WHAT IS THE ROLE OF "COMMUNITY" IN THE HEALTHY LIFE OF A CHILD?
Essays from Henry Rael, Mayor Mitch Landrieu, Sheriff Johnny Valdez, Sister Pat Lamb and Kari Mitchell

OUR FAVORITE THINGS
Mrs. Daniel's second grade students in Jackson, Miss., share their favorite things

WHAT USE IS DATA?
Perspectives from Dr. Neal Halfon – director, UCLA Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities

HOW ARE COMMUNITIES BETTER OFF WHEN THEY WORK TOGETHER?
Thoughts from Maurice Lim Miller – president and CEO, Family Independence Initiative
Community as a Source of Change

Letter from Sterling K. Speirn

I  n the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, a number of news items appeared similar to one in the New York Times, headlined, “Losing Power but Finding a Way to Connect.” One anecdote after another described what happened “as neighborhoods literally and metaphorically washed into one another.” Among the stories: one resident with a three-bedroom apartment offered showers and meals to anyone who asked; another used Facebook to invite any displaced New Yorkers to bunk in her newly decorated studio apartment.

One of the recurring themes in many of the stories was the importance of proximity. As well as food or shelter, the people featured were offering or seeking the sense of connectedness that comes with the physical presence of others. The stories served as a useful reminder of why – even with ubiquitous media references to “social networks” and “online communities” – “communities” in the geographic, proximate sense remain keys to our vision of social change.

A focus on community was central to the foundation at its creation, and to W.K. Kellogg before that. With WKKF’s first initiative, the Michigan Community Health Project in 1931, the trustees expressed a vision of communities as arenas for action, and of the foundation’s role to “provide funds for cooperative community programs.”

In practice, this often meant an emphasis on community systems and infrastructure, such as building schools and camps, and training public health and medical professionals. Change happening in communities tended to be created and guided by the communities’ formal leaders and temporarily supported with externally sourced knowledge and financial resources for the benefit of the community at large.
Today, more than 80 years later, we remain as sharply focused as ever on community as the arena of choice for actions benefiting children. And we have grown in our understanding of change as a manifestation of the community.

This view puts its emphasis on social systems — including informal and ad hoc systems — rather than on infrastructure. It recognizes that while the spark igniting community change can originate anywhere, if the change is to be durable, then its fuel must be internal and organic.

Among the work of current foundation grantees, there are many examples of this energy. One that comes immediately to mind is Parents United for Healthy Schools (also known as Padres Unidos para Escuelas Saludables), founded by Chicago parents to address growing health disparities among the city’s children.

In the past year alone (and at a time of great financial pressure on the Chicago Board of Education), they laid the foundation for significant improvements in the city’s public school food program. Among recent accomplishments, they successfully advocated for a longer school day to allow more time for lunch, recess and physical activity, and they promoted universal breakfast in the classrooms of every elementary school, ensuring the city’s children start the day with a healthy meal.

Another grantee, Michigan Future, has launched an initiative responding to a recent report that only 16 percent of high school students statewide are ready for college. Michigan Future Schools seeks to create 35 small, open-enrollment high schools in Detroit and its suburbs within five years. By providing a quality-based alternative education system with enrollment open to all who apply, and by requiring that the newly created schools meet outcome standards, Michigan Future Schools is attempting to deliver systemic high school education reform at scale.

The view that lasting change originates from communities owes much to relatively recent thinking about social capital, and particularly to Robert Putnam’s definition as describing “connections between individuals, social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.”

Important developments at the foundation in the past few years reflect this thinking. We are increasingly engaged in identifying communities in which the impetus for change exists. We have implemented new engagement practices for our program officers, who now spend more time physically in the communities in which they work, functioning both as grantmakers and as relationship catalysts. Our objective: a thorough and authentic understanding of the unique character and needs of a community, in order to identify and nurture the seeds of change originating in that community.

This is also the reason the foundation added “community engagement” to “civic engagement” as part of our approach. Positive, durable social change requires both implementation within formal, public arenas and the vision, creativity and vitality produced by individual relationships formed at the community level.

As you may know, I recently announced that my term as president of the foundation will end at the close of 2013. Looking to the year ahead, I am excited by the potential of our community-centric approach to test the idea that in our age “it will now take a child to raise a village.” In this view, we believe that even the most disparate, diverse and disconnected community residents share aspirations for healthy, educated, successful children. When communities connect through and leverage the power inherent in this shared interest, they discover the means to promote additional change and build a new village. A bit like a pearl, social capital coalesces around a core issue. When the issue is children, the changes often sought — such as improved education and nutrition, promotion of exercise and health care — tend to strengthen the community overall.

Parent engagement becomes community engagement, which becomes civic engagement.

Of course, there are profound challenges to this work: assisting communities in defining their goals; identifying and building their natural leaders; building capacity in which community-based organizations are, in fact, community-based; applying the best available data; and maintaining the momentum for change once it has been generated.

