

Community Connection Groups are intended to bring community residents together and to build social connectedness and social capital. The results demonstrate that these goals are indeed met by CCGs.

**Community Connection Group Leaders:
Helping to Build Social Connections
and Best Start Community
Partnerships**

Bonis, Leap, Franke
Submitted July, 2016

Introduction

The South Bay Center for Community Development supports the creation and continuation of Community Connection Groups in an effort to build relationships among residents and introduce them to the Best Start Community Partnerships. The Community Connection Groups (ROCS) are social groups formed by Resident Outreach Coordinators (ROCs). The groups are based on a common interest like knitting, walking, cooking, and so forth. Groups meet weekly, monthly, or bi-monthly and are facilitated by an identified leader of the group.

Best Start Community Partnerships exist in 14 communities throughout Los Angeles County and bring together parents and caregivers, residents, organizations, businesses, government institutions, and other stakeholders to collectively build a vision and develop strategies to create safe, healthy and supportive communities where young children and their families can thrive. Members of the Community Partnerships work together to improve a community's policies, resources, and services and to better connect residents to each other and to resources and services. To ensure that a community can continue to advocate for change once the initiative has ended, leadership and advocacy capacity is built through training and project-based learning.

The Community Connection Groups are an important way to bring community residents into the Best Start Community Partnership. A meeting of residents, organizations, businesses, and government institutions could be overwhelming without preparation. The CCGs offer a safe and welcoming space where residents can get to know one another in a smaller setting with people with similar interests, before they move to the larger and more diverse environment of the Community Partnership. Also, for individuals new to community activism and advocacy, the CCGs provide a gentle bridge from little involvement in the community to the engagement desired by Best Start. CCG members are informed of the monthly Best Start meetings and encouraged to attend. Those CCG representatives who attend the Best Start meetings then share information with colleagues who have not yet attended the meetings. In this way, knowledge of community issues, policies, resources, and services is being shared.

Given the unique role of Community Connection Groups in the Best Start Initiative, the South Bay Center for Community Development periodically evaluates the effectiveness of the groups. This report shares the results of four focus groups conducted in late 2015.

Methods

All four focus groups were conducted with leaders of Community Connection Groups; however, there were two separate focus areas—each area addressed by two groups.

The first focus area was on the experience of leading a CCG. The focus group sought to obtain information on the following:

- Leadership skills developed through facilitation of a CCG and through the support provided by training and monthly meetings;
- How support for CCG leaders could be improved; and
- How CCG leaders intend to apply their leadership skills in the community in the future.

A total of eighteen individuals provided feedback on these areas of interest through two focus groups. Figure 1 outlines the demographic breakdown of focus group participants who represented Bell, East LA, Panorama City, Bell Garden, Lancaster, Compton, Wilmington, Broadway/Manchester, Watts, and Gardena.

Figure 1. Participants in Focus Groups on the Experience of Leading a CCG

	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2
Total Participants	6	12
Women	6	12
Men	0	0
African American	1	2
Caucasian	0	0
Latino	5	10

The second focus area was on the leadership training and support. The two focus groups on this topic investigated more deeply the leadership development provided to CCG leaders. Participants were individuals who had taken the group leader training. There was some overlap in the individuals who participated in the two focus groups for CCG group leaders described above and in these two focus groups. The purpose of the focus groups was to obtain information to guide training design, e.g. what worked well and what could be better. Twenty-two individuals participated in these focus groups. Figure 2 provides information on focus group participants.

Figure 2. Participants in Focus Groups on Training Provided to CCG Leaders

	Focus Group 3	Focus Group 4
Total Participants	10	12
Women	9	12
Men	1	
African American	0	1
Caucasian	3	0
Latino	7	11

Through the two focus groups, the following areas were represented: Palmdale, Panorama City, Maywood, South El Monte, Long Beach, Broadway/Manchester, West Athens, Broadway/Manchester, Compton, Watts/Willowbrook, and Wilmington.

The four focus groups lasted between 1 ½ and 2 hours in length. They were carried out in English and Spanish simultaneously. The conversations were recorded with permission of participants. Notes were also taken during the focus group. Transcriptions from the recordings and notes from the sessions were coded and analyzed for themes. What emerged is a valuable account of the experiences of CCG leaders, strengths of the CCGs, and opportunities for improvement.

