it became clear that homeownership assistance was the only sustainable way to really help our communities build themselves so that they wouldn't be displaced."
>
> Stella Chao,
> Executive Director, IDHA

As part of this initiative, the Foundation offers the participating sites access to technical assistance that will help them achieve their goals for strengthening families in a neighborhood context. 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 neighborhoods.

From June 17–19, 2002, staff of Lao Family Community Development, Inc., an active participant in the *Making Connections* initiative in Oakland, California, engaged in a peer match with members of the International District Housing Alliance in Seattle, Washington. The Oakland group recently launched a Multilingual Homeownership Center and sought guidance from their Seattle colleagues who run a successful homeownership program serving a similar community. For more information about *Making Connections* and peer matches, see page 14.

SETTING THE CONTEXT FOR THE MATCH

A key goal of *Making Connections* is to increase family economic success, which occurs when families have ongoing opportunities to build a sustainable base of economic security for themselves, their children, and their neighborhoods. One of the strategies for promoting family economic success is increasing family assets, such as homeownership. In 2001, the Annie E. Casey Foundation provided a planning grant to Lao Family Community Development, Inc., to launch a Multilingual

Homeownership Center (MHC). The purpose of the center is to address the low rates of homeownership among refugees and immigrants in Oakland with limited English proficiency, particularly Southeast Asians. The MHC will provide underserved refugees and immigrants with the resources they need to make informed decisions about homeownership and establish lasting patterns of wise financial management and increasing stability for their families. The center will enable low- to moderate-income, limited-English-speaking Asian households to overcome barriers to home buying by providing targeted outreach, education, and counseling.

In December 2001, the Casey Foundation's Technical Assistance Resource Center commissioned a report by the Finance Project that identified the barriers to homeownership among Asian Americans and presented lessons learned by homeownership programs across the country. The report was intended to help guide Lao Family in the development of the MHC. In the course of its research, the Finance Project consulted Lisa Huang, the program coordinator for Homeownership 123, the homeownership assistance program of the International District Housing Alliance (IDHA) in Seattle. IDHA serves Seattle's Southeast Asian communities and has become recognized as a model homeownership program. Lao Family received a start-up grant from the Fannie Mae Foundation, which has also funded IDHA. The Fannie Mae Foundation recommended that Lao Family meet with IDHA to learn more about the specifics of establishing a homeownership program that targets Southeast Asian refugees and immigrants. Subsequently, the *Making Connections* local coordinator in Oakland suggested that IDHA would be an appropriate match for a peer technical assistance consultation.

The peer match took place at IDHA in Seattle. A team of eight people from Oakland participated. It included four staff members of the MHC; one of MHC's clients; a representative from the city of Oakland's Department of Housing and Community Development who works on homeownership programs and is part of the Housing Development Committee for the *Making Connections* initiative in Oakland; the Individual Development Account (IDA) Coordinator for the East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation, a prospective collaborator on the MHC and an active participant in *Making Connections;* and a staff member of the Urban Strategies Council, which serves as the Local Learning Partner for *Making Connections* and has provided extensive data and analysis on housing conditions in Oakland.

Participants from Seattle included the homeownership coordinator at IDHA; the executive director of IDHA; two of its homeownership counselors; several of its clients; a group of partners representing the city's financial institutions and non-profit housing and community development agencies; and a staff member from HomeSight, which runs another highly successful homeownership program in Seattle. The peer match was cofacilitated by Rosa Briceno, a senior associate at the Center for the Study of Social Policy and member of the Casey Foundation's Technical Assistance Resource Center team, and Jessica Pitt, a senior associate from the Urban Strategies Council in Oakland.

THE CONSULTATION

Through a series of conference calls and phone consultations with the facilitators, the participants identified the following learning objectives for the peer match:

- *Learning Objective 1:* To learn about the "nuts and bolts" of establishing a homeownership assistance center, including program design, governance, and staffing.

- *Learning Objective 2:* To learn about the types of partnerships and collaborations that contribute to a successful homeownership program and how to structure opportunities for partner participation.

- *Learning Objective 3:* To learn about successful counseling and client education techniques.

Learning Objective 1:
The Nuts and Bolts of Establishing a Center

What are the policies and procedures that need to be established to implement a successful homeownership center?