This publication is part of our effort to address those challenges. By exploring some of the successes, obstacles, lessons and current thinking about the role of community in the lives of vulnerable children, it is our hope that we can help individual communities make the changes necessary to propel all their children to success.
My father’s ancestors arrived in New Mexico about 10 generations ago and settled in the northern part of the state, migrating southward over time before eventually settling in Albuquerque in the 1960s. Two generations earlier, in the late 1600s, ancestors on my mother’s side settled in the state’s Central Valley before eventually relocating to the east side of the Manzano Mountains. The bones of some of her ancestors are buried in the Campo Santo on what is now Foothill Drive here in Bernalillo County’s South Valley, located about 300 yards from the site where I attended kindergarten, which is about 200 yards from where I am raising my family and where I’ve promised my children I will live until I die.

Those long ago settlers chose to live in a place of profound natural beauty that is equally awe-inspiring and harsh. Characterized by widespread aridity and unforgiving winters, the landscape could be parsimonious in what it gave. Over centuries, the settlers learned how to live here, developed a relationship with the landscape through trial and error, guided by the experience of native peoples whose families had been here for countless generations before.

Commitment to place drives the need for community engagement and the key lesson of being committed to this place has always been that only through community could we endure, only through cooperation could we thrive. You raised pigs, I raised goats. You helped me plant my corn, I helped you harvest your squash. Cooperation and community were the keys to survival and success. Extended over time, this commitment has literally reshaped the physical environment in ways that facilitate more cooperation and ultimately make the landscape more amenable to our success.

Take, for example, the acequia system that conveys water from various rivers to irrigate fields across New Mexico. Originally excavated perhaps a thousand years ago by indigenous populations and then expanded and institutionalized by Spanish settlers, this series of ditches and canals define the landscape of New Mexico’s river valleys, extending the availability of arable land and dramatically increasing the efficiency of farming and food production.

While these structures are physical things that have endured beyond the lives of the people that built them, they continue to require human beings to operate and ensure their relevance. In the case of the acequias, individual community members must each play a role in opening and closing gates at appointed times on appointed days to ensure that water reaches all the fields. Failure or inattention on the part of any of the parciantes results in neighbors missing their allotment of water for the week, which in a desert environment could hold dire consequences for everyone. When operating correctly, these structures enabled the community to maintain direct ownership of their lives and their shared fate.

The story of thriving in New Mexico has always been about commitment to place over time. It is a story about adaptation, innovation and relentlessly seeing oneself in the context of a continuum, as an inheritor of the wisdom that came before and a guardian of what will be after our generation has passed. As we look at New Mexico in the modern context, these same principles remain relevant and are now increasingly rising in importance. Our work in communities must be driven by this same kind of thinking, informed by the inherited wisdom of what has worked in the past to build structures that demand cooperation and that will endure into the future.

People + place + time. This is the formula that has yielded the unique culture of New Mexico, and indeed any unique culture anywhere in the world. For our children, who long for consistency, who thrive when the ground beneath their feet is solid and the landscape they inhabit is familiar, commitment to place is the water that nourishes their souls, spurs their growth and connects them to one another and the entire world that rises up to feed, nurture and support them.
To create strong cities and strong communities we must work as one nation indivisible. My city’s future — New Orleans’ future — will be decided not in high rise offices, but in schools, community centers and neighborhoods around the city. It will require that private and public entities work together seamlessly — police and parish; nonprofits and neighborhood associations; universities and private companies; city, state and federal leaders — all committed to creating healthy communities that meet the diverse needs of our children. It’s an incredibly complex challenge. After all, a new school alone can’t transform a community without affordable housing. Housing won’t bring real change if there are no living wage jobs. Jobs won’t do enough if people don’t have transportation or lack health care. Even if all the other pieces are in place, we won’t make progress if neighborhoods aren’t safe.

It is my responsibility as mayor to bring people together — to facilitate, link and leverage the power of our community — so that every child gets the chance to reach his or her full potential.

Our holistic NOLA For Life strategy is a perfect example of how we are mobilizing this grassroots power. By stopping the terrible shootings in our neighborhoods; interrupting violence before it occurs by investing in prevention; promoting jobs and opportunity; and rebuilding neighborhoods while improving the police department, we are taking the fundamental steps necessary to create communities that meet the needs of our children.

We will succeed to the extent that we act as if we are, in fact, indivisible.

As a sheriff, I know the importance of law enforcement in making our communities safer firsthand. I also know that one of the most powerful tools we have for reducing future crime is to make sure our kids grow up in a healthy, supportive environment, with opportunities to learn and develop, so they can realize their potential to be contributing participants in our communities.

The sad reality in New Mexico is that many of our children aren’t afforded a strong start in life. As a sheriff, I’ve seen the results: young people dropping out of school, even committing crimes. And research bears out my experience. A high school dropout is eight times more likely to be incarcerated than a graduate.

