



COMMUNITY **NET**NEWS

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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S LETTER

Net Menders and Makers

The image of fishermen casting their nets, which is part of our new logotype for *Community NetNews*, speaks to the essential purpose of the Latino Coalition—to serve as net menders and makers.



We believe in fixing what doesn't work and in joining together to improve what does. By mending our nets, we ensure that fewer youth and families fall through the holes. By weaving new nets of collaborative service, we "catch more, help more and heal more."

The lead stories in this issue illustrate how two of our sub-grantees are translating those principles into action. The work of the New Dimension Coalition, bringing together grassroots groups from across the city of Hartford, demonstrates the power of net-making collaboration. And the work of Cloud and Fire Ministries, creating innovative programs to help incarcerated youth, shows how a net-mending spirit can move us to reach more young people in need.

Many of our other sub-grantees will be showcasing their own remarkable work during our Transforming Communities Conference, February 5-7. Information about the event is posted at www.latinocoalition.org.

We hope you will join us at the conference, to hear their inspiring stories in person, and to help us cast an even wider net in 2007 and beyond.

Richard Ramos
 Richard Ramos



Healing the Heart of Hartford

As she makes her daily round of home visits in Hartford's South End neighborhood, clinical therapist Nyrsa Segui often passes the graffiti-scarred corner of Park and Broad Streets, where she had lived as a child.

"Park Street is the spiritual heart of every Latino in Hartford," she says. "But this area was turning into a wasteland, a haven for drug-pushers and gangs."

The city of Hartford had already embarked on an ambitious program of urban renewal, but Segui and her colleagues in the New Dimension Coalition were intent on restoring more than bricks and mortar.

"For us, it's about transforming the lives of the people, not just the streets and the

buildings," she says.

Working with troubled teens and their families at Hartford Behavioral Health, a private nonprofit mental health agency near downtown Hartford, Segui knows the destructive influence of gangs first-hand.

"My own brothers were gang members," she says.

Segui and her coalition partners are determined to prevent other South End kids from going down that road.

"Gang prevention starts in the home," she says. "We have to build parenting skills and nourish these families, so their kids don't have to run the streets."

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Nyrsa Segui near the corner of Park and Broad Streets

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With a coalition-building sub-grant of \$20,000 from the Latino Coalition's Compassion Capital Fund "Equal Sides Everywhere" program, Segui's dream is becoming a reality. Under the leadership of Pastor Benjamin Santiago of Hartford's New Dimension Christian Center, representatives of Hartford's faith-based and community organizations are joining together to spearhead this city-wide gang prevention and intervention effort.

“When the drug dealers set up shop right across the street from the church, you can't just be thinking about the hereafter. You have to be thinking about the here and now.”

— Minister Cornell Lewis

“We're very excited about the outreach we're doing, and we're very grateful for the funding we received from the Latino Coalition to get it off the ground,” Pastor Santiago says.

While centered in the predominantly Latino South End neighborhood, that outreach has extended well beyond it. All grassroots groups working on the gang abatement issue in Hartford have been welcomed to the fold.

Minister Cornell Lewis of the North

End Church of Christ is a veteran anti-gang activist in Hartford's African American neighborhoods. He was among the first to sign on to the coalition, and he sees it as a promising new vehicle for building bridges among Hartford's diverse communities.

“I'm a firm believer in groups of people coming together to work for change,” Minister Lewis says. “And we clergy need to be more involved in doing this work. When the drug dealers set up shop right across the street from the church, you can't just be thinking about the hereafter. You have to be thinking about the here and now.”

Ivette Rivera-Dryer, Financial Aid Director of Manchester Community College, is another coalition member who understands the tough challenges facing inner-city teens. “We draw students from these neighborhoods and my job is to help them find the resources they need,” she says. “So I know the importance of getting a grant like this one from the Latino Coalition. It has been central to getting this coalition up and running.”