This question triggered a rich discussion about confidentiality and covered some very specific procedures for ensuring that the information exchanged between clients and counselors remains privileged. The Seattle team noted that each funding agency requires that certain laws and policies be followed and that these should provide the standards by which the MHC operates. To accommodate organizations that follow different guidelines, the advice was to go with the strictest guidelines. (HUD guidelines are the strictest.) In small organizations, it is important to leverage other community resources. For example, IDHA stores closed files in a protected place belonging to another organization.

The Seattle team suggested a number of ways to address the confidentiality issue:

- Provide regular training to counselors on confidentiality—and include a lot of role playing;
- Discuss confidentiality policies regularly at staff meetings (avoid putting specific staff on the spot);
- Conduct all counseling in a private office where conversations cannot be overheard by others;
- Require 15 minutes between appointments to complete paperwork and put files away;
- Shred any documents that are not placed in a client's file;
- Store all files in a locked file cabinet;
- Have a lawyer and/or more established organizations review confidentiality policies and procedures;

• Keep confidentiality about clients among staff; and

• Educate the clients themselves about the importance of confidentiality.

There was also a thoughtful discussion about language access. Participants noted that the translation and production of materials in several languages is very costly, and funders tend not to support this type of activity. But they also agreed that the challenge goes beyond money. The cultural competency needed to produce translations that are accurate and can reach the target population is equally important. IDHA explained that with its fliers and forms, for example, it usually has a person translate them into a second language and another person translate them back orally into English to make sure that the information provided is appropriate and accurate.

What is the best way to build the long-term capacity of the Multilingual Homeownership Center? What programs are essential? How should the addition of new programs be sequenced?

"Be very clear about your mission and let the mission provide a 'moral compass' to help you make decisions about which programs to offer and who to partner with."

Tanesha Van Leuven, Senior Community Development Planner, HomeSight

The Oakland team began by expressing concern about what it is able to offer clients. The team wanted to know how to go about building its capacity to offer services, how to layer services, and how to prioritize them. Given its current capacity, it does not want to raise expectations that it is not in a position to fulfill. The Seattle team validated this concern and advised that MHC be very clear about its mission and work in partnership with others.

Early on in Seattle's efforts, "*given the amount of gentrification that was going on in the neighborhood, it became clear that homeownership assistance was the only sustainable way to really help our communities build themselves so that they wouldn't be displaced. It clearly became a necessity to stabilize the population and provide equity of access.*" The IDHA program started off slower than Lao Family. In the first year they only did outreach and education, expanding gradually to provide individual counseling. In Seattle's experience, it was the clients' needs and demand for counseling services that drove the program's expansion. The Seattle team advised that MHC's mission provide a "*moral compass*" that will help the organization make decisions about which programs to offer and with whom to partner. As the HomeSight representative noted, "*if the* *goal is making a strong, vibrant community, and not just referring people to services, then a whole bunch of services need to be added to make your clients strong homeowners.*"

It is important to recognize that any single program cannot do everything, and, therefore, the MHC needs to figure out when to partner with other organizations and when to refer clients elsewhere. IDHA noted that it is a small agency and has done a lot of collaboration and partnership. It reminded Oakland that it takes time to build these relationships. It also noted that "*everyone tends to push their own agenda and products, so you need to be very aggressive about letting people know about other possible options.*" A main challenge is to figure out how to partner with other organizations without competing with them. For example, IDHA is finding new ways to partner with organizations that are increasing their language capacity (which has been IDHA's forte) so that they are not in competition with one another.

Learning Objective 2: Partnerships and Collaborations

IDHA assembled a very impressive group of over a dozen partners for this session that included representatives from local banks and lending institutions, other nonprofit community partners, and the city of Seattle. The discussion was wide-ranging and covered a number of important topics related to partnerships and collaboration.

How do you build relationships with funders and financial institutions?

The funders at the table agreed that it is important to be intentional about building relationships with funders and financial institutions. For their part, funders and financial institutions want assurance that there is a plan and structure in place that will produce outcomes. It is also important to educate funders on the barriers to homeownership so that they have an appreciation for what homeownership programs can and cannot reasonably accomplish.

Programs need to do a better job of sharing success stories with funders. One way to do this is to have high-profile celebrations or to try to get success stories into the media. (One person commented that the media love homeownership.) Programs should always "document, document, document" their successes, and make sure they take credit for them.

