



Photo: Prevention Institute

Making Connections for Mental Health and Wellbeing Among Men and Boys

December 2016 Convening

“By empowering different types of communities across this country to collaborate together to design approaches that work within their communities, we really believe that we can make a significant contribution to improving the lives of boys and men.”
- Paul Villanti, Executive Director of Programs, The Movember Foundation

[Click here](#) to hear Movember’s Paul Villanti on unleashing communities’ knowledge to drive change to improve the mental health and wellbeing of men and boys.

Summary

In December 2016, Prevention Institute (PI) and The Movember Foundation brought together 60 partners from across the U.S. for a convening of the Making Connections for Mental Health and Wellbeing Among Men and Boys initiative. The convening, which came as Making Connections communities were moving from a year of planning into activating their strategies to improve men’s and boys’ mental wellbeing, offered

communities the chance to share their successes, struggle with their challenges, and draw inspiration and support from the community of practice.

The two-day event at Prevention Institute's headquarters in Oakland, California, began with small group coaching sessions on strategies for communications, policy change, and developing a theory of change. Community representatives also participated in podcast discussions on fostering authentic engagement of young men, and on elevating indigenous wisdom. Convening sessions included a mix of panel discussions, small group work sessions, and peer-to-peer dialogues. All of the content in this synthesis emerged from these activities and discussions.

The agenda was designed to reflect the challenges and incorporate the approaches that communities are using in their work to engage men and boys in making lasting changes to the community conditions that support mental health and wellbeing. For example, convening discussions on trauma and healing illuminated the fact that many of the people doing this work regularly experience trauma themselves, and may experience trauma in these discussions. This understanding underscored the need to provide opportunities for convening participants to debrief and receive the support of the Making Connections community. The mix of small and large group discussions and the norms established by the group created a safe space for communities to connect, reflect, lead, share power, and feel supported in taking chances. Ultimately, the convening highlighted the power of coming together as a community of practice to offer and receive support in advancing this complicated, critical work.

Some key themes emerged from the convening discussions and activities:

1. Fostering Authentic Engagement Among Men and Boys: To truly engage men and boys, we must meet them where they are; provide space and opportunity for them to meaningfully participate; foster collective decision-making; be authentic and transparent; and build trust, connection, and belonging.

2. Moving Towards Healing and Resilience: To support community trust, healing, hopefulness, and resilience, we must acknowledge and address past and current events and dynamics that contribute to distrust, and work intentionally toward common goals and practices that help restore relationships among community partners and improve outcomes for men's and boys' mental wellbeing.

3. Maximizing impact by Moving Upstream: To create broad, lasting change, we must shift our focus to the upstream conditions that can affect men's and boys' mental health and wellbeing, such as social networks, safe spaces to gather, and access to living wage jobs and affordable housing.

4. Building Sustainable Infrastructures: To sustain this work, we must ensure that it fully engages the strengths and talents of the men and boys it aims to benefit, and anticipates and addresses unintended consequences, such as community improvements that might displace existing residents.

ABOUT MAKING CONNECTIONS

Making Connections for Mental Health and Wellbeing Among Men and Boys is a national initiative to transform community conditions that influence the mental wellbeing of males. The initial focus of this work is high-need communities, including men and boys of color and veterans. Sixteen communities across the U.S. are developing and activating strategies to enhance their sociocultural, physical/built, and economic and educational environments. The Movember Foundation is funding the work; Prevention Institute is providing coordination, training, and technical assistance; and a team from the University of South Florida is evaluating progress and outcomes.



To learn more, [click here for an interactive map](#).

View a video produced with Making Connections partners in Los Angeles [here](#).

“The conditions we live in create a lot of stress, fear, anxiety. We found out that men have been holding in a lot of trauma.” Randal Henry, Making Connections, Los Angeles.

Key Themes

1. Fostering Authentic Engagement Among Men and Boys

“When I think of authentic youth engagement, it has to look a lot of different ways because we have such different experiences, backgrounds, passions, and skills of the young people in our different communities,”

-Christopher Ramírez, Together for Brothers, Albuquerque, [podcast discussion on engaging youth leaders](#).

Key to transforming community-level conditions, from stigmas to employment opportunities, is authentic engagement of men and boys in the community to identify what needs to change and how to bring about these changes, and finally, to lead the work forward. For Making Connections communities, this means engaging men and boys in their respective populations of focus, which include men and boys of color, American Indians, and veterans. As convening discussions brought forward, the most effective approach to fostering this engagement is to work through the activities, places, and people that already serve as connectors in the community.

Consistently, Making Connections communities noted that many men seem more comfortable talking while doing. The activities through which men and boys engage are as diverse as the communities they represent, from video game tournaments among young men of color in Albuquerque's International District, to planting food in Tacoma, Washington, to building bikes in Kokua Kalihi Valley, Hawai'i.

