

Meriden Family Zone
A project of the Meriden Early Childhood Council (MECC)
and Meriden Children First

Overview
May 2010

Project Summary

A community collaborative called the Meriden Early Childhood Council (staffed by Children First) will create a **Meriden Family Zone (MFZ)** in a targeted, lower-income Meriden neighborhood to help young children do better in school. An array of outcomes related to health, early learning and self-sufficiency will be employed.

In time, the project will scale up to provide a comprehensive continuum of ‘cradle-to-college’ supports for young people and their families.

These three priority areas mirror those as developed in the 2008 “Meriden Blueprint for Young Children” (www.meridenchildrenfirst.org). **The MFZ will focus a coordinated, comprehensive array of wrap-around services and literacy supports for 20 participating families (including 50 children under 10 years old) in the first year.**

Background on Meriden Children First

The lead organization in this collaborative project is Meriden Children First, a successful non-profit in operation since 1995. The mission of the Meriden Children First Initiative (CFI) is to help children be ready, willing and able to succeed. The primary activities of CFI include:

- **providing local parents with programs on analyzing, crafting, and influencing child-focused policy and services** that directly affect their children’s care, education, and health.
- serving as Meriden’s **citywide convener on children’s issues**—hosting regular dialogues and strategy sessions that unite parent leaders with representatives from every childcare, educational, and health care system in the city.
- **sponsoring and disseminating key research** on the status of Meriden’s young people and families, so the community has clear data on which to base its decision-making.

In the past several years, Meriden CFI can claim the following benefits and accomplishments:

- Helped capture State School Readiness funding, which **helps make preschool affordable and prepares Meriden’s 3 and 4-year olds to thrive in school.**
- Trained a team of 150 Meriden parents as skilled public advocates on behalf of children’s needs.
- Urged state legislators to establish a **Connecticut Parent Trust Fund**, which helps underwrite the cost of parent leadership training.
- Supported ‘Buddy Readers’ literacy program, linking 80 Meriden seniors with 200 first- and second-grade children in five elementary schools to improve reading skills.
- **Promoted expansion of a school breakfast to all eight Meriden elementary schools.**
- Led a successful campaign in partnership with the Meriden Board of Education **to expand full-day kindergarten to an additional 200 Meriden children.**

Meriden Family Zone Background

The target Zone is in Meriden's center city. It includes Miller Street, Twiss, Liberty, Pratt, Center, Hobart and Arch. Children in this area either attend or will attend the Roger Sherman Elementary School (except for those attending the City's bilingual program). This target area was selected based on an analysis of census track data and of an asset scan. The Zone has these characteristics:

- Only 1 in 3 live in the same place as they did five years ago
- 50% of the mothers have high school diplomas
- Nearly ½ speak a language other than English
- Median household incomes are just 1/3 to ½ of Meriden's median income
- 70% of eligible Meriden babies are enrolled in the State's HUSKY health insurance program
- 1 in 3 children meet proficiency goals in reading and math at 4th grade

Zone families are more likely to be isolated from services, neighbors and other support networks than their peers in higher-income neighborhoods. The project aims to reduce isolation by helping connect families to needed services and to help build community between families by encouraging participation in common activities such as story times, playgroups, summer enrichment programs and meetings of the local neighborhood association.

The Meriden Family Zone builds on the proven track record and culture of collaboration in Meriden. The project is community-led, with all levels of government as major partners. Project partners are under no illusions that this will be easy or quick. It will take time to see interim outcomes achieved. MFZ will attempt to create a community of self-reliant families working together to do the best they can for their children while at the same time investing their own resources and successes back into their community.

This project will coordinate with a new City of Meriden effort that targets this same Zone to improve neighborhood stability through the purchase, renovation and sale of foreclosed homes to local owner-occupants. Other physical improvements including sidewalk repair and landscaping will also be focused in the Zone.

The MFZ is inspired by the experiences of Harlem Children's Zone (www.hcz.org). The HCZ was built on the notion that:

“Most traditional poverty-fighting approaches are narrowly focused. Hampered by a lack of resources, many are not able to provide high-quality programs, or if they do so, it is only for a few hundred children. Others attend only to a single issue or single age group, approaches that fail to address all the developmental needs of children throughout their childhood. The great majority of approaches neglect the neighborhood environment that surrounds children and affects them profoundly.”