Findings

The Value of Community Connection Groups

There was overwhelming consensus among respondents that the Community Connection Groups are a positive experience for leaders and participants alike. First, the groups provide members an opportunity to **relieve stress and develop a support network**. Many participants find it difficult to take time for themselves, nor do they have trusted individuals close by who could listen to them. Listening without judgment is very valuable for stress relief but not an outlet easily found. One leader emphasized that she most liked convening her group because it offered a way to decrease stress:

What I like best about bringing people together is that it is a pretext for them to relieve their stress. We have two hours to forget about our problems and to dedicate to talking and laughing. We leave very motivated to continue our day to day life.

Another leader made a similar observation. She underscored that while the activity of the group was certainly important, of equal and perhaps greater value was the chance to connect with other adults as a way to relieve stress. She remarked as follows:

It was fun to meet—not just to do things but also to share. Someone would bring a stew and we would talk with each other. It was a great way to relieve stress. It was a moment for us now in the present. Currently, our group has become smaller and we have been meetings less frequently. It is sad for me. We used to have almost twenty people and now we are down to three. I try to tell my remaining colleagues that we can't just stop. It is important even for the three of us.

Her desire to keep the group going even with a small number of members demonstrates the great value that the group has had for her.

Another enjoyable aspect of group participation is **getting to know new people and learning from them**. The groups often become united and are described as a supportive family, as can be seen in the quote below:

Each person brings something and we learn from each other. I learn what is in the community. We can all become better people. We are not just a community group. We are like a fraternity and a family. We are getting to know each other. We don't put limits on what we will learn. We don't have an end goal. We are open to keep learning and doing good for the community.

In a separate anecdote, a participant recounted how her group helped to bridge cultural divides.

We went to a zoo and had a potluck. We had not done something like that before—something so intimate with our families. It was an incredible experience. We felt like a family. I did get tired but the kids were thrilled and it was nice to see the result for the families. I am from Mexico. Others were from El Salvador and Honduras. Life for Latino immigrants, wherever we are from, can be hard. We have become great friends.

In most groups, there is no hierarchy. While there is a leader, most try to create a climate where there is shared responsibility. This comfortable and supportive atmosphere is much appreciated and can lead to greater participation. One person explained that “it’s not just one person teaching. Everyone in the group helps. We are like family. We each share. We started with ten people and now have twenty.”

A third aspect of the Community Connection Groups that participants appreciate is the chance to **make a difference in their own life and in that of others**. Two individuals shared extensive accounts regarding their groups and the positive changes that the groups were bringing about for participants. In both cases, the groups focused on English language learning. The first group leader described the motivation of members for starting the group and what the group meant to her personally given her background.

I went to the leader training. When starting our group, we tried to find something that would satisfy us. We decided on English because often we might go to a clinic or other place and told to fill out a form. No one helps us. We get frustrated. We try to ask for help and no one helps us. Our ROC (Resident Outreach Coordinator) helped us find a volunteer who could help us start our group. I didn't go to school. I never learned how to read or write in Spanish. People sometimes made me feel less because I can't read or write. When asked to read something or fill out a form, I often would say that I forgot my glasses. I felt much shame. I dreamed to be able to learn. Now in my group I am learning English. My self-esteem is growing. All of this has helped me value myself. We can always do something when someone lends us a hand.

The second leader's account also demonstrates the value of the group for both her and other group members and underscores the empowerment that these groups make possible.

Our group is an English class. I thought we would have a small class but now we are more than ten, including moms who bring their babies in strollers. They come up to my apartment. It can get quite hot but everyone is still dedicated to meeting. We designed the class ourselves. We started with a needs assessment. We decided to focus first on the Pledge of Allegiance since many of us are part of committees at schools and they often start with the pledge. Our ROC helped with pronunciation. We felt satisfied that we could learn on our own. While a teacher would be wonderful, we too could teach one another. Now, even the person who could least speak in English feels comfortable leading the Pledge of Allegiance. I see lots of needs. I am learning as I prepare for the class. I look up vocabulary words. I see that as I learn and share things, so can others. My trust in others is growing and we are learning together.

These last two examples also show the power that Community Connection Groups can help build. The development of power and voice is another benefit of participation in these groups. Yet another great value is the development of leadership skills. These two areas of growth are of great significance and will be discussed in more detail. Figure 3 summarizes the benefits of participation in Community Connection Groups.

Figure 3. Benefits of Being Involved in a Community Connection Group

Relieve stress & build a social network	
Get to know new people & learn from them	
Make a difference in one's own life & in that of others	
Build more power & voice	
Develop leadership skills	

Power and Voice

The role of Community Connection Groups in **building power and voice** merits special attention. From the comments of focus group participants, it is evident that establishing and maintaining such groups is a successful strategy in identifying and supporting community leaders and activists. One woman shared that the experience of leading a group has prepared her for becoming more engaged in her community.

