



Community Messengers

**A BAYC Program
Parents Helping Parents**

Who we are. The Bridgeport Alliance for Young Children (BAYC) is a city-wide collaborative of parents, residents, elected officials, and providers. Membership is open to any Bridgeport resident who envisions a Bridgeport where all children, regardless of income, race or ethnicity, are safe, healthy and ready to fulfill their potential.

BAYC facilitates communication among members and across the city; provides coordination of existing community services; helps families find community resources; advocates for families with young children (0-8) at the local and state levels; and acts as a source of knowledge and experience on early childhood topics. Community Messengers is a BAYC program that provides parents with the opportunity to help other parents across the city through face-to-face communication.

What we do. The Community Messengers program was started as a city-wide grassroots vehicle of communication across neighborhoods. Agencies use multiple means of communication...telephone, newspapers, computers, radio and television. However, parents told us that the best way to communicate is by talking...to neighbors, to children, to doctors, teachers and family. Somehow, over time, we have forgotten how to communicate by “spreading the word.” When parents told us that, with training, they could teach other parents, the idea for Community Messengers was developed. As a pilot in 2009, the program was funded under a donor advised grant from the Fairfield County Community Foundation. The first year, 13 parents were recruited and seven completed the required 12 hours of cross-training. As a result of relocation and job changes, only 4 volunteers remained by the end of the first year of the pilot. The second year of the program recruited 23 volunteers and had a waiting list plus parents from outside Bridgeport asking to join. Seventeen parents completed the cross-training, bringing the total to 21 active Community Messengers. Although the next cross-training will not take place until April 2011, parents are already registering to secure their place in the program.

Where. Bridgeport is the largest city in Connecticut. It is also the poorest and many of the 11,000 families with children under age 8 face challenges that affect their ability to prepare their child for success in school. More than 95% of the children are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch and 16% live below the federal poverty level. Approximately 5,000 families with children under age 8 are headed by single mothers and more than 25% are mothers who have not completed high school. 45% of the children come from families with a primary language other than English.

When. Community Messengers was initiated in January 2009. That first year, 13 parents were recruited and seven completed the required 12 hours of cross-training. As a result of relocation and job

changes, only 4 volunteers ended the first year of the pilot. The second year of the program recruited twenty volunteers and had a waiting list of parents from outside Bridgeport asking to join. 17 graduated from the 2010 training bringing the total number of active Community Messengers to 21. Although the next cross-training will not take place until April 2011, parents are already registering to secure their place in the program.

BAYC conducts recruitment for parent volunteers during February and March. The cross-training sessions are held over a four week period in April with graduation in May. The first city-wide activity of Community Messengers is introducing the program and talking to over four hundred parents who attend the annual parent convention held in May. The group meets on the last Tuesday of the month throughout the year for sharing and further training.

Why Community Messengers. All parents and caregivers should be empowered with information, family-centered, family-driven support and the skills needed to ensure that they are their children's first and most important teacher. Community Messengers continues to be a vehicle to communicate with parents in each of the ten very diverse neighborhoods. This program connects leaders who have the trust of their neighborhood and the ability to overcome language barriers. The program increases opportunities for parents to expand the skills and knowledge that will support and strengthen their family.

Community Messengers share information about activities and distribute posters or flyers that promote strong families. They have grown the BAYC Parent email list to more than 400 contacts, and increased traffic on the BAYC website to over 15,000 visitors. We estimate that more than 2,500 families will be touched by one of the BAYC Community Messengers during the next year.

How the program benefits the community. BAYC provides cross-training of parent volunteers and arms them with a "toolbox" of materials. As a Community Messenger, parents spread the word about programs and services in their own neighborhood. Too many people don't know about the services and programs that are in place to help them. Community Messengers do not provide counseling; they point their neighbors in the right direction, help complete applications like HUSKY and SNAP and food assistance, and share announcements of free activities for families to learn and play together.

The cross-training program totals 12 hours with specialists from a wide array of local and state agencies providing an overview of their services and points of entry for those who are in need of services. For example, after the cross-training, Community Messengers are able to assist neighbors with information about:

- Medical care and dental care
- HUSKY insurance
- Quality pre-school for 3 & 4 year olds
- Registering children for school
- Mental health services
- WIC program for women & infants
- Infant and toddler care
- Expectations for kindergarten
- Healthy diets - SNAP
- Immunizations
- Family activities
- The library

· Parent leadership training

· Unemployment and job training

· Legal services

Community Messengers meet monthly to share their experiences, ask for help from their peers, and get additional training.

Summary. The Community Messenger program grew substantially this past year due in part to word-of-mouth stories about its success. That success is a direct result of participants who have been empowered to assist their neighbors in accessing the services, engaging families in their child's education and advocating for a Bridgeport where all children are safe, healthy, and ready to succeed in life.

When asked what they like about monthly Community Messenger meetings, the volunteers said, "They are relaxing but informative and a way of opening doors to change in the community." When asked what they would change, the participants said, "More speakers", "make meetings longer," and "nothing...all is good!"