Carlos Espinosa of the Smart Neighborhood Initiative at Trinity College has also played a key role in developing the coalition. Trinity, an elite liberal arts college located in the South End, offers free Internet access and technology training to area residents through its Trinfo Internet Café, a community learning center which Espinosa heads.

“We're working with the coalition to develop a program that teaches kids both technology skills and critical thinking skills,” he says. “Our goal is to empower young people, by helping them discover practical ways to



Fernando Morales, the LC's technical assistance coordinator in Hartford, confers with Aida Santiago, program director for the New Dimension Coalition.

address issues like youth violence from their own point of view—using video, blogging, multi-media production, and other forms of technology.”

Hartford Mayor Eddie Perez, who helped develop the Smart Neighborhood project when he served as Trinity's director of community relations, is another staunch supporter of the New Dimension Coalition. Raised by a single mother on welfare, Perez came to Hartford from Puerto Rico in 1969, and the story of his rise from street kid to community activist to elected leader is a source of inspiration and great pride within the Latino community.

Praising the New Dimension Christian Center's history of success with both its prison ministry and its anti-gang youth ministry, the mayor has pledged the city's help “in developing a comprehensive and holistic approach to providing a better quality of life through the development of the New Dimension Coalition.” He has declared his own commitment to provide neighborhood families “with the tools and the supports they need to achieve a bright future.”

Now when Nyrsa Segui passes the corner of Park and Broad, she can see beyond the rundown buildings and, like the mayor, envision brighter days ahead.

“I want to come back here in 30 years and feel proud of what we did to bring people together,” she says. “Almost all of us in this coalition have full-time jobs, so we're really giving of ourselves to make this happen. We believe in it because we believe in the future. And these kids are our future.”



Carlos Espinosa, head of the Smart Neighborhood Initiative at Trinity College, is working with the New Dimension Coalition to develop a program that teaches both technology and critical thinking skills to local youth.

Making the Grade

With technical assistance from the LC, Cloud and Fire Ministries is tracking outcomes and extending its reach.

For special education teacher Melody Rossi, conditions at the middle school where she taught seemed to be going from bad to worse. Located in the North Hills section of Los Angeles' San Fernando Valley, the school had once been a model junior high, with a stable population base, high-performing students and ample resources.

"This whole part of the Valley used to be thought of as typical suburbia," Rossi says. "Then it got to be known as 'the gang corridor.' Things were getting so bad that our students were testing in the bottom two percent of the nation. With scores like that, how could they ever develop the skills they need for decent jobs and productive lives?"

In 1999, Rossi decided to try making a difference outside the classroom. Together with another teacher, Carole Walker, she began holding after-school club meetings at Centro Cristiano, a nearby church, where neighborhood kids could find safe alternatives to life on the streets.

In addition to tutoring and mentoring sessions, Rossi and Walker organized field trips and classes in spiritual development.

Rossi and Walker's Cloud and Fire Ministries, named for the pillar of cloud and pillar of fire that point the way out of the wilderness in the Book of Exodus, remained something of an ad hoc project until 2004, when a neighbor told Rossi about the work of the Latino Coalition and its Department of Labor-funded "Reclamando Nuestro Futuro" grant.

Rossi wrote a proposal to create Project LYDIA (Latino Youth Developing Intelligent Alternatives) and was awarded a \$60,000 sub-grant to initiate the program.

Now entering its third year as a sub-grantee, Cloud and Fire has grown into a professionally managed, multi-program organization, thanks in large measure to capacity-building assistance provided by the LC and operational improvements prompted by the implementation of Project LYDIA.

"The Latino Coalition took us to a



Vanessa Sanchez (center) and Emma Barajas (right), shown here at their high school graduation ceremony with Cloud and Fire executive director Melody Rossi, joined the organization's very first after-school program when they were middle school students. Today Emma is Cloud and Fire's youth coordinator and a Project LYDIA case manager. She plans to study child development in college, with the goal of eventually becoming a teacher.

whole new level," Rossi says. "It was almost like a makeover—like Pygmalion molding us into something better and much more solid."

