Male Engagement Network: Men Making Connections



Making Connections in Boston starts with a common belief held by all project partners: that community conditions affect mental health and wellbeing. This is the driving force behind community development corporations (CDCs), nonprofits that focus on community improvement ranging from after-school programs to affordable housing. In Boston, a history of structural racism has resulted in underfunded schools, inadequate housing, and other community conditions that generate trauma for men of color. A report commissioned by Boston's Local Initiatives Support Coalition (LISC) demonstrated that up to one-third of men in the organization's area of interest experience 15 or more days a month of impaired functioning due to anxiety, sadness, or stress. The connection between these mental health outcomes and community conditions is clear. Since 2016, LISC has convened the Boston Making Connections coalition to promote mental wellbeing for men of color and their families.

As a national organization with offices in over 30 cities across the country, LISC supports CDCs to better meet the needs of the neighborhoods they serve. Aptly named the Male Engagement Network (MEN), the Boston coalition brings together CDCs that have demonstrated long-term commitments to the communities they serve, a fact that helps build trust and support from residents. Nuestra Comunidad, Codman Square, and Mattapan ABCD are three of the original community-led organizations that have brought on additional partners to be a part of this growing network. Beyond providing housing and social services, CDCs act as neighborhood conveners, creating spaces for community members to share their experiences and identify solutions they want to see, and MEN brings CDCs together to align community projects toward shared goals. This diversity of partners and resources helps make real gains in health and wellbeing possible and builds momentum for community change.

A focus of MEN has been resident leadership, specifically drawing on the experiences and leadership of men of color age 25 to 55 who are disproportionately impacted by community conditions that contribute to trauma and other stress factors. The CDCs convene a roundtable of ‘Champions,’ men in the community that don't just receive services, but proactively discuss what they and their communities need and seek community change. In monthly meetings, Champions explore the central elements that they have identified for achieving wellbeing: stable housing, financial health, and social connections that support mental health and wellbeing. The benefit of a collaborative network like MEN is the efforts of Champions from different neighborhoods can be connected. Local resident Champions within the CDCs aren't the only ones involved in these dialogues—so are men of color participating in community

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partners' programs like those of 365Dads, Fathers Uplift, and Breakfast IV Brothers—all organizations that address the individual and structural barriers that men experience in raising a family, while encouraging them to act as change agents within their community. These spaces support men as they build parenting skills, connect with peers and resources, and simultaneously serve as a forum for MEN to channel residents' voices into actionable change. MEN partners advocate for economic and housing stability while focusing on the significance of social connections as a major driver of mental wellbeing. In the summer of 2018, the power of social connections was on full display: over 400 community members participated in the annual Fatherhood Grill Off, a time to build community, share recipes, and spend time outside. This same collective joy can be seen every second Saturday at Breakfast IV Brothers, where men of color come together to celebrate fellowship and reflect on the strengths and efforts of their community. These community organizations have expertise in bringing residents together, exemplifying the importance of social support. The final piece of the puzzle is documenting the impact of these efforts. Vital Village, yet another trusted community partner, serves as MEN's strategic planner and evaluator. By answering the question "what is the effect of these community projects?" the Boston coalition is able to continue championing wellbeing for men of color in their city