One participant suggested that homeownership centers should sell their programs to lenders as a referral source. If a bank cannot service prospective homebuyers because they do not qualify for a loan, then it can refer them to a homeownership program for counseling. Once the client is ready to purchase a home, the client can be sent back to the bank for a loan, thereby creating business for the bank that otherwise would be lost. One of the bankers stressed the importance of building relationships with individuals within a bank so that the homeownership program has someone to advocate for them.

In addition to traditional funders and financial institutions, the city can be an important source of support. The representative from Seattle's Department of Housing suggested that the MHC find out as much as it can about Oakland's down payment assistance programs and make its case with the city. If the MHC can demonstrate how it can help make the city's programs better, then the city could become an important ally. It is also important to keep track of policy discussions within the city that may affect homeownership and actively work to make sure that city policies are conducive to homebuying programs.

How can partnerships with funders sustain homeownership programs?

Rather than going after one-shot requests, programs should think about building long-term relationships with funders and financial institutions. Another important source of program support is service fees. HomeSight has begun to charge its clients modest fees for some services. For example, it charges $40 for six classes—which covers materials and the teacher's time—and $30 for obtaining a credit report. These fees are not unreasonable, especially if there is flexibility in how they are paid.

While these fees may help defray some program costs, the most expensive piece of this work is the counseling. There is a need to educate funders about the value of this service. One funder commented that program providers should put a price on counseling so that funders have a better understanding of the actual cost of this service.

How can you structure opportunities for partner participation?

Reiterating the point made in the earlier session, everyone agreed that no one agency can meet all the client's needs; it is essential to engage in partnerships with other organizations. The discussion centered on how to create and strengthen productive partnerships.

It is very important to educate partners about homeownership and how your program works. In the past, HomeSight has conducted lender and realtor trainings. It held lunchtime seminars at which it would educate and update partners on its programs and products. Providers also need to educate each other so that they can make informed referrals.

Programs must make sure to "document, document, document" their successes and also take time to celebrate those successes together with their partners.

Partnerships benefit from being explicit about each party's role and responsibilities. In some situations, it may make sense to develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between partners.

Realtors are particularly important partners because they are often the link between clients and lenders. Clients—especially ones that do not speak English—are put at risk if their realtors try to take advantage of them or if they refer them to lenders who practice predatory lending. This issue led to a lengthy discussion about predatory lending and the importance of participating in local predatory lending campaigns in order to stay abreast of who the unsavory lenders are in your city. In order to protect clients from predatory lenders, the homeownership center should get to know the local mortgage industry well.

The group also discussed the importance of collaborating with other nonprofit community organizations. Collaboration has been a major component of IDHA's success. Although collaborations take more time and effort, they are usually worth it, and they benefit clients. IDHA gave the example of a recent homebuyers fair at which it partnered with several other community organizations, thereby increasing outreach and targeting more language groups.

Learning Objective 3:
Counseling and Education

In this session, the counselors from IDHA and MHC participated in role-plays in which they acted out scenarios that the MHC counselors have already experienced in their early interactions with clients. The first scenario focused on how to fill out a credit report. The second scenario focused on a client who has large reserves of cash, has children on TANF, and wants to make an under-the-table deal with the seller of a property.

After the role-plays, participants shared observations and key lessons. These included:

- *Treating clients with respect.* The Oakland team noted the very respectful manner in which counselors interacted with their clients during the role-plays. A Seattle counselor noted that it is very important for counselors not to assume anything and to always ask questions.

- *Being careful not to overwhelm clients.* The information provided to the clients might be very difficult to grasp all at once. It is important to give people a chance to go home, review the information provided, and think about their options before making decisions.

- *Helping clients to assume ownership of the homebuying process.* The Seattle team noted the importance of being very clear with clients during the intake procedures about what the agency can and cannot offer. "*We don't make decisions for clients, but help them understand their options.*" It also cautioned against promising too much to clients. There is a danger that clients will come to depend on the counselors. The aim should be to teach people how to do things for themselves, not to do it for them.