Convening partners offered a variety of examples of engaging men and boys through activities:

- In the discussion on elevating indigenous wisdom ([listen here](#)), Jeffrey Tangonan Acido, the lead for Kokua Kalihi Valley's Making Connections work, talked about the exchanges that take place during traditional gatherings in Hawai'i that incorporate planting and preparing food: “All of the things you needed to know happened when you were eating, happened when you were cooking, when you were planting.”
- Ivy Lim-Carter, Men's Health Program Manager at Movember Canada, described a mental health initiative among Inuit youth in Northern Canada in which men connect through land-based cultural practices including fishing, hunting, and dog sledding.
- Resilience Grows Here (RGH), the Making Connections partner in Connecticut, connects with veterans through the help of a support dog, Anzac. “We have vets who told us the only way they could begin to address the trauma was through dogs,” said Project Manager Justine Ginsberg. “So we got a service dog. And the most magical thing happened when we listened to what the community needed: This dog started the conversation for us.” She said Anzac serves as a bridge with veterans who otherwise may feel uncomfortable talking about mental health issues;

often, veterans will speak directly to the dog rather than the person accompanying him. Anzac also has helped RGH connect with clergy and mental health workers at the Bradley Air National Guard base. [Read more about Anzac here.](#)

Also important for fostering engagement, communities said, is creating a safe space. They shared their approaches for creating a sense of safety in the convening conversation *Progress at the Speed of Trust: Building a Common Narrative around Community Trauma, Healing and Solutions*. For example, members of the United Women of East Africa (UWEAST) in San Diego, which works with young men in the refugee/immigrant community of the City Heights neighborhood, said they found that it is helpful to build on existing relationships. Ramla Sahid, Executive Director of the Partnership for the Advancement of New Americans (PANA), a member of the San Diego coalition, said being transparent about who is invited to the table, why, and how the decision-making process is structured also can help lay the groundwork for building trust and healing individuals and communities.

In the discussion on youth engagement, Making Connections partners in Albuquerque talked about how they engaged young men in their planning process by training them to conduct their site's community assessment. The young men adapted the content and language of PI's [THRIVE framework](#) for assessing community conditions, gathered the data, and helped analyze the results. This allowed the youth to ask questions that were more relevant to the community, said Christopher Ramírez, co-director of Together for Brothers, which has partnered with the Albuquerque site.

Christopher's co-director, Xavier Barraza, said that involving the young men also helped foster deeper community connections. "I would say the most powerful thing wasn't what was in the survey or what came out of the survey but the interactions with their fellow community members." The experience illustrated that every opportunity for young men to engage with one other and with the community brings multiple benefits.

[Click here](#) to listen to a podcast discussion on engaging youth leaders featuring Tomás Madrigal, Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department; Lilly Berger, City and County of Denver; and Xavier Barraza and Christopher Ramírez of Together for Brothers in Albuquerque.



Participants in the youth engagement discussion added that it's important to recognize and be open to changing existing organizational practices and structures that may make it difficult or uninviting for young men to engage in the work. This includes creating paid leadership positions for young men and providing them with appropriate training and other support, as well as looking at organizational culture and ways that it may need to change to allow for different perspectives and broader participation—everything from the look and feel of offices to how meetings happen.

“When you're a gatekeeper, it's about opening the doors,” said Tomás Madrigal, of Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department, a Making Connections partner in Washington State. Tomás said an example of this is sharing resources, or even sharing responsibilities for resource allocation, for instance through methods such as a participatory budgeting process.

Approaches for fostering authentic engagement among men and boys include:

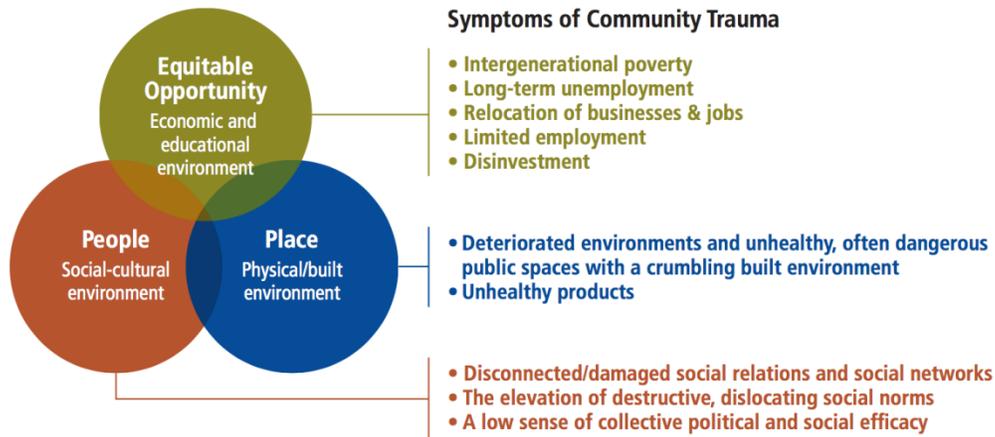
- Connecting in the places and through the activities with which men and boys are already engaged.
- Creating a safe space, including working through existing relationships, being transparent about goals, participants, and decision making.
- Engaging the population of focus at every level of the work, from planning and data gathering, to budget allocation, to implementation. Providing appropriate training to make that engagement effective.
- Being open to changing organizational practices and structures.