But there are signs of hope, right here in rural areas of New Mexico. Through efforts such as New Mexico’s First Born Program and the Nurse-Family Partnership, our communities are beginning to provide voluntary home visiting for pregnant mothers and at-risk families to help new parents learn vital skills, including how to cope with the stresses of child-rearing. A number of communities are offering high-quality early learning programs such as Head Start for young children, to help prepare them for success in school.

And at a time of tight budgets at all levels of government, it’s important to note that setting kids on the right path from a young age is cost effective. When it comes to investing in the success of kids, we can pay now or pay much more later. The choice is each of ours to make in each of our communities.

The research shows the lasting impact of these community supports for at-risk children and their families — increased likelihood of graduation and decreased likelihood of incarceration. That’s why law enforcement leaders like me have joined FIGHT CRIME: INVEST IN KIDS, and are supporting these community efforts.

Many years ago, I traveled with migrant farmworkers from Ohio to Florida. My dream then was for their children to finish high school and even go to college. Yet the children lacked so much — preparation for school, a place for learning, a clear pathway to a complete education.

Now, with the preschool we established in our parish in Holland, Mich., I see my dream coming true. The need for a program for the children in our church and surrounding community became evident several years ago, when research on kindergarten readiness showed that fewer than half the children in our area were entering school with the skills necessary to succeed.

We joined leaders at Corpus Christi Catholic School and formed a partnership with Ready for School, a community initiative to expand early learning opportunities in Holland and nearby Zeeland, Mich. Together we committed to find a way to open a preschool focused on children who would otherwise be unable to attend a preschool and who would benefit from bilingual teachers.

In its second year, our Ready for School program is full. Good news spreads quickly in our parish. And the preschool is integrated with our broader educational mission, so our families — two-thirds of whom are Spanish speaking, many of them new to our area — do not have to view their children’s education as separate from their faith experience.

Ready for School offers families a place of welcome and belonging. No one parent does it alone; no one teacher does it alone. And as the faith-based community, we have a role to play. Together we offer our children what the children of the migrant farmworkers did not have: an affordable, educational program that meets their needs and the support of a stable community.

I love to visit the preschool as the children arrive and go bouncing down the stairs. They would not do that if they were not happy to be there. And in the classroom, they are eager to learn, they want to show their mastery and achievement. What we are establishing is a foundation for lifelong learning.

I am so happy with how this fundamental program came about. I wish something like Ready for School could be universal, but I am so very grateful it is in our community.
A community will effectively address the issues that affect children and youth when everyone in that community takes ownership of the challenges it faces and works across the sectors. When the business community comes to the table, we bring a focus on data-driven, best practice-oriented solutions that can create strong returns on investment. This is the same orientation we have in running our businesses.

Business will always do what’s best for business, and we have a vested interest in supporting positive outcomes in children’s lives. We will pay for the failure of the educational system through those who become dependent upon public service (which our tax dollars fund) or those who enter our businesses unprepared (creating significant costs for training).

Historically, the business community has pointed fingers at educational providers for high dropout rates and an ill-prepared workforce. In Doña Ana County, when we stopped pointing fingers and started linking arms, we were able to have candid, often difficult conversations about return on investment for educational spending. In the process, I – and other business owners – gained a deeper understanding of the barriers and challenges faced by educators and the places where the K-12 system was broken. We identified misalignment of educational pathways in preparing students to pursue higher education or succeed in the workforce – ultimately limiting future employability for those students.

To build a healthy future for children, the business community must play a central role in the educational process and remind educators that the end goal must be employability for young people. Through The Bridge of Southern New Mexico, we found a way to invest our time and resources to prevent the outcomes that work against the overall economic development of our community. Success is achieved when students enter careers that enable them to provide for themselves economically and strengthen the overall communities in which they and their families live.
Who Needs to Participate in Community Change?

Developing multidisciplinary community leadership through fellowships has been a cornerstone of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Throughout the past 25 years, the foundation has supported more than 1,500 fellows through 10 leadership programs, which have been networked since 2002 through the Kellogg Fellows Leadership Alliance. These leaders combine boots-on-the-ground familiarity with the communities in which they live and work with a broader knowledge of the levers and mechanics of social change in the world beyond. WKKF asked three fellows, from different communities facing dramatically different challenges, to share their insights on the questions of who must participate in effective community change and how best to gain that participation.
Marysville Schools serves two distinct communities – the city of Marysville and the Tulalip Tribes Indian Reservation. For 155 years, Native students in our community (and nationally) have been underserved – they are the most academically challenged subgroup in our public schools. This stems from a history of trauma caused by boarding schools, where children were removed from their homes and teachers sought to eradicate Native history, culture and language, shaping how many families from Tulalip see our public schools today.

