

Strengthening Rural and Urban Communities through Social Capital



CASE STUDY

CONNECTIONS TO SUCCESS

About Connections to Success

Connections to Success (CtS) is a nonprofit organization serving primarily the St. Louis and Kansas City regions of Missouri, including rural communities. The program focuses on individuals and families experiencing poverty, those who are unemployed and underemployed, individuals incarcerated and re-entering the community, youth aging out of the foster care or juvenile justice system, and others.

CtS believes that people are at the center of their own success. With its emphasis on supportive networks and lifelong community engagement, CtS creates a learning environment where staff and participants “do life together.”

Specific programs include a 60-hour personal and professional development class, monthly group discussions for professional women and men, mock interviews, Toastmasters (public speaking and leadership skills), and Dress for Success (a personal shopper provides complimentary professional clothing). CtS holds weekly activities such as “connect group” dinners that incorporate movies and games. One-on-one mentoring and coaching also provide more personalized ways for individuals to connect with, learn from, and mentor each other.

Program Overview

CtS uses a holistic, data-driven model that integrates a variety of services and programs to help participants build and leverage social capital, with the ultimate goal of preparing for job interviews and employment and building healthy lifelong relationships. Its mentoring and coaching program, connect group dinners, and other programming aim to help participants build lasting ties with both their peers and others in the community who have access to different networks, perspectives, and resources.



This case study is part of a project on “Strengthening Human Services through Social Capital” that aims to offer insight on programs that use social capital to reduce poverty, increase employment and economic self-sufficiency, and improve child and family well-being. For more resources, visit <https://aspe.hhs.gov/social-capital>.



Social Capital: Components in Practice and Innovative Approaches

CtS strives to maximize face-to-face communication, place volunteers and participants together at the forefront of each activity, and create experiential learning in the community. This attention to building and leveraging social capital includes connections with people of similar backgrounds (bonding social capital), different backgrounds (bridging social capital), and positions of power in the community (linking social capital).

Bonding: Connections With People Like Me. CtS builds and strengthens the connections among participants primarily through its use of a cohort model in its professional development class. Each class comprises 10–15 participants who engage in 60 hours of intensive training over a 2-week period. The training relies heavily on interactive discussions and activities through which bonds are formed by the intensity of sharing personal aspirations, experiences, and struggles.

This peer bonding is maintained through other ongoing programs, such as the weekly connect group that invites the entire CtS community (current and former participants, families, staff, and volunteers) to “a free dinner and an evening of fun and learning [where] families are welcome, and childcare is provided.”

Bridging: Connections With People Different From Me. Efforts to build relationships among people with different backgrounds are embedded through activities like daily gratitude circles, when each morning everyone in the building says what they are grateful for that day. This culture encourages people to get to know one another better and provides natural openings for individuals to connect on a personal level as everyone slowly shares personal stories and experiences each morning through the lens of gratefulness.

“I’m not calling an agency; I’m calling a friend.”
— former participant

Linking: Connections With People in Positions of Power in the Community. CtS also links its participants to individuals in influential positions in the community by bringing in representatives from banks, human service agencies, probation and parole offices, and police departments. CtS stresses the conversational aspect of these gatherings by ensuring that conversations are face-to-face and friendly, creating a setting for openness and learning. CtS solicits constant feedback from participants on what topics they would like to learn about and which individuals are more effective at connecting. To further build community, CtS seeks out presenters who use engaging teaching styles and focus on active learning rather than employing a didactic teaching model. The goal is to build social capital, either through a direct relationship with the individual presenter or an increased knowledge and comfort on how to tap into these institutions in the community. Topics of discussions frequently include how to

- open a bank account and save money;
- navigate child support;
- interact with law enforcement;
- find housing;
- identify appropriate education and training opportunities; and
- access health and wellness programs.

CtS also brings participants on tours of employers’ workplaces so that participants experience them from a learning and curiosity mindset. Showing participants that work environments can be warm and welcoming reduces anxiety about employment. These conversations empower participants to engage with and access community resources. As one former participant said, “I’m not calling an agency; I’m calling a friend.”

CtS emphasizes an organizational culture that embraces social supports and community-building for all involved. CtS practices this mindset daily in many small ways, such as eating together and rejecting any sense that CtS is a referral service or service provider and embracing the power of community.