Having my own group and leading it has made me feel more empowered to get involved in other activities. I had been involved with the school on bullying but now I feel like I have something more give to parents.

Another person built on her statement, saying that “*being part of this (a CCG) encourages you to reach out at your church, school, or neighborhood. It helps us be friendlier and kinder.*”

Some participants had received negative comments and resistance from family and friends about their involvement in Community Connection Groups. As individuals experience the many benefits of group participation and as they become stronger themselves, they are more assertive, as demonstrated in this statement:

My husband often asks why I help others. Then, my neighbor says I am wasting my time at meetings because I have so much to do at home. I tell them all that yes, there is much to do at home, but there is also much to do in the community. I need to be at these meetings to learn.

Learning about resources, particularly through the Best Start meetings, has been an important source of power for participants. *“I like to learn as a leader and then communicate this to my family and friends,”* declared one woman. *“If I know about a program, I share this with others. I like to have information to be able to help others.”* Another individual specifically equated knowledge of resources with power. She explained her position as follows:

I feel with power to help other people. My daughter is proud of me. That motivates me to learn more about the community – what resources we have and what we don’t have. My friends ask me about schools, doctors, and clinics. I know where to find them. I feel like I have power.

She went on to share an anecdote about an opportunity that had presented itself to one of her friend’s children. Students in his class could go to Italy, but the cost was \$3,000 per family. This was much money for many in the class. She encouraged her friend to tell her son’s teacher to search the internet for funding sources. In the end, they received a \$50,000 grant from Google. Each family only had to pay \$1,500. The experience underscored for this group leader how much power even one person can have to make a difference. She closed her story with the following reflection: *“I helped my friend and she encouraged her son’s teacher, and now look at the result. We as parents with no power could inspire the school teacher.”*

In addition to growing power and voice in their community, some participants have found themselves with more power and voice in their homes. One woman shared a summary of a discussion that she had with group members on this topic. *“In my group we have talked about how we are more part of our homes now. We feel like we have a voice. We can participate more in our home.”*

Growth as a Leader

Through leading a group, individuals have learned various important skills. The most frequently cited skill developed was understanding people’s needs, and responding to them, as appropriate. This is not surprising, given that meeting new people and learning from them was identified as a benefit of Community Connection Groups. While getting to know people and learning from them may be a valuable personal benefit, a leader needs to know how to recognize and manage different interests and needs to advance the shared interests of the group. Leaders of Community Connection Groups have been developing the skills to become an empathic leader who is able to develop solid relationships with group members.

Empathy is a powerful, if sometimes undervalued, leadership skill. Anything a leader tries to do involves other people, and leaders don’t necessarily have to be followed. Connecting to others and their interests is far more effective in drawing people to work with a leader than

control and authority. A young woman explained how being on the receiving end of empathy in a Community Connection Group she had participated in motivated her to start her own group.

I was inspired that the leaders of my group showed lots of empathy. This is why I stayed in the group. This helped us feel more connected. I hope to start a group for young girls. I'm not much older than them, so I've had similar experiences. I think that I can be a good listener and offer them support. I will try to have empathy too.

Empathy involves sensing other people's feelings and emotions, and taking a genuine interest in them and their concerns. Empathetic leaders must also be good listeners and nonjudgmental. Another participant described how she became a better listener, and in this way has been able to be more understanding and supportive of members of her group. She noted the following:

I learned to be more open and understanding to each individual situation. I learned to probe and just listen, so I could better understand people. Sometimes people find going to a club and talking to be a way to vent. You have to learn not to judge one another.

A different person recounted how she intentionally has worked on connecting with members of her group.

I have realized that I have to learn about each person individually. I need to be patient. Some people are harder to deal with. I have grown much in a year and a half. We have become very close in my group. One day a month we go out to lunch. This is separate from our group meetings. It is little things like this that makes people feel part of a group.

Yet another leader described how taking the time to understand another, and honestly sharing about one's self, can lead to more authentic and productive relationships.

Leadership is lots of things. I learned how to understand others. For example, I now know what to do if I meet someone new. I feel more comfortable opening up to them, listening to their needs, and being more honest in my approach—more honest in explaining what I can and can't do. I won't say I will do something and then not do it. These are all important when you want to develop a relationship with someone.

These examples illustrate that leaders are learning how to better enter the world of another and understand the way they feel. This is an important starting point for a relationship, and for joint work. "Empathy is at the heart of real rationality," writes linguist George Lakoff. When people feel understood, they can connect to values and a sense of justice and from there engage in action.