To confront this history and build a new future, Marysville Schools developed a true partnership with Tulalip Tribes – committed to honor a sovereign culture and to create success for Native students. The goal has been to create a sense of belonging and success for Native students in our community. The Tribal Council, school board and district leadership work together to provide a positive learning environment for ALL students and to prepare students for success both academically and within their individual cultures.

Creating one community and one voice takes time, respect, listening, understanding, standing, and action. Ultimately, actions speak louder than words. We participate in community and cultural events. We pick up the phone and get together to problem solve when needed. Monthly breakfast meetings between district leaders and Tribal Council leaders help build strong and respectful relationships.

Reservation schools greet parents and students with tribal pictures and quotations from Native leaders. Students start each day with a Native drum welcoming assembly. Parent conferences are held on the reservation. Our “community conversations” – facilitated by Native leaders – engage parents and community members in creating success for our Native students. Now more than ever, parents and parents feel that the school belongs to them.

As a result of our partnership, Tulalip Tribes came to us in our darkest hour of multi-year budget cuts to ask how they could assist. They now invest $1.6 million per year to support smaller class sizes, extra time for tutoring and teacher teamwork. Teachers work together to identify strategies for closing learning gaps. We have fewer disciplinary issues and better attendance. Our Native kindergarten students now outperform students district wide. Quil Ceda and Tulalip, elementary schools located on the reservation, were named number two in the nation by Learning Forward for their data team’s work, which is now spreading to other schools in the district.

Gradually we are creating one community – one voice. Community members attend and participate in our morning songs. The chairman of Tulalip Tribes visits schools regularly to encourage Native students to get a good education – reminding them they are our future leaders.

It was a cold Saturday morning in Denver and they came in small family groups, as many as six at a time. Some came in their Sunday best and others seemed to have just crawled out of bed. It was an Education Summit that drew us, but most had no idea what they would find when they arrived. Many had never seen a summit, conference or town hall meeting of any kind. They heard from the governor, the mayor, state senators and a national speaker and trainer, Dr. Larry Nyland.

The race, class and gender inequities that persist in American society leave those who are least powerful and most vulnerable to absorb the brunt of the consequences. Black, Latino, Native American and poor white communities are persistently plagued by poverty, unemployment, inadequate and culturally-biased schooling, poor food access, police brutality, family instability and ineffective and sometimes corrupt government. As the nation, states and local municipalities struggle with balancing budgets in the face of inflated costs and reduced prosperity, far too many women and children are left without adequate social supports.

While social supports are important and necessary, they are not adequate if we want to eliminate the intergenerational cycles of underdevelopment, disempowerment and suffering. Real change that creates equity and empowers communities will require a fundamental realignment of power and priorities. We must therefore ask the questions, who leads community change? And where is the locus of control?

All communities have the responsibility of and right to self-determination; the ability to interpret their own historical and contemporary experiences and to use that analysis to define what they want for themselves and their progeny. The most effective efforts to change conditions in communities are led by the people of those communities. Those with the “lived experience” are best qualified to determine what they want and need. They know best the type of help they need from others and how that help can be best offered. This model of development builds community capacity and empowerment.

This community self-determination model is a sharp contrast to the model we see played out frequently in urban areas inhabited by African Americans and Latinos where well-meaning, often affluent suburban whites, empowered with foundation funding, enter communities to provide “services” or, in almost-missionary style, to prescribe solutions for social ills.

Individual allies, businesses, foundations, institutions and others wishing to support community self-determination models should meet regularly with legitimate community leadership to learn about their experiences, programs, priorities and vision for the future. They should demonstrate that they are trustworthy. They should develop relationships with community members and listen more than they talk. They should find ways to provide human, intellectual and financial resources to that leadership in ways that they find helpful.

Finally, community self-determination does not mean that communities isolate themselves, become provincial or devalue the experiences of others. There are multiple issues facing humanity that require our mutual cooperation to solve. That cooperation should be promoted on the basis of mutual respect and a commitment to the common good.

With the help of individuals aptly called “navigators,” participants created connections with the resources gathered for the day. They were recruited to the Maestro en Casa program, to learn English over the radio. Some reluctantly released their little ones to child care; others reluctantly released their teenagers to the student conference. And at lunch they were serenaded with Mexican songs from their past.

Community change is about hope, the collective and the courage to hold the space for struggle, advancing toward a world that is more just, fair and equitable. To participate is to believe that one’s voice, actions and vision of possibility are necessary for creating value in one’s world. That hope, courage and faith were displayed vividly that cold morning in Denver. There, grounded in cultural relevancy and strengths, parents and children seized the opportunity to connect their dreams to possibilities. It was the first step towards tangible community change.

American society is beset by multiple systems challenges which, collectively, will drastically change the way of life that we have become accustomed to. With the rest of humanity, we face an environmental crisis that is already having monumental consequences. Our economic, political and social systems are in deep crisis. The systems that produce and deliver food and energy are stressed, fragile and fraught with inequities.