2. Moving Toward Healing and Resilience

“We come together all too often when things go bad. But we need to do it as a way to build peace.”

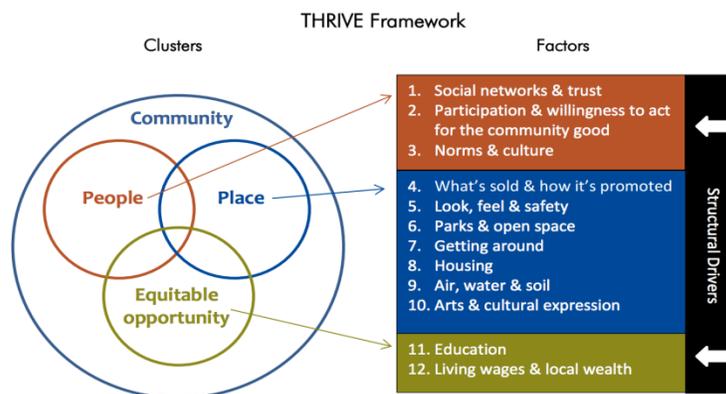
- Howard Pinderhughes, Associate Professor & Chair, UCSF School of Nursing and Prevention Institute partner

In a lunch dialogue led by Prevention Institute partner and UCSF Associate Professor Howard Pinderhughes on [Adverse Community Experiences and Resilience \(ACE | R\)](#), convening participants looked at opportunities to move their communities toward healing and resilience. A first step is identifying and addressing communities' trauma, or Adverse Community Experiences—the harm that individuals, families, and communities experience when structures, systems, policies, and practices prevent them from being able to meet their basic needs. The consequences of ongoing exposure to such stressors are negative conditions in the sociocultural, physical/built, and economic and educational environments, as illustrated in the following diagram.



Convening discussions explored the structural and institutional dynamics that contribute to stressful conditions that erode men's and boys' wellbeing—from heightened surveillance of immigrants, to lack of community supports for veterans transitioning from active duty, to inadequate educational opportunities for young men of color. Partners talked about approaches for addressing these contributing factors and reframing the focus of this work from addressing trauma to building resilience. Discussions revealed that while the concept of resilience is important, it is also essential to consider how we define and frame resilience, for instance, looking toward “bouncing forward” rather than “bouncing back” to what might not have been a positive place for the community.

In their first year of work, Making Connections sites found that the community sharing, learning, and organizing strategies that they used in their planning processes helped promote healing. Many sites adopted versions of the [THRIVE tool](#) to support this process. The tool enables community members to collectively examine and develop strategies to address conditions that can affect mental health and wellbeing.



In the discussion on elevating indigenous wisdom, participants talked about how indigenous practices helped promote healing in their planning processes. Partners from Tacoma convened a People's Movement Assembly (PMA), a gathering to collectively analyze and develop solutions to community problems, to explore the information they generated using the THRIVE tool. The PMA incorporated culturally grounded activities, including a community altar, music, and art. Partners in Kokua Kalihi Valley explored community needs and assets in culture circles—talk-story sessions that are rooted in popular education, a process that also emphasizes collective learning and decision-making.

At the end of the first year, partners have seen that these collaborative planning processes have helped to engage men and boys in envisioning changes they want to see in their communities, as well as how to get there. They have recognized the value of allowing time, space, and mindfulness around discussions that touch on sources of trauma. As a result, these processes have fostered connections and understanding that serve as the roots of resilience and healing.

Approaches for supporting healing and resilience include:

- Recognizing and addressing sources of trauma.
- Using collaborative planning processes that promote collective learning and decision making.
- When appropriate, incorporating indigenous practices of the population of focus.
- Bringing mindfulness to discussions on trauma.