The theory of change underlying this model requires the coordinated application of the following core principles. To create change it is necessary to:

- **Serve a targeted neighborhood comprehensively and at scale.** Reaches children in numbers significant enough to affect the culture of a community; it transforms the physical and social environments that impact the children's development; and it coordinates and creates programs at a scale large enough to meet the local need.

“[The Harlem Children Zone] eliminated the achievement gap.”

- *David Brooks, New York Times columnist, May 8, 2009*

- **Create a continuum of support.** The MFZ will build on the existing portfolio of local child and family services with a refocus of some existing resources in the target zone, coordinated case management and data sharing. Where needed, MFZ will develop additional excellent, accessible programs and link them to one another so that they provide uninterrupted support for children's healthy growth. Meriden has the advantage of having some very good programs serving young children, but the effects of a few good programs serving small numbers of people are easily diluted in otherwise underserved neighborhoods.
- **Build community** among residents, institutions, and stakeholders, who help to create the environment necessary for children's healthy development. Another benefit of the Zone is that staff can provide on-going support to a family whose children may 'age-out' of or be too young for a particular service. For example, infants and toddlers are too young for Head Start but can still benefit from exposure to basic early literacy techniques, helping them be more ready when they do connect to a formal preschool program.
- **Program oversight and management.** Outreach workers will be closely supervised by Meriden Children First with the support and guidance of a MFZ advisory group that will include MFZ residents, area providers, faith and civic leaders, educators, law enforcement and policy makers.

Project Action Steps

1. Zone Outreach

Two part-time **Zone Outreach Workers** were hired in January 2010. A third began in May 2010. Total staffing is 25 hours a week. All three are bilingual/bicultural and have extensive family outreach and home visiting experience.

Most of the first Zone families are referred through the Health Department's WIC (Women Infant and Children) nutrition program. The rationale for this is that many of the more than 2,700 Meriden families (60% Hispanic, 30% White, 10% African American) connected to this program benefit primarily from its nutrition services. It is believed that enrolling some in the Zone will allow other supports, such as early literacy skill building and connections to job training, to be connected to a family.

By the end of the first year (March 2011), this initial contact will have identified 20 families in the Zone who are willing to enroll and participate. *As of May 2010, there are 8 families involved with the Zone. Some preliminary findings and progress . . .*

Other families may be recruited through Connecticut Works, Department of Children and Families, and New Opportunities of Greater Meriden.

Workers will reach out to the recommended families to talk with them about the Zone, its benefits, their interests, goals and challenges. An initial home-based intake/strength and needs assessment is conducted to determine if a family wants to participate and to develop a baseline of information for referral, coordination of services and data measurement purposes. Over time, a second, more comprehensive assessment will be done asking a variety of questions about where that family is and wants to be in relation to early learning, health and development and family economic security.

An early literacy specialist will be added to complement the efforts of the outreach workers. This resource will also use home visits and referrals to help families strengthen intergenerational literacy skills, including early literacy (as with the 'Read With Me' home literacy model) adult basic education, and English as a Second Language and to follow-up on a regular basis for support and encouragement.

2. Zone Family Action Plan

The Meriden Children First Director will meet with **Outreach Workers** and area agency non-profit and public service staff that currently serve and/or have relationships with targeted families. An individualized family plan will be established to address service gaps, to connect families with all necessary supports and referrals, and to track progress. The outreach workers are responsible for follow-up, retention and tracking of progress.

The following is a beginning list of those that have agreed to be Zone partners:

- WIC / Health Department
- Department of Children and Families
- School readiness programs
- Meriden Police Department/Community Police Officers and the local Neighborhood Association
- Families involved with City of Meriden housing revitalization effort in Zone
- New Opportunities
- Meriden Housing Authority
- Child Guidance Clinic
- Head Start
- Community Health Center/Nurturing Families
- Family Resource Centers
- Connecticut Works
- Board of Education; Roger Sherman Elementary School
- Women and Families Center
- Churches