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Our Favorite Things

Mrs. Daniel’s second grade students in Jackson, Miss., share their favorite things

We are driven to work for social change that ensures that vulnerable children get the love, security and nurturing that all children need. Yet it’s easy to get so absorbed in the methods and language of our mission that we can temporarily lose sight of what it means to be a child.

These photos – a sampling of the possessions most cherished by the second-graders at Casey Elementary School in Jackson, Miss. – are meant as a reminder. We hope you take the time to look at each and to see in each the preciousness, innocence, hope and promise of every child.
UNDERSTANDING VULNERABLE CHILDREN: WHO KNOWS WHAT ABOUT COMMUNITY?
At What Point Did You Get Involved?

Reflections from Valerie Davidson — Senior Director of Intergovernmental and Legal Affairs, Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, Anchorage, Alaska

When I was a young girl growing up in a small Yup’ik Eskimo village in southwest Alaska, children enjoyed a strong sense of community thanks to special promises made on our behalf by every parent to every other parent in the community:

As your children walk outside your door, I promise to look after them, to make sure they are safe, they have what they need.
I promise to carry them in my heart.
I trust that you too will look after mine.

In this way, our children will know they are loved.
They will know they are important.
They will know their place in our world.
They will know they too are responsible for younger children.
They will know we are all connected.

What affects one child affects every child.
What affects one family affects every family.
What affects one community affects every community.

Although we have cultural and language differences, Alaska Native and American Indian families want what every family in America wants: We all want our children to be healthy, happy and to live in safe communities. Families and communities may need to do things differently to accomplish that same goal, and specific goals may be different from one community to another.
They are all important.

In Alaska, we have been working to restore the smiles of Alaska Native children by improving access to oral health care in new ways. Our Dental Health Aide Therapy (DHAT) Program is modeled after a program in New Zealand and authorized in more than 50 countries. DHATs provide basic oral health care procedures, including fillings under the general supervision of a dentist.

For me this work is deeply personal. As a child I remember when the dentist came to our village once a year. As we waited in line to be seen, we could hear the screams behind the door as teeth were pulled from children ahead of us. The door would open and we’d see our crying brother, sister, cousin or friend holding a bloody gauze bandage to their mouth. We always asked how many teeth were pulled.

For the youngest kids, this was especially traumatic because they had not experienced it before. They did not know that this was considered “normal.” Every year, one of the little ones would stand in line, terrified, and either wet themselves from fear or run out the clinic door. Our community health aide would wait five minutes to give the child time to calm down and then bring the child back. The “runner” would move to the front of the line.

For our children, going to see the dentist was truly traumatic. I have a cousin who still cannot be seen by a dentist unless she is under full anesthesia. Imagine how frightening it is for her to seek oral health care for her children.

This is why I got involved in this work. Our children deserve better. They need to know that “normal” is being cavity-free and that oral health care can be a positive experience, not a terrifying one. Our young children also deserve to have positive relationships with people in our community who look like them and who they look up to.
When we began to develop our DHAT program, we were told there was too much opposition. We were told that we were out-resourced and we were politically outnumbered. We were told it was simply going to be too hard.

While we knew that was probably all true, we also knew that some of our children were graduating from high school with full sets of dentures. Many other children covered their mouths when they smiled and laughed because they had “ugly teeth” and/or missing teeth. These things happen when you only have access to oral health care once every year or two, if you are lucky.

We had tried other strategies to entice dentists to live in our frontier communities. Volunteer dentists, student loan repayments, incentive payments and other strategies simply weren’t working. We knew that we needed to find our local solution to our local problem.

Ultimately, we were not willing to accept the poor oral health status for our children any longer. As things got harder, I remembered the advice of my late grandmother, Taurluq Annie David. “Lead with love. You will not stand alone if you lead with love.”

My grandmother was a wise woman. We did not stand alone. Through the generous support from our partners in Alaska Tribal Health System, Yuut Elitnaurviat, University of Washington, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Rasmuson Foundation, Bethel Community Services Foundation and others, we are now educating Dental Health Aide Therapists in Alaska. The program is rigorous; after all, they are caring for our children. We are proud of the fact that the DHAT recertification standards are more stringent than standards for dentists.

Today, more than 25 certified Dental Health Aide Therapists practice in rural Alaska. Our children receive oral health care from people who look like them, who speak our languages and understand our cultural norms. Beyond the dental chair, our DHATs connect with our children through schools, basketball games and throughout the community. Our children look up to our DHATs. They are people that we know and trust.

Because of these close relationships, we are already changing the smiles of Alaska Native children. We are beginning to see cavity free kids. We are raising the oral health IQ of our children, our families and our communities. What began as our local solution to our local problem is being looked at by other states as people realize that this model can work anywhere.

We have learned a number of valuable lessons that are equally applicable to almost any effort that strives to improve the lives of children, families and communities. But the most important may be this: that people will do the most amazing things when given the right reasons. And children are always the right reasons.

