

# EDITOR'S PERSPECTIVE

## The Hartford Story



George White  
Assistant Director  
Center for Communications  
and Community

It all began with a presentation in February 2003 of a television news coverage audit in Hartford, Connecticut. The Center for Communications and Community presented the audit findings as part of its communications workshop for a coalition of nonprofits and community groups called Making Connections in Hartford (MCHartford).

MCHartford – like comparable coalitions in many other cities – works to strengthen disadvantaged communities under a program sponsored by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Operating in these Making Connections cities, the Center for Communications and Community (C3) seeks to improve local news coverage by building the communications capacity of community groups and nonprofits through interactive workshops, sessions that often involve journalists who attend to find new sources and to hear community-based perspectives on coverage.

News audits measure a range of matters – content topics, story placement, and sourcing among them. When C3 Director Frank Gilliam and I related some of the findings, members of MCHartford were stunned and outraged.

“What can we do about this?” one member asked.

I made a suggestion. I had no idea the coalition members would act so quickly. I didn’t know they had documented our visit and were making plans to take action until I saw a report in the March 2003 edition of *Making Connections in Hartford*, a quarterly that the coalition has published since 2001.

*“The workshop leaders...shared an analysis...of how the media covers Hartford and its neighborhoods,” the report said. “This analysis made it clear that spokespeople of Hartford’s minority community were underutilized ...*

*“Correcting this situation is not just the job of the news media, according to Gilliam and White. They asserted that it would take a concerted effort by the community to document...concerns through studying the media coverage and by informing media outlets when they make factual errors, demonstrate bias and lack diverse viewpoints. As a follow-up to this workshop, the participants agreed to act upon these suggestions. They have begun to form a media watch group*

*composed of a subset of people from this workshop as well as residents from the neighborhoods served by the Making Connections initiative."*

However, this task force did not limit itself to monitoring local media. Subsequently, with encouragement from C3, the newly christened Hartford Media Advocacy Task Force decided they would find new ways to tell their own stories about their activities and their community. It's the story of an expanding media voice from a group of community residents seeking change.

The effort was led by Michael Salius, the MCHartford communications consultant, with support from Debra Delgado, a Casey senior associate. Working with fellow task force member John Murphy, general manager of the University of Connecticut's WHUS Radio, the advocacy group in 2004 launched a monthly 30-minute interview program that focused on MCHartford and the two city communities served by the Making Connections program – Frog Hollow and Upper Albany.

The initial programs addressed topics such as the federal Earned Income Tax Credit for the working



An issue of MCHartford's quarterly.

poor, community health outreach activities, and a conference on asset building and the high cost of being poor in Hartford.

The high costs of the working poor would become

the topic of a feature in the fall 2004 edition of the ***Making Connections in Hartford*** quarterly. The article chronicled how MCHartford, prompted by a Casey-published essay on the high cost of poverty nationwide, produced a statewide study on the subject.

When the state study was completed, the article noted, MCHartford organized a conference featuring Casey Senior Vice President Ralph Smith to discuss the findings. The conference and the study were promoted through news releases and members of the media were invited.

As a result of the effort, local broadcasters and the ***Hartford Courant*** published reports on the subject. A front-page story in the ***Courant*** on August 8, 2004, said the following:

***"During the 1990s, income for the poorest 20 percent of families dropped more in Connecticut than in any other state, according to a new report by Connecticut Voices for***



Some members of the Making Connections in Hartford staff gather with some supporters.

***Children, another advocacy group that plans to push for a state income tax credit for the working poor...***

***“A state earned-income tax credit could ‘piggyback’ on the existing federal income tax credit for the working poor, advocates say. The credit would add up to 20 percent to a federal credit worth as much as \$4,200 to a taxpayer with more than one child in 2003. It would be a ‘refundable’ credit, meaning that a low-wage worker eligible for the maximum federal credit would get an \$840 check from the state, even if the worker had no state income-tax liability.”***

Reporting on the MCHartford study, the **Courant** noted that car insurance prices were higher in Hartford, Bridgeport, and New Haven “than in all suburban and rural areas of the state.”

In addition to the report on how MCHartford generated press coverage on the cost of poverty, the **Making Connections** quarterly heralded the next big media project by Hartford’s media advocacy task force – a website.