  Still, Seattle counselors recognized that they do a lot of handholding for their clients. "*We have found that clients tend to see their counselor as the person who knows it all, and when you refer them to other agencies, instead of asking questions, they come back to ask the counselor. We are trying to break that* *dependency*." One member of the Seattle team suggested that the relationship between the client and counselor be presented in terms of a partnership, in which the client understands that the counselor is there for support, but that he or she will be responsible for doing the work. Oakland participants found this approach helpful for furthering their education program, recognizing that the end goal is to help clients take ownership of their homebuying process and become self-sufficient in this area.

- *Getting educated about many financial subjects.* The role-plays brought up a number of questions related to income benefits, tax consequences, TANF regulations and limits, the differences between SSI and welfare, and "mattress money." Some lending agencies, for example, have special considerations for clients who are "new Americans" and have accumulated savings in the form of "mattress money." It is important to understand these issues in order to advise clients adequately.

  HomeSight shared that its counselors have to be trained in a number of areas related to financial counseling. Training opportunities are available on a regular basis, and there is a required amount of training that everyone has to take, although counselors have quite a bit of freedom to choose in what areas they want to get more training. Still, the HomeSight representative emphasized that it is important that all counselors receive identical training as a foundation for providing consistent, quality services to all clients.

  IDHA counselors noted that because clients trust them, they sometimes ask them about options that lenders or other people have suggested that are not necessarily legal. In these cases, it is important to advise their clients that they will not be able to help them or protect them if they choose to go that route.

- *Addressing the time management challenge.* Meeting with clients can take a very long time, and it becomes challenging for a small agency to service all its clientele. While remaining cognizant of this issue, IDHA counselors emphasized that every client is different, and how far they go with each client is established on an individual basis. While some may require lots of time and attention, others require much less, so it all balances out.

To address this time management issue, HomeSight has streamlined the process. Clients must first take an orientation class that covers the basics. At the end of the class, they get an application and are asked to fill it in at home as much as possible and to gather the necessary paperwork. Then they schedule a one-on-one appointment for an intake session with a counselor.

LESSONS LEARNED AND NEXT STEPS

As both teams prepared to wrap up their work and leave the peer match with a renewed level of knowledge and energy, each participant took a few minutes to highlight what he or she had learned. Their comments included the following:

"It is worth dreaming something big. I dreamed that this peer match could take place and it did. It was definitely worthwhile."

Jennie Mollica,
Associate Director, Lao Family

- "I learned that homeownership for low-income residents is possible, and that there are good programs that work."
- "It is worth dreaming of something big. I dreamed that this peer match could take place and it did. It was definitely worthwhile."
- "I appreciated getting to know about the Lao Family and feeling more engaged and committed as a stakeholder about the possibilities for working together."
- "It was very reassuring to learn from another agency that is starting a similar process."
- "I learned a lot about communication, teamwork, and the goals that are in front of me."
- "It was inspirational. I see passion in your eyes, and you are on the right road."
- "I appreciated the opportunity to participate. It was very interesting to see two organizations in different levels of development and see how they can learn from each other and share honestly the challenges and applications."
- "I learned more than I can say. It was also a wonderful opportunity to meet new people."

- "As a resident of my neighborhood, I appreciated the opportunity to come, and also to see that I am not the only one who has barriers to buying a home."
- "It has been reassuring, stimulating, a great opportunity to think about many things and to meet a lot of people."

Before concluding the peer match, the Oakland team identified a set of next steps that it will take upon returning home. These include:

- Making sure the MHC counselors observe more client workshops and classes, especially in the languages they speak, as well as attending computer training;
- Developing a matrix of lenders, loan assistance programs, and realtors;
- Meeting with local lenders;
- Becoming familiar with Oakland's loan assistance programs;
- Meeting with realtors and contacts in banks in order to introduce the MHC program and make its agenda clear;
- Clarifying the mission and purpose of the program;
- Creating a business plan that includes partnerships, roll-out services, and funding strategies;
- Preparing counselors to do quality work;
- Developing a six-month plan for the implementation phase;
- Developing individual work plans for the counselors; and
- Working with the *Making Connections* Local Learning Partner, the Urban Strategies Council, to collect data and develop outcomes.

In addition, the Oakland group agreed to meet with Jessica Pitt, one of the peer match facilitators who is based in Oakland and works closely with the *Making Connections* initiative, to develop a more extensive and detailed set of next steps.

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.

Design and Production: Kathryn Shagas Design / Photography: Susie Fitzhugh

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