The result of our efforts will be to ensure that our children grow up healthy and strong and equipped to make their own promise to the children of the future. Just as I made that promise to my daughters.
I started my career as a pediatrician interested in improving children’s health, astounded by how much health is influenced by poor social status, and quickly recognizing that the medical model and my newly issued black bag were woefully inadequate for the job at hand.

Later in my career, even after I established The Center for the Vulnerable Child at Children’s Hospital Oakland to provide better health care to children in the welfare system, it was clear that we were just scratching the surface. No matter how good we were at putting Band-Aids on the “boo boos” of kids in foster care, there were not enough Band-Aids or pediatricians to do the work.

I also learned how easily healthy development is compromised by the all too common risk factors that derail children’s developing health potential. While absolutely necessary, it is clearly not enough to identify and treat one child at a time. The only way to make real headway is to improve the health trajectories for the entire population of vulnerable children by targeting the risk-drivers that put children in harm’s way in the first place.

The Transforming Early Childhood Community Systems (TECCS) initiative focuses on drivers of early childhood risk and works with communities to enhance the protective factors their families cannot help. As it is becoming clearer that toxic stress, poverty and other early childhood risks are contributing to a massive brain drain that is robbing many children of their developmental potential, many communities are attempting to overhaul and upgrade their early childhood services. Creating a high performing early childhood system capable of achieving collective impact requires functionally aligned sectors; stakeholders committed to common outcomes; a common improvement and innovation framework; and shared vision, trust and accountability.

That work, in turn, requires data, insight and analytics to measure, map and determine community needs, progress, performance and outcomes; insight on whether the data is measuring something that makes a difference in people’s lives; and analytics to drive innovation and improvement, and support cross-sector strategies essential for success.

In 2009, TECCS began working with local community coalitions committed to improving early childhood outcomes in order to:

- Support strategic system improvement activities that work within and across sectors and programs.
- Facilitate a national collaborative learning system that can advance innovation and improvement within and across participating communities.

As TECCS has expanded from eight sites in 2010 to 18 sites in 2011 and 30 sites in 2012, we are learning and applying the knowledge to an evolving community measurement and improvement platform. We’ve learned that:

- Local data is actionable data. When a county reports that 20 kids died last year in traffic accidents, that data is usually just a statistic with a tear. It is only informative if it makes a difference in how policy is developed or what people do. If you are not on the mayor’s committee to end traffic accidents, this data is not likely to change your behaviors. However, if you know that two blocks from your house, in the neighborhood where your children play, two children were hit at the same intersection in the past two months, chances are you will join others to make sure a stop sign is put in place. Having child outcome data at the neighborhood level can engender the same kind of response.

- Data can be a mirror that catalyzes action. When you cannot see yourself it is hard to know what you look like and how you compare to others. If data is not about your specific community, it is like looking into a mirror and seeing a mash-up of yourself and other people, which does not give you the information you need to act. Off-diagonal data, where the poor areas look better than expected and the non-poor areas look worse, can show that not all low-income communities have high vulnerability in all domains, nor do all middle- and high-income communities have low vulnerability. This information and the dialogue it stimulates can often yield useful, actionable information about what is working, what is not and what needs to be tried to achieve desired results.

- Parents and local residents need information to advocate and act. Data needs to be interpretable and translated into information that parents can use. This builds the capacity of all members in a community to develop shared accountability for outcomes and solutions.
Measuring the healthy development of all children in all neighborhoods is important. While the concentration of vulnerability will often be higher in low-income communities, the total number of children who are vulnerable will often be much greater in middle- and higher-income communities. This shifts the frame of the discussion from what it takes for “those children” to survive to what it takes for “all our children to thrive.”

To turn data into insight, it must be relevant. To turn insight into currency it needs to have value and be usable in a marketplace of public opinion and policy advocacy.

Data has more value when it can be traded across sectors and used to engage, link and network different community initiatives. Early childhood school readiness is not only a useful outcome measure for early childhood coalitions, but is also increasingly valuable to medical care providers and health systems, where new financing models are focused on managing population risk, and to community economic development investors who are looking for indicators of what it takes to enable a community to thrive.

TECCS is now working with early childhood coalitions in 30 cities across the United States as we partner to provide the support that all children need for healthy development and to prevent mental health and developmental disabilities.

By measuring and mapping children’s development at the neighborhood level, a community can hold up a mirror to itself, gaining insight about where they stand and what they want to achieve, and establishing common cause for early childhood providers, pediatricians, parents, advocates and other caring community members to start working together to improve outcomes and achieve results.

Children are vulnerable by their very nature. Children with health and developmental problems are twice as vulnerable and children are three times as vulnerable when service systems are not in place to protect, support and catch them if they fall. If we equip ourselves and our communities with useful, actionable data, we will be able to make more strategic decisions about how we will respond to these vulnerabilities so that more children can thrive.
What Keeps Community Change Going?

