

Building Partnerships from the Inside Out: Congreso's Model for Service Integration

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Summary

This article describes how Congreso, a Philadelphia multiservice nonprofit serving the Latino community, recognized the strength of its service delivery model and community trust to lead community partnerships in multiplying educational opportunities for youth and adults. Historically, Congreso made high-quality human service delivery its core business. But as the organization grew and funding diversified, no one model clearly defined the organization's service delivery across multiple programs. Congreso developed a service delivery model (Primary Client ManagementSM) to strengthen collaboration among 300+ employees working in 50+ diverse programs that would result in increased coordination and better service to participants enrolled in multiple services.

Congreso's self-assessment also inevitably identified service and resource gaps that pointed to broader partnerships opportunities. Leading with its strength, Congreso used its trusted reputation in the community to

introduce new partners who provide needed services Congreso could not offer efficiently alone.

The shift toward better internal service integration and broader-scale partnerships allowed Congreso to simultaneously strengthen and extend its “core business”—human services delivery—within multiple partnerships. As a result, Congreso provides human services to over 14,000 unique clients annually with a smaller budget than might be expected for a large, multiservice agency.

Congreso's Mission

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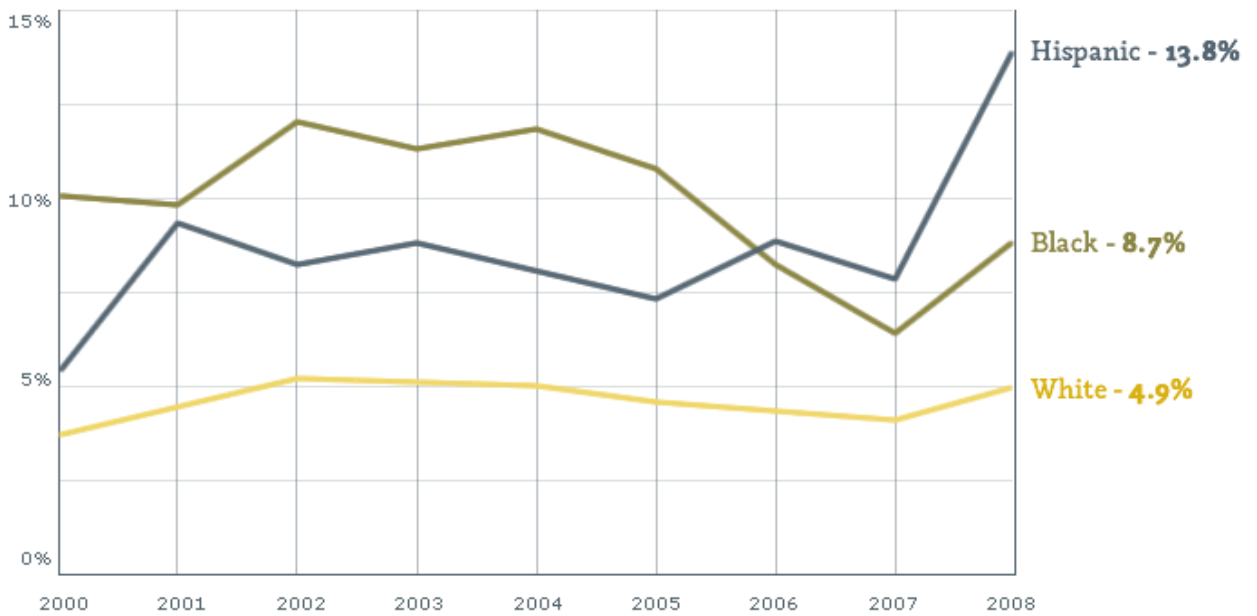
Congreso primarily serves the neighborhoods of Eastern North Philadelphia where a high concentration of the city's Latino population resides. The organization's mission is to “strengthen Latino communities through social, economic, education, and health services; leadership development; and advocacy” (Congreso de Latinos Unidos 2011a). Poverty and its complex relationship to education, employment, health and family stability have been well documented. A few statistics illustrate the complexity of the relationship:

- In Philadelphia, 61 percent of Latinos live in poverty (Congreso de Latinos Unidos 2009).
- Nationally, Latinos are 25 percent less likely to earn high school diplomas than their non-Hispanic white

peers (Congreso de Latinos Unidos 2009).