Overall, the social capital elements of CtS are knitted together through a series of gatherings, including

- Monday night connect groups;
- monthly professional women’s and men’s group;
- daily gratitude circles and text groups; and
- one-on-one mentoring and coaching.

As one interviewee said, “Here you are building humanity... We’re all growing and coming out of our comfort zones to become self-starters.”

Participants are also often volunteers and sometimes become staff, further integrating everyone involved. Through its regular activities, a community approach, and a learning mindset, the organization creates a lifelong network for everyone involved.

Key Outcomes

CtS targets generational and community-wide impact, tracking short-term outcomes such as improved healthy relationship skills, improved parenting skills, progress toward greater economic stability, and reduced recidivism.

CtS collects data using an extensive enrollment form and monthly follow-ups. Monthly surveys of 375 participants served over the past 12 months indicate the following:

- 70% of participants retained their jobs 9 months after getting them;
- 82% increased their earnings within 6 months of employment;
- 84% reported reduced conflict in co-parenting relationships;
- 82% reported increased involvement with their children; and
- a 14% recidivism rate for participants 12 months after release from incarceration, compared with 44% nationally.

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— CtS co-founder

Lessons Learned and Key Considerations for Social Capital Integration

CtS leadership, staff, and participants have identified a number of lessons about the most effective ways to integrate a social capital mindset into their work to best help participants build and use social support networks.

Empowering Networks and Partnerships. Networks and partnerships are critical because “Social capital is what we thrive on... We will never have enough money or enough staff to do the things we’re able to do with this network of volunteers in the community,” reported one of the founders. CtS aims to bridge gaps and connect resources by bringing existing community assets to its participants. “Every volunteer has a circle of friends, families, church groups, etc. that they can bring to the table,” one interviewee commented. CtS partners with a broad array of organizations and individuals, and interviewees highlighted the benefit of CtS’s engagement with faith-based and interfaith organizations because they always have many people to connect with to broaden and diversify their networks.

Knowing Your Participants. A second lesson for CtS is that it is critical to know and understand the community you are serving. According to one interviewee, “You have to be the secret shopper in the community you work in.” Interviewees noted the importance of setting the foundation for long-term success by first listening to participants and working with them to sketch out a life plan before focusing on job searches or connecting them to the assets in the community. The program embraces this assets-based approach, which seeks to leverage existing community strengths and social capital based on participant goals.

Instituting the Right Staff and Culture. CtS strives to create a culture where it is safe to be in uncomfortable situations, pursue self-discovery, and be willing to show up and keep trying, all of which are important elements to forming relationships toward lasting positive change. CtS also embodies a learning model whereby programs and activities constantly evolve to better meet the participants’ individual goals and the organization’s desired outcomes. CtS administrators stressed the importance of having staff who fit and embrace the culture of self-discovery and learning, which contributes to open communication and a willingness to build and tap into existing social networks to support themselves and their CtS community members.

Striking a Balance Between Structure and Fluidity. CtS is constantly working to strike a balance between being fluid and responsive and being structured and organized. As an example, CtS started with a highly structured mentoring and coaching approach in which a group of volunteers were matched with a group of participants. What they found, though, is that “We’re working with people; it doesn’t always follow [a] script.” Sometimes there is not a good fit between the volunteers and participants, and by matching them in a structured way, they might have “inadvertently been creating an ‘us’ and ‘them.’” CtS found that, at least with mentoring and coaching, “the more organic the better,” and they now give participants and volunteers opportunities to “feel each other out” and to develop one-on-one relationships in a less structured way. That said, an interviewee noted that a complete lack of structure can lead to mentor teams’ accidentally getting off course from their main goals. The key is finding a balance between structure and fluidity in this relationship-building process and being ready to change if it’s not working.

Emphasizing Mutuality. CtS stresses making connections with people, not agencies or organizations. Staff who believe they are there to provide a transactional service are not typically a good fit. Staff strive to “find solutions and answers for participants rather than another referral. All interviewees commented that a person who walks in the door is not a number but a human being. This viewpoint creates a “zeal for providing the best care.”

As one of the founders said, “Collectively we’re addressing the biggest social issue of our time, and that’s poverty. We can only move the needle if we’re working together as a community. We can’t do it, they can’t do it, but collectively we can make a difference.”