Another leadership trait that was evident among participants was **humility**. As with empathy, humility has not traditionally been a trait associated with effective leadership, although

recent scholarship is changing this perception. Humble leaders are more likely to have an accurate view of self, recognize followers' strengths and achievements, lead by example, work together for the collective good, show mutual respect and fairness, and engage in mentoring and coaching. Three individuals provided thoughtful reflections on humility. The first group leader recognized that she needed her followers and had to support their growth. She admitted that

I wouldn't have a group without my members. I give them tasks, such as putting out supplies like needle and thread. I change the person responsible for a task each week. This helps them feel ownership for the group—to know that they are doing something for the group.

The second specifically called out the need for a leader to be humble, and in this way learn from one another and work collectively for the group's benefit.

Being a leader doesn't mean that I am more than others. I want everyone in my group to grow and be leaders just as I am growing. I need to be humble. When we have power we can't be thinking that we know more. We are all learning from one another. Each day I learn and become stronger, and I transmit this to my colleagues in my group. And they do the same for me. Even now, while I am here (in the focus group), I have ten colleagues at the Best Start meeting. I know they will share with me what they learn when we are together again, and I will tell them what we discussed today. This information will help us as a group and individually.

And lastly, the third leader expanded on the idea that the more effective leaders don't consider themselves to be better than their peers, and instead try to draw out the strengths of all in the group.

Before, I used to think that the leader was the most important person in the group and that the leader would tell everyone what to do. I now see that we are all important. The only thing a good leader does is attract more people to the work but they are not more important. A good leader helps find the good that is hidden in other people and helps them take it out so they too can be a leader and make a difference.

The style of leadership being developed through the Community Connection Groups is one that prioritizes empathy and humility over authority and control. The approach is validated by recent research on leadership. In his best-selling book on teambuilding, *Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't*, Simon Sinek proposes the idea that leadership has little to do with authority, management acumen or even being in charge. True leadership, according to Sinek, is about empowering others to achieve things they didn't think possible. Empathy is the most important instrument in a leader's toolbox, Sinek believes. Leadership is about creating a "circle of safety," a culture that leads people to feel protected and free from danger inside the group. That, in turn, allows them to focus their time and energy on

advancing the interests of the group and taking advantage of opportunities that benefit the collective.

Support for Leaders

SBCC offered CCG leaders a leadership training session and monthly meetings for leaders as support for their work. At the time the focus groups were held, nearly a year had passed since some individuals had taken the leadership training session. This passage of time, however, did not affect the ability of participants to share their views on the training. Also at the time of the focus groups, very few individuals had taken part in the monthly meetings for CCG leaders. It must be recognized that the meetings for CCG leaders had begun shortly before the focus groups were held. As a result, fewer participants were able to comment on the monthly meetings.

An additional source of support for CCG leaders are the Resident Outreach Coordinators. The ROCs are essential in building relationships in the community to bring more individuals into Community Connection Groups and the Best Start Partnership. They also provide ongoing support for leaders and their groups, including transportation, coaching when planning and carrying out meetings, and so forth.

Leadership Training

Benefits of Training

Participants entered the leadership training with different levels of prior knowledge and experience. Those with less leadership experience saw the training as an opportunity for personal growth. Some of their expectations of the training included the following:

- Getting to know parents and members of the community;
- Learning how to better interact with and motivate others; and
- Learning about ways to see the needs of the community and better help the community.

For those who already had some experience or training in leadership, the opportunity provided a chance to revisit and reinforce concepts, as explained in the following quote:

I did not learn anything new. Instead, it (the training) was repetition and rebuilding of skills I had. However, I enjoyed it and found it refreshing. It reminded me that it is OK to go out there and start something that is for the community and that anyone can be a leader. We are doing something good. We can make the world a better place. It starts with us. A little group of people can make change.

This quote also demonstrates that the training motivated participants to start their work in the community. This was true for both experienced and new community leaders. A woman new to leading a group enthusiastically recounted her discovery that anyone can be a leader in the community: *“I used to see leaders from afar. Now I can see that I too am a leader.”*

The following are areas in which participants experienced the most growth during the training:

- Relationship building;
- Communication;
- Creating meeting agendas; and
- Managing conflict and different personalities.

Learning about strategies that can help build relationships, such as sharing something about yourself when facilitating a discussion and using icebreakers and games, was the most frequently cited benefit of the training. One person recounted how her approach changed as a result of the training:

Before, I would just go to a room and say hi and I would quickly forget people’s names. Learning about the icebreaker helped. Now, if I get together a group of people and I don’t know their names, this is a great way for them to interact.