The proposal that Rossi wrote to create Project LYDIA was her first attempt at grant-writing, but the step-by-step guidance she received in the course of preparing that proposal has continued to pay dividends for Cloud and Fire.

"The Latino Coalition's trainers really clarified the relationship between planning the program and writing the proposal," Rossi says. "By the time we were done, we had a much clearer picture of what we wanted to achieve and how to achieve it."

The following year, Rossi applied for a separate grant from the Department of Labor and was awarded \$75,000 to develop a "One-Stop Connection" job referral and placement center. Rossi and Cloud and Fire's administrator, Kelly Gerhart, credit LC consultants R. Paul Morales and Eve Berry with helping them



Cloud and Fire sponsors trips to national parks and other recreation sites for the participants in Project LYDIA.

put together the components of that winning proposal.

“Eve drew up an excellent roadmap for us to follow, and Paul really took us through the process step by step,” Rossi says. “They helped us understand the technicalities of what goes into a federal grant application. Before that, we had only worked through intermediaries like the Latino Coalition. But the technical assistance we got from Paul and Eve convinced us that we could do this on our own. They showed us how to answer specific questions and laid it all out for us precisely and clearly.”

As a result of this kind of expert coaching—along with targeted research and careful cultivation of prospective donors—Cloud and Fire has compiled an impressive record of grant procurement over the last two years.

“So far, every grant we’ve applied for has been approved,” Rossi says.

It isn’t just proposal-writing savvy that accounts for this success.

“What really helped us hasn’t been ‘grantsmanship’ per se, but understanding things like evaluation, outcomes and benchmarks,” Rossi says. “I think that’s what has set us apart from other grassroots groups competing for these grants. It’s another benefit of the training we got and the requirements imposed by the Latino Coalition’s sub-grant.”

As one example, Rossi cites the requirement that her organization’s case management load for Project LYDIA include 60% adjudicated youth.

“That was a challenge for us, since most of the kids who came to us were not adjudicated,” she says. “To get those numbers, we decided to develop an anger management program and take it into local youth detention camps. That project turned out to be so effective that it’s now our flagship program, and the California Endowment gave us a grant to expand it. Part of their grant was used to hire a professional evaluator—producing even better statistical evidence to back up what we’re doing.”

According to Rossi, another key factor in Cloud and Fire’s success has been the use of the ETO (Efforts to Outcomes) database, which the Latino Coalition supplies to all its “Reclamando Nuestro Futuro” sub-grantees.

“ETO truly raised the bar for us,” she says. “It’s very structured, and it pushed us to take a hard look at our programs and the correlating participation. It’s what helps us track the real progress our kids



At Camp Mendenhall, a youth detention facility in Lake Hughes, Calif., Cloud and Fire performs concerts and conducts classes in anger management.

are making, instead of merely guessing or describing it in general terms.”

Now government agencies are coming to Cloud and Fire, sending more referrals to the organization and soliciting its assistance in the delivery of services.

“Our work in the detention camps has led to close relationships with the Los Angeles County Probation Department and the County Office of Education, which is responsible for the education of incarcerated youth,” Rossi says. “In addition, we’ve become an accredited provider for the California Access to Recovery Effort (CARE), working with kids who are struggling to overcome substance abuse.”

Summing up the net effect of all these changes, Rossi points out that outcome measurement doesn’t just make a favorable impression on grantmakers. It causes her own staff to feel more positive about the work they’re doing.

“The more accurately we track outcomes, the better able we are to ensure that we’re offering a good product,” she says. “If something isn’t measurable, there’s a good chance we aren’t really meeting the needs of the kids. And just the process of thinking through how we measure our services has helped us focus on quality control. Doing all these things has given us more credibility with funders and our partner agencies, but it also makes us feel more confident that the work we’re doing will have a lasting impact.”

Poster Project

Posters conveying anti-gang, pro-family themes and produced by youth enrolled in the graphic arts programs of Latino Coalition sub-grantees will be on display during the LC’s Transforming Communities Conference, February 5-7, in Industry Hills, Calif. Creators of the best posters will receive cash prizes provided by contest sponsor Pinnacle Resources, LLC.