The Making Connections in Hartford

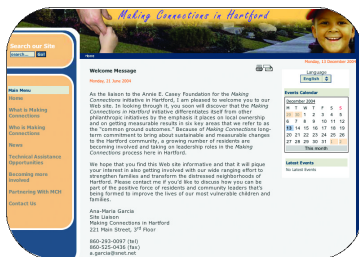
website – [www.mchartford.org](http://www.mchartford.org) – debuted in November 2004.

The website includes a news section containing reports from mainstream media on MCHartford, an archive of the **Making Connections in Hartford** quarterly, information on training programs for nonprofit managers, and details on how residents and organizations can become involved in the coalition’s programs and work groups.

The site also includes the following welcome from Ana-Maria Garcia, who leads MCHartford as site liaison.

***“We hope that you find this Web site informative and that it will pique your interest in also getting involved with our... effort to strengthen families and transform the distressed neighborhoods of Hartford. Please contact me if you’d like to discuss how you can be part of the positive force of residents and community leaders that’s being formed to improve the lives of our most vulnerable children and families.”***

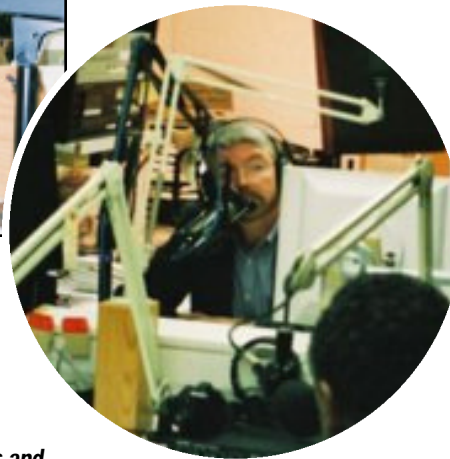
The next big media project spearheaded by the advocacy task force was also born of a need to



Making Connections in Hartford website.



Casey Foundation Senior Associate Debra Delgado (left) is interviewed on WHUS Radio. Radio interview involving Michael Williams and Marie Spivey (center), co-chairs of MCHartford's results steering committee.



Spivey and Williams being interviewed by WHUS Radio GM John Murphy.

strengthen communities. MCHartford had been searching for ways to generate more cooperation between the two communities it serves – the largely Latino Frog Hollow neighborhood and predominantly black Upper Albany.

The media advocacy task force decided to launch a newsletter that would cover the two communities and be staffed by residents from the two neighborhoods. Plans for the newsletter, dubbed **Voice for Change**, were also announced in an article in the *Making Connections in Hartford* quarterly.

***“Voice for Change,” said the article, “a community communications collaborative, started with the simple realization by Magdaly Font, Teresa Rosario and Timathea Taylor that residents of the Frog Hollow...and Upper Albany...neighborhoods face many of the same challenges and have many of the same opportunities to overcome them. This realization led them to the conclusion that residents from the two neighborhoods should join***

***forces and begin working together to improve conditions in both neighborhoods.”***

The article said **Voice for Change** hopes to counter “negative” coverage of the two communities.

**Voice for Change** was launched in December 2004 as a bilingual newsletter that also carries the Spanish translation, **Voz de Cambio**, as a co-title. It contains articles on health, the earned income tax credit, and information on how to get involved in MCHartford.

Now, the media advocacy task force is launching yet





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*continued*

another project – a monthly television program on Hartford Public Access TV. The program, also dubbed ***Voice for Change***, will include reports on events in Upper Albany and Frog Hollow, segments on resident involvement in community building, and spotlights on youth in the two communities. Trainees from middle schools and high schools will help produce the program.

Months before the launch of the ***Voice for Change*** newsletter and TV program, some local journalists with mainstream media told me that they would account for the fact that any community-based media would have an agenda. However, they welcomed the prospect of such news productions, noting that community-based media and media

monitoring groups can provide useful information and help keep mainstream media accountable.

Said Susan Campbell, a reporter and columnist for the ***Hartford Courant***: “I don’t mind having someone looking over my shoulder.”

Campbell also said she might get leads for stories or columns from such community-based news operations, events or neighborhood developments she might otherwise miss.

Communities can organize for change and bolster their efforts by telling their own story. That’s the Hartford story. ■



Mural on a Hartford street.