

## DENVER SOCIAL NETWORK PARTNERSHIP

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**What Are Social Networks?** Social networks are the interconnections between people who rely on each other for the exchange of ideas, resources and information. Representing interwoven sets of relationships among many different groups, social networks are a powerful way to help individuals and families leverage common ties in order to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes.

As the term “social networks” suggests, no one person can do it alone. Whether people rely on friends, family or neighbors to help them achieve something, they leverage the connections they have. In an ideal situation, social networks provide people with the connections they need in order to get ahead socially, economically, physically and intellectually.

People participate in social networks every day, perhaps without even realizing it. They attend business functions to forge new professional relationships, or engage in conversations with friends to find the best family doctor or the best school for their children. In forming strong bonds with one another, people can expand their circle of contacts and create an endless source of personal and professional opportunities - laying the foundation for robust neighborhoods and communities.

**Why Social Networks Matter.** Not everybody has access to the resources they need to get ahead in life. While many communities have strong connections in the form of family ties, these close-knit relationships are often the primary resource families have, and can sometimes become limiting. Without broader access to the reach and the breadth of resources available to others, community reserves can soon be depleted, leaving people feeling isolated, disenfranchised and unable to advocate for things they need to improve their conditions.

We believe that families should have the opportunity to not only reach a wide and diverse array of relationships and gain regular access to quality services, but also to drive and shape programs that serve them. Social networks open the door to these opportunities, and the barriers that families face as they move towards self-sufficiency become rarer, of shorter duration and less devastating in effect.

This ability to lift barriers and create opportunities is especially critical to sustaining self-sufficiency generation to generation. Children and grandchildren learn from their parents that all people should rely on meaningful, mutually beneficial relationships with others, and must seek to define and generate the resources they need to lead healthy, productive lives.

**How Our Partnership Is Helping.** Organizations can play a critically important role in creating successful social networks because they provide some of the valuable services and programs people need to get ahead. That is why an array of Denver, Colorado-based groups has gathered to implement a social networks model. The networked environment we have created provides a unique opportunity for our partner organizations to individually and collectively learn from each other and share experiences, then pass the benefits of those experiences on to program participants.

What we all have in common is that we serve predominantly low-income families or families who otherwise feel disconnected due to barriers created by poverty, language and culture differences. While our network is ever-expanding, we currently consist of a community and technical college, a refugee resettlement group, an early childhood education provider, a women’s organizing group and a foundation.

As individual organizations, we have the power to rally critical resources together to attract and engage people in a social network setting. As such, we become facilitators of relationships that aim to collaboratively solve problems and create opportunities. Our collective aim is to help families, whose connections are often stretched thin, gain access to a more level playing field.

Some people come to our partner network in search of access to tools, resources and information. And others, who may be equipped with connections and knowledge, come ready to help. A successful outcome is one in which all participants, regardless of income or circumstance, walk away feeling richer, wiser and more valued.

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**Fostering a Transformative Environment.** As organizations we provide many of the services and programs people need. **The way** we deliver these offerings can make a significant difference in their effectiveness and impact. To help families benefit more fully from our programs and services, we recognize that we may need to alter our practices and internal environments using social network principles. Interrelated and complementary, these principles are the drivers of any social network initiative that strives to create positive, sustainable outcomes for individuals, families and communities.

Our social network principles include: 1) *membership*, or the concept that people seeking services and support are members who feel they belong and have an important role to play; 2) *demand-driven*, or the concept that members are self-determined, motivated people with the power to shape programs and create relevant, valuable opportunities; 3) *reciprocity*, or the creation of mutually beneficial relationships; and 4) *learning*, or the acquisition of knowledge or skills that will lead to positive consequences and results.

Through the support and co-learning of the partner organizations, transforming practice is not a burdensome task that creates more work. Rather, we believe that it is an integrative process that helps us become more effective in work that is already in progress. As partners we are willing to observe other groups' implementation of social networks, try new things, and create innovative approaches to fit our communities' unique needs. This is an iterative process, and found within it are opportunities to self-evaluate and make improvements while supporting innovation and striving toward tangible results.

At the end of the day, our programs and strategies are most likely to succeed if they strive to increase access to quality programs *and* address the structural barriers and inequities that exist in the service delivery system.

**Tools and Strategies.** Because each social network is so unique, it will naturally rely on different tools and strategies to support change. What all of them have in common is innovation and learning: the dual aim is to achieve sustainable results through social network practices, and to create lasting capacity for innovation in response to shifting community needs.

This requires the constant development and adaptation of new tools and strategies. For illustration purposes, some examples of the types of tools being created by our network of partners include:

- A process for *practitioner immersion*, in which staff and members intensively immerse themselves in other organizations to observe, share in and reflect on the practice of others;
- *Community circles*, in which families meet regularly to build relationships or work toward an identified goal;
- *Documentation and reflection processes*, which partners use to record and reflect on significant moments or catalyzing events in their work; and
- *Organizational development strategies*, which help partners reorganize **how** they carry out their work.

Again, the tools will be unique to each organization, and no list could possibly represent the distinctive attributes and needs of each partner organization or the communities we serve. Because of the requirement for innovation and the evolving nature of social networks, tools used by an organization today might be different tomorrow. And we may “borrow” or “share” what we have learned with our partners so that as a network, we are constantly on a path toward collective improvement.

**Putting Theory Into Practice.** Whether we put social network theory into practice in order to increase access to critical services, link people with job opportunities, provide access to training, create networks of emotional and financial support for families in crisis, or simply help people decrease their dependency on systems, our organizations are working together toward a common mission: to help people get ahead by gaining access to the extent and variety of social, economic, physical and intellectual capital that is at their disposal, while expanding access to new resources.