The winning artwork will also be featured at the Latino Coalition’s website and in future issues of *Community NetNews*.

For more information about the poster contest, contact Estela Padilla at Latino Coalition headquarters (EstelaP@latinocoalition.org).



Participants in the Youth Builders project of LC sub-grantee Victory Life learn computer graphics programs such as Adobe Photoshop and ImageReady, iMovie, and Keynote. “When their eyes light up and they realize they can make designs just like their favorite CD or magazine, it’s priceless,” says Jason Reyna, Youth Builders graphics instructor.

Getting Their Act Together

For grassroots groups that work with youth, peer-to-peer communication is an essential form of outreach. One of the most successful Latino-focused peer-to-peer programs has been developed by Northwest Family Services, a Latino Coalition sub-grantee in Portland, Ore.

The core of the program is a Spanish-language script called *Encuentros*. Told through a series of vignettes that simulate real-life situations, the peer-enacted drama combines words, music, mime and movement to show youngsters confronting issues of gang membership, drug use, and similar challenges.

A technology sub-grant from the LC's Compassion Capital Fund "Equal Sides Everywhere" project has enabled Northwest Family Services to buy new production tools and state-of-the-art equipment for staging *Encuentros* in and around Portland. These include a new video camera and projection gear as well as a portable strobe light system.

"As a result of all these high-tech improvements, we have a much more professional-looking production now, and that generates more excitement and more positive word-of-mouth in the community," says Carlos Romero, Latino youth education coordinator for Northwest Family Services. "Because of rising demand, we've almost doubled the number of shows we were able to put on this year, which means we're going into a lot more schools and reaching a lot more kids."

Another benefit has been a jump in the number of youngsters showing up for auditions, eager to join the on-stage troupe or help with production work behind the scenes.



"They learn teamwork, communication skills, public speaking and being open with others," says Romero. "It's a very effective method for reaching at-risk youth and getting them to deal with their frustrations and feelings in a non-threatening, non-violent manner."

For more information about *Encuentros* and other peer-enacted dramas created by Northwest Family Services, visit www.youthsolutions.info.

Good Food, Good Jobs

Coming soon to downtown Phoenix, Mi Nana's Tamales is both an eatery-on-wheels and a job-skills training center. It's part of Neighborhood Ministries' Jeremiah Project, an outreach and workforce development program supported by the Latino Coalition's "Reclamando Nuestro Futuro" grant.

To help bankroll the new tamale cart, youth participants in the Jeremiah Project have been collecting discarded cell phones which they turn in for cash. They also cater meals after the church services that are held every week at Neighborhood Ministries.

"Our goal is not just to raise money for the fast-food enterprise, but to teach the kids business skills, customer service, and how to handle money," says Manny Esparza, Neighborhood Ministries' job developer.

Esparza also oversees the Jeremiah Project's job placement program.

"Most of the kids who come to us have no idea how to present themselves to an employer, so we spend a lot of time walking them through the process," he says. "That includes learning how to fill out an application, how to write a résumé, how to dress,

and what to talk about when you go in for a meeting. In many cases, I'll drive them to the interview and wait for them outside. It lets them know someone really cares about them."

Esparza's own career path is an inspiration to the kids he mentors. His first job out of the army was as a cook at Jack-in-the-Box. A year later, he owned the restaurant. Eventually he went on to become the company's district manager for all of West Texas and Southern Arizona.

"I lived in the barrio, so I know what these kids go through," he says. "But even as a child, I was out selling gum and soft drinks to the workers in the fields. I was so busy working, I guess I never had time for gangs."

Esparza tries to communicate that same work ethic to the young people he mentors.

After retiring as training supervisor for KFC, he decided to become a full-time volunteer with

the Jeremiah Project. "I may not be getting paid for this, but it's still the most rewarding work I've ever done," he says.

For more information about the Jeremiah Project and Mi Nana's Tamales, visit www.neighborhoodministries.org.



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