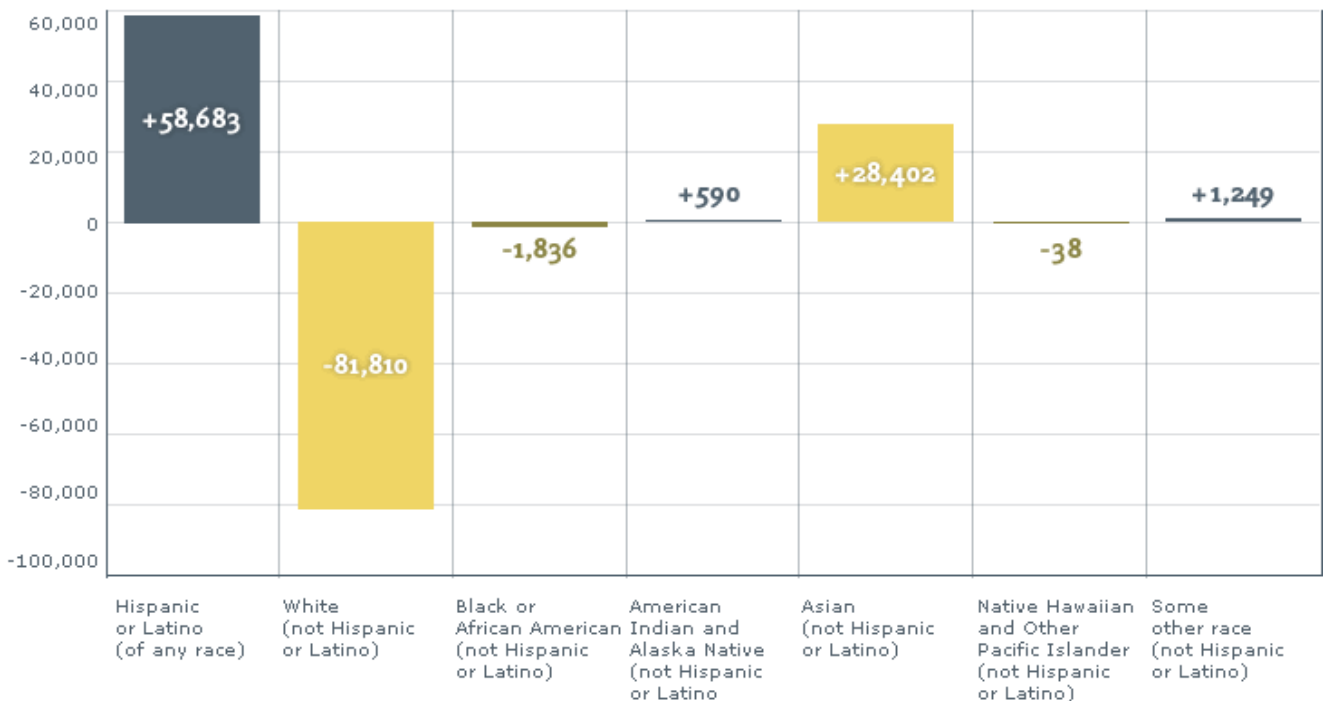
- At 13.8 percent in 2008, the Pennsylvania Latino population had the highest unemployment rate of any measured race or ethnic group, more than double the average for Pennsylvania (The Reinvestment Fund 2009).
- Growing by nearly 60,000 individuals between the 2000 and 2010 census, the Philadelphia Hispanic/Latino population outgrew all other racial and ethnic groups combined (U.S. Census Bureau 2001, 2011).
- One-third of the population without health insurance in this country are Latinos (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2005).
- The community in which Congreso works has many cases of lung disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes, asthma, heart disease and mental health conditions (Congreso de Latinos Unidos 2011b).