An interview with ANI MANSFIELD
PROJECT COORDINATOR, NORTHWEST IOWA FOOD & FITNESS INITIATIVE, DECORAH, IOWA

The Northeast Iowa Food & Fitness Initiative (NEIFFI) was created to address two ironies. The first: that children in the six Iowa counties comprising part of one of the world’s most productive agricultural areas are, in fact, growing up in a food desert. The second: that the rural, relatively healthy physical environment in which these children live does not automatically offer opportunities for healthful living.

Yet having achieved significant success in addressing these issues, NEIFFI has encountered a third irony: once once generated, momentum for change is a challenge to sustain.

NEIFFI is pursuing three strategies to drive change which will increase the communities’ and schools’ wellness: building a local food system; engaging communities in active transportation to school and work as a way to increase physical activity; and changing local schools’ policies and practices regarding wellness. Five years after its successful launch, the initiative has accomplished some notable achievements, including:

- A significant increase in the number of children who walk or bike to school in the six counties.
- An increase in locally-sourced food, which is now served in 17 of the region’s 20 school districts.
- Sixteen school districts with school gardens, producing more than 4,000 pounds of produce used in school meal programs.
- Annual continuing education classes in wellness training for K-12 teachers.
- Creation of active wellness teams in 90 percent of the region’s six counties and 28 school districts, making “cookie-cutter” solutions impossible.

Citing one strategy — building a local food system for all of the region’s school districts — Mansfield listed the component tactics required for a single task:

“Say we want schools to serve broccoli three or four times in the month of September. This is a region of small farms. We won’t get this done with one producer. So we have to start by aggregating producers. Then we have to work with each of 20 school districts’ procurement systems to help them design bid requests that recognize the difference between a local food product and a commodity product; coordinate refrigeration and distribution; and deal with preparation challenges, especially in schools that are all about heat and serve.

“And then we have to get people to taste and try healthier local foods. So that one task comes down to understanding and intervening in five or six key dimensions of the food system. This is a very fundamental shift for us. Yet, it’s very exciting long term.”

But while thinking in terms of systems helps dimension the task, the challenges often come down to specific interpersonal interactions.

“We’ve been challenged to get to a sustainable model, where we’re no longer looking for outside investment,” Mansfield said.

“So for the past five years, we’ve been building multiple stakeholder groups, everything from producers to schools to health providers, city councils, county supervisors and employers, and having conversations about why wellness is so important. Then facilitating discussions that really develop buy-in and commitment and build capacity to the point where we have people starting to advocate for change.

“The reality is, people don’t want to be told what to do without understanding why. And in order to understand the why, it takes slowing people down and having a good conversation.”

Singing out parents as one – albeit one very important – group of stakeholders, she described the process as “more like silver buckshot than a silver bullet. It’s parent-teacher conferences … and inviting parents into school gardens … and setting up experiential meals where we get eight parents around a table with a high fat, high sodium heat-and-serve meal to have a thoughtful discussion about food value and the importance and implications of change.

“It’s multiple conversations with one parent at a time, and then trying to understand how to leverage that parent as a messenger and an advocate.”

Corry Bregendahl, an evaluator for the initiative, pointed out that the process of education is continual and ongoing for each group of stakeholders, and that it must remain relevant to each, even as contexts change.

“For example, our schools are changing before our eyes. In five years, consolidation could make our schools look very different from the way they look today. We’re developing school champions who may not have a job in the fall.”

A second challenge is the continual negotiation over boundaries and control. For example, NEIFFI’s food systems work requires the involvement of leadership from virtually every stakeholder group, against a constantly shifting political background.

“There’s a real issue of who is going to control what processes and systems,” Bregendahl said.

Ultimately, both Mansfield and Bregendahl agree that promoting conditions that support healthy lifestyles requires first promoting conditions that support what Bregendahl called “stable domains for change,” built on stable partnerships and relationships.

The ingredients:

- A common vision that is nurtured over time as new relationships are formed.
- Trust between partners that they will act in each other’s interests.
- An appreciation of diverse perspectives, and an ability to de-personalize judgments and decisions.
- And a commitment to process, with faith that desired outcomes will follow.

“This isn’t about changing an individual’s behavior,” said Mansfield. “(What) we hope to achieve is for people to embrace this idea of why our environments need to be healthier and why it’s so important that the healthy choice is the easy choice.”

Bregendahl characterized the work of creating that change as twofold. Building “muscle” is the process of actually changing community behavior. The relationships that drive and sustain that effort is what she called “building the connective tissue.”

“It’s messy work,” she said.
How are Communities Better Off When They Work Together?

Thoughts from MAURICE LIM MILLER
PRESIDENT AND CEO, FAMILY INDEPENDENCE INITIATIVE, OAKLAND, CALIF.

We have a rich and varied history of people making the journey from poor to middle- and upper-class in the United States. Often, their stories are not rags-to-riches tales of individuals who made it to the top through sheer force of will. Rather, while hard work and determination played a critical role, the key ingredient was often community.