Summary of Outreach Protocol

1. Referral from WIC (criteria: lives at same address more than one year; lives on target street; interested in Zone and willing to have outreach worker contact them. Going forward, ask for mix of documented and undocumented)
2. Family contract discussed and signed that details expectations and outreach worker role/boundaries
3. Initial intake/enrollment of family by outreach worker to identify basic family info and status on a range of family indicators
4. With family, create family action plan and identify priority issues. Triage, manage and evaluate using:
 - Rita's Operating Manual w/ 'chapters' noting resources/contacts on primary areas (employment, health care, child care, etc.)
 - Biweekly staff meetings with CFI director
 - Monthly meeting of outreach 'support/advisory team' to work with outreachers to manage family plans
 - Also note and act on immediate concerns (may not be highest priorities) to show progress, build spirit (ex. books for kids, bike helmets, etc.)
 - Identify families in common w/ other local service providers (proposed)
5. **Common to all Zone families:** early literacy supports; 'ages and stages' screening to look at status on a range of early childhood growth/development indicators; activities involving all families
6. First 2 months, weekly home visits with families then biweekly thereafter

Incentives (such as gift cards and other goods and services from Meriden business partners) will be used to recognize effort and progress.

Other project features:

Family Economic Self-Sufficiency

- Focus recruitment and referral of Zone families to area language, workforce training and placement programs, such as those through Literacy Volunteers, Connecticut Works, the Women and Family Center, and Middlesex Community College.
- Partner with area banks on improving financial literacy, savings capacity, and access to home ownership opportunities of target families.

Neighborhood Improvement

Neighborhood	Work with City, key partners and residents on Zone n’hood plan: sidewalks, plantings, vacant lot plan, park space, etc.	Convene City Council-led committee to think about a ‘mini-master plan’ for the Zone (in context of Plan of Conservation and Development)? Wait until the summer when families are more deeply engaged and more able to help with this process.
Housing	To grapple with resident turnover and upkeep of property, important to know who owns what, future plans for their properties, supports needed, etc.	Detail ownership of all properties; Outreach strategy to landlords; Local Initiative Support Corp (LISC) strategy, bank summit? Talk with Tom Kilroy at City. Habitat for Humanity? <i>Dedicated staffing to focus on this?</i>
Public Safety	Zone outreachers met with area community police office & N’hood Assoc. Prez to get lay of the land	Regular check-ins with staff. Over time, encourage residents to attend local n’hood association meeting. What else?

Communications

Zone Marketing	Develop logo/tag line for Zone materials: outlet covers, pencils, fridge magnets, business cards, t-shirts, road signs, billboards, presentations to variety of audiences (civic, business, funders, elected, etc) etc.	Branding Marketing folks are doing some thinking on this, will have some stuff for us to consider soon
External relations: Other connections to make	Update Congressman Murphy, Rep. Donovan, other key folk?	

Relationship of this project to City Hall and Meriden Board of Education

We have and will continue developing strong links between this project, Board of Education and City Hall. Examples:

- Both a Board of Education member and administration representatives serve on the body guiding the work of the Children Zone (Meriden Early Childhood Council – MECC);
- MECC reports given as a regular item on Board of Education agenda;
- City Council representative serves on Early Childhood Council; and,

- Meriden School Readiness (City’s preschool provider) representative on the Early Childhood Council.

Note that in addition to the steady and active participation of both the Meriden Mayor and Superintendent, MECC also has engaged the City Manager, the City Planner, the City’s Economic Development director, several elected members of the Meriden Board of Education and other key Board of Education administrators. These leaders:

- Promote Blueprint and MECC works in public forums and with other civic and political leaders.
- Integrate MECC efforts with City’s housing and downtown redevelopment projects.

Attention to mobility of Zone population

For this project to be successful, it is important that Zone staff maintain relationships with target families for at least 18 months. This is a challenge given the high mobility of many families living in lower-income neighborhoods. To increase the odds of success, the following steps will be taken to minimize the impact of residents leaving the Zone.