Another individual also found the icebreakers to be a good way to bring people together and to make them feel more comfortable. She made this observation:

Lots of times, people come to a meeting and don’t know each other. The icebreakers give us a chance to get to know each other and build trust. I also liked them because they can be fun and people enjoy them. Icebreakers can be a nice distraction. People might have problems at home and preoccupations. When they come to the group and engage with others, they can forget about their problems for a little while.

Someone else was introduced to icebreakers during her training, and then she quickly had the opportunity to see the difference that they can make for a group. She described her experience as follows:

I was fascinated by the icebreakers. They can help change attitudes. Activities also are easier after an icebreaker. I got to be a leader of an icebreaker at an event. I was shocked to see what it did to help people overcome shyness. I will now always have icebreakers in my group.

Communication was the second most often noted benefit of the leadership training. In particular, individuals appreciated learning about how to more consciously choose their words and how to speak in front of others. Communication was considered particularly important as

individuals became more involved in activities of Best Start, as one woman stated in the following quote:

Now that I am part of Best Start, I go to homes of families and talk to them so communicating better is important. I learned to slow down in all of my communication—in meetings and by phone or email.

Another person shared how she became more confident talking to different audiences.

I personally learned how to talk to the community—not to be afraid if I am talking to a woman, child, or man, not to be afraid if they are of a different (race or ethnicity). I learned to be able to talk with confidence and without dread.

The third benefit of the training raised by several participants involved **creating meeting agendas**. Individuals realized that a well-designed agenda can help a meeting run more smoothly and lead to desired results. One person admitted that she had not noticed how important an agenda was in the past. She described her own change in attitude as follows:

I used to think that it was so easy to create an agenda but we learned all that goes into it. We have to think about the date, time, who opens the meeting, who closes it, how much time to have for certain topics, and many other elements. We learned how to put an agenda together step by step. Now I feel like I can put together a solid agenda. I know how to organize topics and how to involve people. All of this is important so that we can move forward in the meeting.

Others recounted additional advantages of creating an agenda, like anticipating problems and reducing their own workload. For example, one person noted that “*by creating an agenda, we can see where we might run into problems in a meeting and we can make adjustments.*” Someone else pointed out that “*we don’t have to carry the whole meeting. I used to think that a leader has to be responsible for everything. By learning to create an agenda, I learned that I can reach out to others to help plan and carry out parts of the meeting.*”

As they learned about all that has to go into planning a meeting, individuals thought about how they tended to behave in meetings, and how they would like to be treated when they facilitate meetings. One participant’s comments resonated strongly with the group:

I learned how to better value the time of people who host meetings. Sometimes we go to meetings and don’t pay much attention. We might be busy thinking about our “telenovela” or others things going on in our life. Now we see how much effort goes into planning a good meeting. It is important to pay attention and respect the facilitator.

The fourth most common benefit identified of the training was learning how to **manage different personalities and resolve conflict**. The training offered knowledge and strategies that participants felt they could use readily. One person recognized that when it comes to conflict,

they have not always had the best approach but the training helped change that: *“I can be like a bull in a china shop when there is conflict. The training gave me good ideas on how to react.”* Another person took the training during the middle of a challenge in her group, and she found what she learned to be immediately applicable. She recounted her experience in the following way:

My group started working on a project and we ran into some difficulty. I had my training right around that time. During the training, I kept in mind our project and how my colleagues are. Through the training, I saw ways that I could better work with my colleagues avoid that situation in the future.

Learning about different personality types was also helpful because it enabled people to be more patient and respectful of others. One individual left her training feeling like she would be better able to make all people feel welcome in her group. She said, *“I realize that all people are unique and that while we may have differences, we need to treat everyone well and listen to them. This will help them feel part of the group.”* A different person appreciated learning about different personality types because many people in her group bring with them problems from home. *“By learning how to talk to and deal with different people, she noted, “I can better connect with them and help them. This will make them feel better in our space and make our group stronger.”*

Strengths of the Training

From these comments, it is evident that the leadership training was considered to be extremely beneficial by participants. While the topics covered were helpful, the delivery style was also very important. The mixture of lecture, hands-on practice, and interaction with one another was considered the most optimal approach for the training. Role play was particularly appreciated, as evident in this comment:

It was very helpful to role play certain circumstances that might be uncomfortable in a group, like when someone talks to much, or has a very different opinion from the rest, or doesn't want to participate. We learned how to handle such situations in a professional and kind way.

Role play was valuable not only because it gave an opportunity for practice, but because they were very realistic and encouraged individuals to face challenges in a safe setting. One participant remembered how difficult yet rewarding the role plays could be.