Historical Unemployment by Race—State of Pennsylvania



Source: The Reinvestment Fund 2009

Population Change by Ethnicity and Race — 2000 to 2010 : Philadelphia County



Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2001, 2011

Started in 1977 by local Puerto Rican activists seeking social and economic opportunity for the expanding Latino community in Philadelphia, Congreso had large goals of

community empowerment but limited resources and programs to accomplish them. In 1979, Congreso received a \$15,000 grant from the City of Philadelphia to offer bilingual drug and alcohol counseling. Additional services and funding followed as Congreso began building its reputation as a provider of human services in health, education and employment in the community.

In the 1990s, Congreso enjoyed unprecedented growth and recognition. A wider circle of funders and policymakers took notice. Congreso's growing reputation required greater accountability. Congreso made organizational changes to streamline decision-making and better meet professional standards of service delivery, and financial and data management.

In 2001, Congreso began receiving large-scale federal grants and launched a major capital campaign for its new headquarters. At the same time, the organization focused on developing its ability to collect, analyze and report data to guide client services, assess programs and improve accountability.

In 2007, Congreso's Board of Directors and executive leadership took a hard look at organizational data that showed both the persistence of many of the social problems that inspired Congreso's grassroots beginnings and the promise of using data to inform new approaches to old problems. Complex social problems—public health needs, unemployment, poor education—cannot be solved

by a single program, organization or system working alone. Change depends on collaboration and broad-scale sector partnerships that recognize each partner's strengths and limitations. For example, data showed that as Congreso grew, so did the challenge of integrating services internally and fulfilling expectations that Congreso served as a one-stop shop for all the community's social needs. A closer look at the data revealed that employees and programs often worked in isolation without considering the client's well-being beyond the presenting problem. On a larger scale, Congreso leaders realized that to reach excellence, the organization needed to define those services it could deliver as the best in the field and seek partnerships for those services other organizations could provide better.

The Assessment: Identifying Areas of Excellence

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Congreso's self-assessment confirmed the organization's commitment to high-quality service delivery in support of greater client self-sufficiency. Specifically, Congreso identified its strengths in education, workforce development, health and wellness, and family support services. Congreso also identified client management as a "core business" and created a service approach – Primary

Client ManagementSM—to improve the quality of resource sharing and referral among 50+ client managers and set performance standards for service delivery across agency programs.

Among the four service areas, education stood out as central and became the focus for delivering Primary Client Management services within broader partnerships. Congreso identified specific youth and adult client education outcomes including high school graduation, GED or alternative high school graduation for high school dropouts, and a two-year college degree for adults. Primary Client Management supports each outcome by giving clients access to Congreso's full range of health and family services.

Instead of trying to offer all necessary education services itself, Congreso used its trusted reputation to introduce and strengthen existing organizations in the community. Congreso decided to partner with Pan American Academy Charter School to create a community-based elementary school that integrates Congreso's human service delivery on-site. The Pan American partnership seeks to reduce the high percentage of students who later drop out of high school in Philadelphia.

Congreso also recognized a commitment to re-engaging current dropouts with GED and alternative high school opportunities through partnerships, again offering human service support aimed at the unique needs of these

students.

Finally, Congreso aimed to make post-secondary education more accessible to community adults by partnering with Harcum College, an existing and accredited college that opened satellites in the Congreso community. Harcum at Congreso students earn an associate's degree with the option to pursue a bachelor's degree. The partnership keeps costs low and provides a personalized learning experience supported by Congreso's Primary Client Management services.

The Innovation: Building Partnerships to Leverage Resources

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In building partnerships, Congreso redefined its role to clients and partners. For clients, Congreso's Primary Client Management service delivery means that outcomes—such as high school graduation or an associate's degree—are considered in a client-centered and holistic perspective in the context of the client's health, family and community. Whenever possible, Congreso client managers offer clients the agency's health and family services that extend beyond the classroom. The integration of the Primary Client Management model into many of the partnerships ensures that Congreso's mission and service delivery quality remains strong within the

partnership.