- Before WIC refers a family to Zone outreach workers, WIC screens to ensure potential families have **lived in the Zone for at least a year**. The thinking is that a family in place for a year is more likely to remain for another year vs. someone who has just moved in.
- WIC to screen for **documented families**. Not that we won’t take undocumented – these are the people in our neighborhood, after all – but for starters this will increase prospects for success. Given that we have happened to start with undocumented families, comparing that experience with documented families will be of interest.
- New families sign a contract that they participate understanding this is a **long-term commitment** and that if they leave the zone they will not benefit directly from Zone outreach and supports.
- The comprehensive effort to create a ‘high performing’ neighborhood will keep some families who might otherwise move on.
- Will also investigate **paths towards citizenship** for those who are undocumented.
- **Length of residency** is also noted on the enrollment form, as well as questions related to likelihood to stick around, such as employment and extended families in the area.
- Deliberate plans are in the works to **engage landlords** in the project to ensure safe, affordable housing.
- The other activity that may ameliorate resident mobility is that of **building community**. Where possible, Zone families will be engaged in common activities to build relationships and support systems between Zone families and with the greater community. For example, moms and their preschool children will attend playgroups and story times; neighborhood association meetings; will also determine connection of school-aged children to schools, etc.
- Another aspect of our approach is to stay small, that is, focus on relationship-building with several families – **quality over quantity**.

- **Quality control - Zone outreach staff meet every other week** with CFI director and monthly with other Zone project partners to manage family action plans and track progress and challenges.

Program Measures

Measurement of program outcomes will be based on a Results Based Accountability framework.

Over time, the MFZ will lead to the following improvements:

- More children with **health insurance**.
- More mothers receiving adequate **prenatal care**.
- More children 'ready' for **kindergarten**.
- Improved **literacy skills** for children.
- More children involved with **quality preschool** programs.
- More parents with **high-school diplomas** and thus more 'job ready'.
- Concentrated **physical improvements**: lighting, housing, sidewalks, roads, landscaping.
- Community building by connecting neighbors, raising hope.

Baseline data on where a child and family are at in relation to each of these indicators will be gathered in an initial assessment. Outreach workers will revisit these measures on a regular basis to determine progress or challenges. A data management system is being developed to capture baseline child- and family-level information. This will allow progress on individual family action plans to be monitored. It will also provide for population-level (for the target group) reporting and mapping to show the status of progress on priority family outcomes.

With success, the project will involve additional families and possibly expand into new neighborhoods.

Funding Plan

While much work can and will be done by volunteers and in-kind support from existing outreach staff from various service providers, the Zone will hire dedicated staff to conduct outreach and track impacts. **Funding of \$273,000 (cash and in-kind) over three years is required from a variety of public and private sources to build MFZ to capacity and to plan and execute project strategies in a quality and expeditious way.**

This proposal has and will be submitted for consideration to the foundations noted below and in the following amounts. The ideal is to have local sources comprise 60%, or about \$55,000 annually, of the total proposed budget. This funding level would align this project to Federal resources that will become available later in 2010. The Federal funds (either through the US Department of Education's Innovation Funds and/or Promise Neighborhoods initiative) require a local contribution, thus Meriden would be well-positioned to access these resources.

Sustainability

The economic downturn – at least in the immediate term - will severely limit the ability of the City, State and local Board of Education to provide public funds for this project. In the interim, a thoughtful, realistic funding plan built on private foundation and some potential Federal resources has been developed. Already several important multi-year commitments have been secured. Discussions are also underway but not yet fully developed about creating a disciplined outreach strategy to area businesses to co-invest in the Zone project.

When the economy improves and if this project shows the desired results at the end of three years, an approach will be made to local and state government about sustaining funds. A successful project is in the interest of both the City of Meriden and the Board of Education, so a strong case can be made for them to complement their in-kind supports with funding.

Meriden Children Zone Budget and Narrative

I 2010 Revenue (cash)

Secured (\$64,500):

CDBG ARRA \$5,000

One-time commitment to support outreach staff costs.

Napier Foundation \$10,000 a year for 3 years (\$30,000 total)

For oversight (CFI Director) and outreach.

Naugatuck Savings Bank \$5,000

One year for partial time of director/supervisor and outreach workers, printing/materials, and data management.

Cuno Foundation \$10,000

One year largely for family incentives, childcare, refreshments (as provided at programs/events that involve all Zone families), other costs related to Zone-wide activities (such as summer enrichment program or story time at library).

Tremaine Foundation \$7,500 a year for 2 years (\$15,000 total)

For project development, largely director/supervisor time.

MEDCO \$10,000 a year for 3 years (\$30,000 total)

Staffing to guide housing, business/civic partnerships and workforce activities.

Graustein Memorial Fund

One-year, \$12,000 request (with potential for 3 additional years) towards director salary and early literacy supports. Requires local cash match.

CDBG

Received one year, \$5,000 for Zone operations.