The role plays were very helpful in our development. Many of us got red and trembled during the role plays because it felt so real. Some of us didn't know how to express ourselves at first. In time, we began to feel more comfortable and we started having fun expressing ourselves. It was a great way to learn what we would have to do in our groups.

The facilitator also made a significant difference to the quality of the training sessions. When facilitators were positive and demonstrated through their words, actions, and dress that they were happy to be present for the training, this transferred to participants and they were more motivated to engage in the training. Most focus group respondents also felt that their facilitators did their best to cover the various topics. The experience of the training, as noted above, led participants to have greater respect for facilitators.

Opportunities for Improvement in the Training Sessions

While there was overall great satisfaction with the content and delivery style of the leadership training, respondents also shared various thoughtful and creative ideas for making the training even more effective. Their comments related to content, and logistics and delivery.

Recommendations related to content include the following:

- Creating rules to guide the group and foster a positive yet focused environment.
- Public speaking, including managing emotions before speaking in public.
- Assertive communication.
- More information on conflict resolution.
- More information on icebreakers (e.g., icebreakers of different lengths, for different purposes).
- Internet research on the topic of interest of the Community Connection Group.
- Conducting a needs assessment of community needs and interests (so that the Community Connection Group doesn't duplicate other programs in the community).
- Making flyers.
- Strategies for retaining participants in a group and maintaining excitement in the group.
- Sensitivity training for individuals with disabilities.
- Evaluation methods for obtaining feedback on improving the groups.

Then, suggestions for logistics and delivery are as follows:

- Be careful with the pace of sessions; some facilitators covered topics too quickly for participants to really capture and process all of the information.
- Take into account that it can take some time for people to warm up to the class space and feel comfortable talking and participating.
- Offer the course at different times of the day to make it more accessible for individuals who work, e.g. in the afternoon not only the morning, and in different locations.
- Have the session be longer, perhaps offering three days of study and a fourth day of presentation and application of what was learned.
- Offer training opportunities more frequently, maybe every three or six months (several participants had taken the session a year before the focus group and felt that they needed more training and tools).

- Invite community leaders to share their experiences.

Monthly Meeting for Community Connection Group Leaders

An additional source of support for Community Connection Group leaders introduced in Fall 2015 was the monthly meeting of leaders. In this space, leaders could exchange best practices and discuss how to overcome challenges. At the time that the focus groups were held, only one or two monthly meetings had been conducted. The majority of participants had not heard of the monthly meetings, nor participated. However, in reviewing the opportunities for improvement that were identified for the leadership training, it is evident that monthly meetings could indeed be a strategy to meet some of the additional development needs that individuals noted.

In one focus group, before the topic of monthly meetings was raised, a woman shared her desire to stay in touch with other leaders in the following statement:

It would be great if we could continue meeting to share ideas and see how things are going. (Another focus group participant) and I haven't seen each other since the training. It would be wonderful to come back together and to share our experiences. Many of us work alone and being together could help us better connect to the purpose of Best Start and to our role in motivating more people to be a part of this.

After she made this comment, another person in the focus group who has attended a monthly meeting told the group about her experience. All focus group participants looked upon the meetings favorably and hoped to attend in the near future.

The few people who had attended a monthly meeting for Community Connection Group leaders considered them to be very useful. One woman expressed her joy at making a connection with another group:

We all took something from our group. I liked that I met other people. My group focuses on acrylic nails. We met a group that does nail painting. We have decided to get together so they can teach us how to decorate nails and we will show them how to put on acrylic nails. It was so wonderful to see and celebrate how much talent we have in our community. Sometimes we have someone around the corner who could teach us something and we don't know.

This is an example of the networking and learning that is possible through the monthly meetings. The practice is a promising one; future focus groups may be able to provide more information on their effectiveness.

Resident Outreach Coordinators

CCG leaders are extremely satisfied with their ROCs, many of whom have shown themselves to be accessible and supportive in numerous ways. One participant's comment gives a good demonstration of the distinct ways that a ROC assists their group.

Our ROC supports us so much. She is always available to help us. She calls me if I don't call her. She tries to be at each English class in case we need help. I don't drive so she takes me places to pick up materials. Several of us in the group don't drive, so she helps them also. Then, she also gives us ideas for our group. We wouldn't be as effective as we are without her.

Another individual also described her ROC as being very involved in the group.

Our ROC comes to my house and those of the others each week. She keeps us informed. She also goes to our parties. She is very integrated.