In relation to its partners, Congreso sees potential in expanding its role as more of a guide and overseer than outright competitor. The shift plays to Congreso's strengths and recognizes that community clients are more willing to access and trust an unfamiliar partner organization if Congreso introduces it and informs its service delivery under Primary Client Management.

The innovations positioned Congreso and its partners to compete for funds that support broader initiatives. Funders generally do not commit the sizeable resources needed for broad-scale partnerships without a central organization with a well-defined and sizable constituency and ability to provide administrative oversight. Partnerships have helped Congreso maintain mission and fiscal health while leveraging more resources to address complex social problems.

Build It Yourself: A Comparison

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In contrast to Congreso, other large multiservice nonprofits have approached each new need by building and adding to their own infrastructures. The "build it yourself" approach seeks to develop a seamless continuum of services under one roof with easy access to data and more direct control over service quality. The

large organizations that use this self-contained approach often develop a strong brand based in part on their size, scope and ability to attract attention and money.

The “build it yourself” approach is not without considerable risk, especially for smaller, less visible and less well funded organizations with an eye for expanding their impact. The approach requires a much steeper learning curve for each expansion in operations.

Adherents to this model must hire far more personnel, purchase and maintain far more real estate, and raise far more funds than is necessary for the partnerships Congreso developed to expand its programming. This greater level of financial exposure can, in turn, potentially limit the amount and quality of new initiatives. Congreso provides intensive direct support to over 14,000 individuals each year, with a budget of \$22 million.

Vulnerabilities: Potential Partnership Pitfalls

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Challenges of Congreso’s early partnerships are the remaining gaps in the continuum of services, role clarity, and the challenge of collecting meaningful data from multiple partners.

Gaps in the continuum of services remain as Congreso builds the partnerships necessary to provide “cradle to

college" services within the community. Finding the best partners, introducing them to the community, and integrating Primary Client Management services becomes more efficient with each partnership built. But each partnership has its own specific negotiations that would be largely unnecessary if Congreso built the service alone.

Another potential pitfall of partnerships is Congreso's lack of direct control over the quality of client services. The degree to which Primary Client Management is integrated into each partnership varies and with this variation comes different degrees of accountability for data collection, performance management and service quality control. While Congreso does have the ability to evaluate client data and the performance of partner organizations, it must often influence change indirectly and with care not to deteriorate the trust upon which the partnership rests.

That said, Congreso's influence as a trusted partner does not depend on its acting as the only source of comprehensive data. Much of Congreso's strength comes from its willingness to make an impact incrementally. Regarding data collection and analysis, Congreso is able to remain a valued lead partner because it holds itself and its partners accountable with an emphasis on client-centered data and results. Thus, while the need for greater precision remains, an emphasis and structure exists to achieve the quality of data needed to achieve that over time.

Social Impact: Adaptable Applicability and Community- and Sector-Wide Transformation

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In the near term, Congreso's primary social impact is the way it influences lifestyle choices among the 14,000 individuals it serves annually. The impact potential is especially transformative among those who choose to enroll in higher education who before were unaware of the opportunity or saw no realistic way to access it.

On average, the difference in lifetime income for a high-school dropout and achieving a two-year college degree is over \$400,000. The social impact is significant; greater earning power brings with it choices and opportunity, often representing the difference between a job and jail, and can lead to stronger families and safer, more successful communities (Congreso de Latinos Unidos 2009).

In the longer term, Congreso's Primary Client Management model is flexible enough to integrate into diverse partnerships and allow Congreso to influence service delivery in multiple sectors where it may be missing as a key ingredient in achieving client outcomes. Currently services provided by the Primary Client

Management model are being evaluated within a third-party outcomes study for a youth drop-out prevention program. Results to date find that Primary Client Management supports are associated with improved school attendance.

In the final analysis, Congreso's innovation is one that not only seeks greater self-sufficiency for Congreso's clients, but also greater efficiency and influence for Congreso and its partners.

Dan Halprin and Sarah Silver both received a Master of Science in Nonprofit/NGO Leadership from the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy & Practice in May 2011.

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