Before I founded the Family Independence Initiative (FII), I researched the paths people took out of poverty before the War on Poverty. I learned about African Americans who founded their own thriving townships like Greenwood and Weeksville, and Chinese immigrants who created Chinatowns in cities across the country where the newly arrived could find job references, housing, loans and information. Many other ethnic groups – Italians, Cambodians, Poles – had similar stories. All these groups created paths to prosperity by pooling resources, sharing information, providing job references, supporting each other’s businesses and opening their homes to others.

Today this sense of community and willingness to help is especially visible in times of trouble. When Hurricane Sandy hit the East Coast, I was struck by the stories of people helping others. Neighbors left power strips on their front stoops so others still without power could charge their phones. There was this posting on Facebook: “If you need a warm place to stay, our house in Rahway, N.J. is open. Strangers welcome.” There was the young man who walked to the top of a high rise in Coney Island with bottles of water and found there an elderly woman who’d been without water for two days.

At times, disaster brings out the best in us. I’m fortunate that I get to see the “best in us” regularly without an accompanying disaster, yet still often informed by that sense of community. Inspired by history, FII challenges low-income families to form cohorts with their friends in order to enroll in one of our Demonstrations, where we test an on-the-ground paradigm-shifting approach to spurring economic and social mobility. The families display this sense of caring for and supporting each other in their everyday lives. They are motivated by a shared desire to make their lives better. And they know that everyone does better when they all do better.

Candace, a Boston mother, told me, “Before joining FII, I used to be a loner. I was unemployed and had no direction to where I was going. When I joined I realized that I was not alone. Other people were going through the same thing I was going through.”

With her cohort supporting her, Candace has secured a job and been promoted, she’s in school pursuing her degree in health and human services while her husband, Mario, is training to be a nurse. Candace and Mario are also starting a childcare co-op with other FII families.

Sinita, Bertha and Johana, who live in San Francisco, have 12 kids among their three families. Their child care options are limited given the cost and earning extra income is a challenge. A few months after joining FII, the three friends launched a business. Through their community, they find clients with homes and small offices that need cleaning. While two of the moms clean, the third cares for the kids. And they split the profits.

These families and the others I meet through FII have drive and passion to improve their lives and their children’s future opportunities. But no one moves forward alone. The camaraderie, support, accountability and extra hands of friends and family are what enable us to truly unleash the power of our own talents and initiative.
What is the Role of Media in Community Change?

I was born in Mexico and became a United States citizen in the late 1980s. Growing up on the South Side of Chicago as a new American child, I went with my mother to Civil Rights Movement demonstrations in the late 1960s-70s. I felt I was witnessing participatory democracy in action. But when we went home in the evening to watch the news as a family, I did not see my American immigrant story reflected there. I saw free media in action, examining and reporting on the Vietnam War and Watergate. But I did not hear the voices of people like my family or me. I felt invisible, vulnerable, “other.”

We were there at the demonstrations. Why were our thoughts and actions not important to the news media?

Ensuring that the media fully reflect our national diversity is more than a matter of equity; it determines what we decide and how we act as a country to safeguard and nurture the lives of our most vulnerable. And “full reflection” is a matter both of quantity—the extent to which our diverse voices are expressed and heard in the mainstream media—and of quality, of how those voices are represented.

We are on the brink of becoming a multicultural-majority nation. In 2011, multicultural births exceeded non-Hispanic white births. By 2042, non-whites are expected to comprise the majority of Americans. It is essential for our collective national identity and security and the future of our children that we understand something of the life experience of all Americans.

The fact that teen pregnancy is three times as common among Latina girls as among white girls, or that Latinos ages 16-24 have the lowest percentage of high school graduates in the nation may sound like relatively insignificant stories, affecting only some “other” group of people. And, indeed, such stories continue to be unreported or underreported in the mainstream news media. Yet by underreporting such stories, we effectively make vulnerable children more vulnerable and more invisible. Worse, we risk raising generations of children who believe they deserve to be invisible.

But the role of media extends beyond the volume of reportage on multicultural issues. More fundamentally, our identities are largely informed, even validated by their media representation, or its absence. Ask any empowered adult and they will more than likely be able to recall a moment when, as a child, they saw themselves reflected in popular culture and how life changing that could be. For me it came when someone sang a song about my name in “West Side Story.” For others, it came when they saw someone who looked like them on Sesame Street or saw their story reflected in an afterschool TV movie. These same experiences occur for children of all backgrounds in the journalism they see and hear all around them.

Community change begins with an individual’s sense that it is possible to fully participate in how society is structured. Coming to know that our voice is heard and that our stories are told is one key to this process. Understanding that our voice is not only heard, but that it matters is a second key. The two together are part of the essence of democracy and are vitally important to communities’ ability to function in the best interests of their youngest and most vulnerable.