Pending (\$25,000 for 2010):

Meriden Foundation *Update (May 14, 2010) – declined. May reconsider a refined proposal in the Fall.*
Requested \$15,000 a year for 3 years for project staffing. Decision by April 2010.

Rotary Club *Update (May 14, 2010) – declined. May reconsider a refined proposal this Summer.*
Requested \$10,000 a year for 3 years largely for early literacy and family econ. self-sufficiency staffing.
Decision by April 2010?

Upcoming: Revenue Prospects

Several large Federal prospects, including Innovation Fund, Early Learning Challenge Grant and Promise Neighborhoods. All require 50% local cash match. Summer 2010 submissions.

This chart shows the revenue that is being sought from a variety of sources for the first year and projections for three years. Depending on the source, the three year totals may not be Year 1 x three years.

Revenue Sources	Year 1	Three-year total	Status
CDBG	5000	5000	Committed
Meriden Foundation	15000	45000	Submit Fall 2010
Napier Foundation	10000	30000	Committed
Cuno Foundation	10000	10000	Committed
Naugatuck Savings	5000	5000	Committed
Tremaine	7500	15000	Committed
MEDCO	10000	30000	Committed
Graustein Memorial	11970	37410	Committed
Fed. (Innovation Fund, Promise N'hood)		50000	To be submitted
Meriden Rotary Club	5000	5000	Resubmit June
In-kind outreach worker staffing	8000	24000	
In-kind office and meeting space	5000	15000	
Total (cash + in-kind)	92470	271410	
Total (cash only)	79470	232410	

This chart shows total project expenses for one year and projected for three years.

Staffing		
Zone Outreach (10 hours @ \$20/hr)	10400	31200
Zone Outreach (10 hours @ \$20/hr)	10400	31200
Zone Outreach (5 hrs @ \$15/hr)	5200	15600
Literacy/Family support (5 hrs @ \$20/hr)	5200	15600
Business partner manager (5 hrs @ \$30)	7800	23400
Administrative, supervision, convening, project coordination (30% of full-time CFI Director)	17250	51150
Incentives, family supports, childcare	7500	22500
Meetings for planning, community - food	2500	7500
Printing/Publications	2000	7500
Postage	500	1500
Office supplies/materials	1160	4500
Internet, data management	8200	24600
Purchase of service (bookkeeping, audit)	1000	3000
In-kind staffing from other non-profits (2 hours a week x 40 weeks x 5 outreach workers @ \$20/hr)	8000	24000
Rent & Utilities (in-kind)	5000	15000
Grand Total Expenses	92110	278250
Cash only totals	79110	239250

Notes

1. CFI's total operating budget for 2010 is \$295,000, including \$80,000 for Zone project.
2. Office space and utilities are provided to Children First in-kind by the Meriden Public Library

Zone Expenses 2010												
	<i>One Year 2010</i>	Meriden Found.	Naugatuck Savings Bank	Napier	CDBG ARRA	Rotary	CDBG	MEDCO	Tremaine	Cuno	GMF	Total
Staffing												
Zone Outreach (10 hours @ \$20/hr)	10400	3000	750	2000	2500		2150					10400
Zone Outreach (10 hours @ \$20/hr)	10400	3500	750	2000	2500		590				1060	10400
Zone Outreach (5 hrs @ \$15/hr)	5200			3500			2260					5200
Literacy/Family support/'Baby College' (10 hrs @ \$20/hr)	10400					6000					4400	10400
Business /civic partner manager (5 hrs @ \$30)	7800							7800				7800
Administrative, supervision, convening, project coordination (40% of full-time CFI Director)	19350	3500	2500	2500				2200	5000		3650	19350
Incentives, family supports, childcare	7500									7500		7500
Meetings for planning, community - food	2500									2500		2500
Printing/Publications	2000		500						1300		200	2000
Postage	500										500	500
Office supplies/materials	1160										1160	1160
Internet, data manage	1700		500						1200			1700
Purchase of service (bookkeeping, audit)	1000										1000	1000
In-kind staffing from other non-profits (2 hours a week x 40 wks x 5 workers @ \$20/hr)	8000											
Rent & Utilities: in-kind	5000											
Total (cash + inkind)	92270	10000	5000	10000	5000	6000	5000	10000	7500	10000	11970	92270
Cash only totals	79270											79270