#253 Making Connections



The Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department (TPCHD) noticed a misalignment in the local mental health arena: even though the mental health of men and boys of color is related to experiences and trauma at the community level, interventions generally focus on individual-level behavior change. The 253 Making Connections Initiative (MCI) came together to change how this issue is addressed and focus on preventing mental health challenges and community trauma from occurring in the first place. The natural question raised by grassroots organizations involved in the MCI coalition was, "How can we promote wellbeing for men and boys of color by strengthening resilience?"

As the backbone organization for MCI, TPCHD is well-versed in the science behind mental health and wellbeing. For example, staff effortlessly recite research drawing connections between scarce employment opportunities and mental distress. However, their approach to addressing their community's mental health inequities relies less on academic research and more on elevating community wisdom. That's why MCI has provided incentives to nearly 1,000community members totaling over $26,000 to hear about their experiences with mental health. The expertise of their community partners comes from years of addressing basic needs like housing and food insecurity in the community. For MCI, supporting community wellbeing requires more than traditional solutions to meeting basic needs—like connecting individuals to food banks. Instead, MCI unpacks the origins of these inequities. This is where healing happens. And as MCI leadership asserts, healing is possible because "our grassroots community partners continue to hold up more than half of the sky."

To create opportunities for grassroots organizations to address their communities' needs most effectively, MCI recognized the role that funding decisions play. TPCHD is unflinching in its acknowledgement of the idea that the community knows best—that's why participatory budgeting as a strategy made perfect sense. Participatory budgeting is the process of community members coming together to make decisions about how to allocate resources. Through this process, grassroots organizations have been funded to continue and expand their impactful work. Before MCI convened, Hilltop Urban Gardens (HUG) addressed the ancestral trauma of slavery by reconnecting black residents with the healing practices of cultivating food. Not only were they able to address access to healthy food by growing 1,000 pounds of fresh produce, they also created space for neighbors to strengthen their cultural bonds.

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Through participatory budgeting, HUG—along with six other grassroots organizations serving communities of color—vote every year on how to allocate $100,000 to advance community

wellbeing. With its institutional power to pool resources and its legitimacy in the public eye,TPCHD funds community projects that address mental wellbeing in upstream and culturally-relevant ways. Since receiving MCI funding, HUG's food production is up to 4,000 pounds, foodthat is redistributed to community members in exchange for their commitment to share their talent, treasure or time with other community members or with HUG. MCI shares that "this grant has built capacity among people of color-led grassroots organizations resulting in greater ability of MCI partners to collaborate, obtain new grants, and implement activities that promote mental wellbeing." These include:

- Tacoma Urban League (TUL), which receives funding through participatory budgeting in recognition of the impact their programming has on the wellbeing for youth of color. Currently, 54 young men receive mentoring through TUL's Male Improvement Program.
- Centro Latino (CL), which receives funding through participatory budgeting to provide space for grassroots community organizations to gather, plan, and organize.
- Consultants for Indian Progress (CIP), which receives funding through participatory budgeting to support their All My Relations program for indigenous youth and to advance their innovative Paddles Up, Families Strong curriculum that ties urban natives to deep cultural practices such as the Tribal Canoe Journey.
- La Resistencia (Latino Advocacy, LLC), which receives funding through participatory budgeting to visit, communicate and advocate for immigrants who are detained at the Northwest Detention Center so that they can remember that they, "Are not Alone".
- Canoe Journey Herbalists (CJH), which receives funding through participatory budgeting to continue their First Foods and Medicines project that provides the community with natural herbs and healing balms and tonics.
- API Chaya, which does not receive funding but is a member of the coalition to prevent domestic violence and is helping to address trauma within our communities through skill-building and relationship-building.

The 253 Making Connections Coalition has been able to successfully leverage the momentum of the national Making Connections initiative to support community-driven strategies for the mental health and wellbeing of the community in Tacoma.