In not every case, however, was the ROC as present in the activities of the group as indicated by these quotes. Still, in these instances, the ROC provided support behind the scenes to help make the meetings productive, such as providing food and transportation, and being available if needed.

One issue regarding ROCs generated much discussion. Currently, when community members express interest in the work of Best Start or the Community Connection Groups, the leaders have to contact the ROC, who then gets in touch the community member to give them information. In this process, follow up may not go as smoothly or community members might lose interest. Many felt that having an office or even just "consistent visiting hours" for the ROC at a set location would do much to facilitate and make more effective the outreach process.

Participation in Best Start Community Partnerships

While one important purpose of Community Connection Groups is to build relationships among members of a community, another is to connect those individuals to the Community Partnerships of the Best Start Initiative. Nearly all participants in the focus groups actively participated in the monthly Best Start Community Partnership meetings. Some were also involved in special leadership and advisory groups of Best Start. The few who had not yet participated in Best Start Community Partnership meetings cited the time of the meeting as a challenge.

Benefits of Being Involved in Best Start Community Partnerships

The most frequently cited benefit of being involved in a Best Start Community Partnership was learning about topics that affect children and families and learning about community resources. "*Best Start meetings are very important,*" declared a participant. "*Each*

one teaches something different.” Attending Best Start Community Partnership meetings gave participants access to information that was of great value to themselves and others. One woman provided a powerful testament to the significance of the Community Partnership meetings when she drew a sharp distinction between those who attend the meetings and those who don't:

If you are not in (Best Start), you are out. When you are in, you can become informed and help make decisions. You can share what your group and community needs, and learn about what is available. I leave everything I have to do at home because I like to go to the meetings. I recommend to all of my friends that they should go (to Best Start meetings) so they can be a part of it.

Focus group participants gave various examples of the topics that they learned about through participation in Community Partnership meetings that strongly resonated with them. For example, the session on brain development was raised in two focus groups as being particularly influential. One woman shared the following:

My behavior with my children has started to change since I began attending Best Start. They offer information on important topics. We recently discussed development of the brain. It was fascinating. I wish we had had more time to talk about it.

Another talked about what she learned about reading nutrition labels. She made this remark:

I now know that many juices we think are healthy really are not. I used to drink juices that said they had vitamins, but after I learned to read nutrition labels, I saw that they had lots of sugar. I am now more careful about what I drink and what I give to my kids to drink.

The information that participants learned about was of benefit not only to themselves but also to family and friends, and many eagerly shared what they learned at Best Start Community Partnership meetings with others. One individual offered numerous examples of instances where she could use what she learned at a meeting, or could pass along the information to others who needed it:

One time, we heard from a group that helps teen parents. From them we learned a lot that we can share with other parents (in our community) so they can support their kids and motivate them to learn, instead of chastising them. In another meeting, I learned about bullying, and that helped me become active about the issue at my child's school. At another time, I heard about free diapers for teen moms, and I passed along that information. I did the same with information about free turkeys. To be connected with Best Start gives you so much information.

While the information obtained was identified as the most valuable aspect of the Community Partnership meetings, it must be noted that some respondents also pointed out that the meetings offered an opportunity to meet others in the community. One woman new to Los Angeles has found the meetings to be particularly helpful. She pointed out that *“the meetings are a great way to meet people. I enjoy coming to the meetings and interacting with others.”*

What Has Worked Well in the Best Start Community Partnership Meetings

Efforts to make community residents feel more engaged in the Best Start Community Partnership meetings have been appreciated by many. Several focus group respondents indicated that they were part of committees that assist with preparation for Best Start meetings. Others shared examples of how they were encouraged to provide feedback on the meetings—and how some of their suggestions were taken into consideration. Through steps such as these, Best Start Community Partnerships are becoming a more welcoming place for residents.

One woman reflected on how encouraging residents to have a more active leadership role in the Best Start Community Partnership might motivate other residents to join. She expressed the following:

When they (Best Start) ask residents to take more leadership in the meeting and to take on roles, it can help others be more interested in the meetings. Individuals might think that ‘My friend will be leading this meeting. She will use words that work for me.’

Participants also gave other suggestions that might improve resident engagement, including less focus on presentations and more on interactive discussions, and the use of raffles as incentives for participation. It is evident in several sites that residents feel comfortable sharing ideas to improve the meetings, and that these ideas are given serious consideration. Trust and greater collaboration seems to be developing between residents and individuals in charge of the Best Start Community Partnership meetings. This development was seen optimistically by residents and has had positive outcomes, as can be seen in this quote.

I like that Best Start (facilitators) take my suggestions into account. I once proposed a raffle as an incentive, and they did it. Then, I suggested that people who go to meetings every month should get something at the end of the year so they could feel appreciated. This was done also. I feel that it’s important for me to attend meetings where I can speak on behalf of the community. I usually go to the meeting before the main Best Start meeting because I can share my ideas there to improve the meetings.

What Could be Better in the Best Start Community Partnership Meetings

While some residents noted increased opportunities for participation in leadership activities of Best Start Community Partnerships, as well as processes for providing feedback that

is then acted upon, not all participants reported observing the same at their Best Start site. The Best Start Initiative is vast, extending throughout Los Angeles County, and it is to be expected that practices may vary across sites¹. However, it is important to ensure implementation across sites of those strategies that have worked well.

When asked about how to improve Community Partnership meetings, the comments had more to do with logistics and delivery style, as opposed to content. For example, time of meetings was a frequently raised issue. Many felt that the weekday morning meetings limited the participation of individuals who work, including fathers. Some felt that there should be alternatives to this date and time, or other means by which to reach out to residents who cannot attend meetings during the workday.

Another matter raised was the amount of time dedicated to certain topics. There are some subjects that cannot be easily addressed and processed in a two-hour time period. The session on brain development was given as an example. Many participants were very intrigued by the topic, but given its complexity and vastness, there was only so much that facilitators could share in a two-hour period, and only so much the audience could absorb. Many would have welcomed a follow-up session on the topic.

In terms of delivery style, a more interactive approach is desired. The format for Best Start meetings often involves presentations, with questions taken if time permits. Participants would like more opportunity for interaction and dialogue with one another, such as through small group activities. In this way, participants could engage more deeply with the material, processing the information with others and practicing application.

Small group activities could also help people get to know one another more. This is another area of potential improvement. Currently, individuals may meet people at their table but they may not interact with other attendees of the meeting. A process by which individuals would be encouraged to meet and work with new people is desired.

A final area of improvement suggested had to do with language. While there is effective translation provided at meetings, some Spanish-speakers described a gap in communication that could be tied to cultural sensitivity, word choice, and complexity of concepts. An example that one person gave was a question from a facilitator asking residents about concerns they had about their community. When residents started talking about challenges they faced at their children's school or paying their rent, it was made clear that these were not the responses that the facilitator was looking for. Incidents like these leave Spanish-speakers feeling uncomfortable and

¹ This focus group uncovered some differences across Best Start sites that could be systematically explored through other methods, such as a survey administered at each site. Any survey conducted should ask about communication. For example, it is possible that a site does indeed have a leadership committee that residents could be a part of, but that residents are not aware of the committee due to lack of communication.

disconnected. Then, seeking clarification on questions is not something that many are comfortable doing because of shyness and a deference for authority. These comments seem to indicate that engaging Spanish-speakers involves more than offering direct translation. It is necessary to think about presenting topics and asking questions in a culturally sensitive manner and fostering a climate where Spanish-speakers feel comfortable raising questions and concerns².

Conclusion

Community Connection Groups are intended to bring community residents together and to build social connectedness and social capital. The results of the four focus groups demonstrate that these goals are indeed met by CCGs. Participants reported expanding their social network; developing their power, voice, and leadership skills, and learning about resources in their community, among other outcomes.

The perspective offered by these focus group participants was from the vantage point of the leaders of the CCGs. As such, they were also able to comment on the training and support that they received to assume a position of leadership. Overall, a solid leadership development program and plan is in place through the South Bay Center for Community Development. The suggestions for enhancement offered by respondents will only help make the training and support more effective.

Recommendations for improvement were also shared regarding the Best Start Community Partnership meetings. The relationship between the Community Connection Groups and Best Start is vital given that CCGs are an important strategy in building a base of residents for the Best Start Initiative. The ideas offered may help make stronger this significant relationship. As community members become more involved Community Connection Groups,

² It needs to be noted that when the comments on language came up in one focus group, they resonated strongly with Latino participants but not with African American participants. Some respondents came from Best Start Partnerships that included both Latino and African American participants. The African Americans in the focus group had difficulty understanding the challenge around language expressed by their Latino colleagues, and expressed some irritation. They felt that direct translation and the chance to ask questions should have been enough. The irritation was not lost on the Latino participants in the focus group. In fact, at the end of the focus group some Latino participants expressed concern that their comments were not taken well by their African American colleagues. The exchange in the focus group seems to underscore a need for more cultural sensitivity on the part of all involved in Best Start.

and through these become more involved in the Best Start Community Partnerships, they will be better able to advocate for improved policies, resources, and services for their communities.