3. Maximizing Impact by Moving Upstream

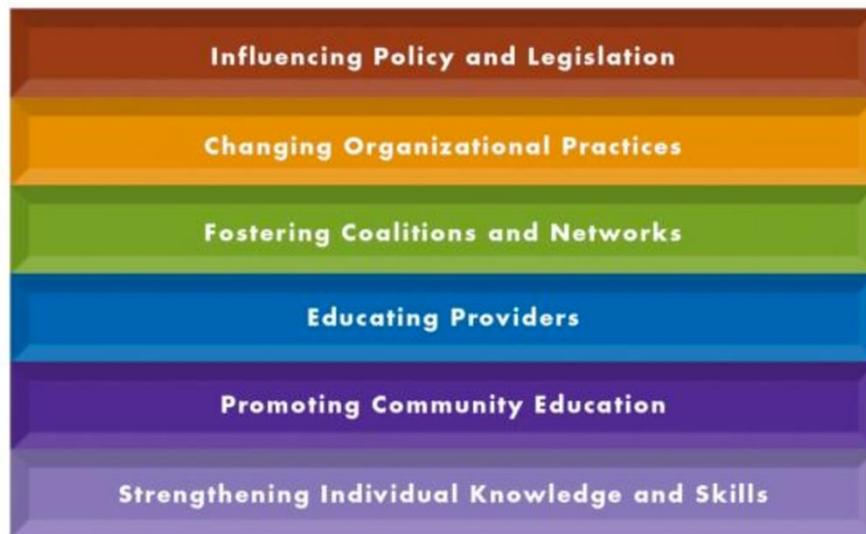
"If we keep going upstream, we go to where the stream is sacred."

- Jeffrey Tangonan Acido, Kokua Kalihi Valley, Hawai'i

In conversations about strategies that support lasting change, communities discussed the importance of addressing the structural factors and community conditions that contribute to mental health and wellbeing for men and boys community-wide. They acknowledged the temptation to focus on immediate needs—such as medical treatment for individuals, or educational supports that help one student at a time, or improved housing conditions for a single family—at the expense of addressing the upstream community factors that contribute to those needs. The convening provided partners with the opportunity to grapple with this tension and to develop practical strategies for addressing structural and community factors with the capacity and resources available in their communities.

Partners shared their approaches for identifying the most powerful leverage points for affecting change in priority areas identified by their communities. Fundamental to these approaches are tools such as PI's [Spectrum of Prevention](#), which lays out synergistic levels of activities to advance prevention, including equipping individuals with knowledge and skills, educating providers, changing organizational practices, and influencing policy.

THE SPECTRUM OF PREVENTION



Making Connections partners with the Southern Plains Tribal Health Board in Oklahoma described how they are addressing suicide prevention among youth by adapting the HOPE Squad peer support strategy. Students selected by their peers as leaders are learning how to use a QPR (question, persuade, refer) strategy to support other youth and refer them to help when appropriate. The HOPE Squad program is designed to build understanding about suicide and related mental health problems and community resources for addressing these problems, and to nurture connections among students and increase their willingness to accept help from their peers. The plan is to initiate the work in Riverside Indian School, and then expand to other schools in the community, which recently experienced a wave of teen suicides.

As part of moving upstream, the Nebraska Association of Local Health Directors, which is working with local health departments and veterans across the state, began with a series of conversations to raise awareness around the concerns of veterans and their families. In a convening discussion about building community trust and hopefulness, Project Lead Susan Bockrath described how her state's veteran population has been largely geographically isolated and socially invisible. "We want health districts and their partners across Nebraska...to understand the veteran experience and how that impacts the whole community's health, as well as family wellbeing," she said.

In addition to connecting veterans to provider resources, the site is organizing and advancing practice change—establishing a local point of contact for families, and creating a “no wrong door” philosophy across the system of public health partners. The partnership intends to promote these strategies in local and state policy and as a national model to inform federal policy for larger impact.

Similarly, Making Connections partners in Boston are working at a variety of different Spectrum levels, from educating individuals, to advocating for policy changes that address economic stress and displacement, which have a particularly significant impact on men. In a [video conversation](#) with fellow Making Connections communities about strategies for development without displacement, Marcos Beleche, Associate Director of the Codman Square Neighborhood Development Corporation in Boston, said his community's efforts range from helping aging residents who are homeowners with estate planning to the successful passage in November of the Community Preservation Act, which includes a tax levy that will help support affordable housing.

Working across the Spectrum enables communities to connect individuals, foster collaboration among organizations, and transform policies and practices that pose barriers for men's and boys' mental health and wellbeing.

Approaches for maximizing impact by moving upstream include strategies that span the Spectrum of Prevention, such as:

- Broadening community understanding, connections, and engagement, e.g., the HOPE Squad peer-to-peer suicide prevention strategy.
- Changing organizational practices, e.g., providers' “no wrong door” approach for serving veterans and their families.
- Advocating for policy changes, e.g., tax levy to support affordable housing.

4. Building Sustainable Infrastructures

“Despite the fact that we have a long history of resettling refugees, our city has not acknowledged the strength of those communities.”

- Ramla Sahid, Executive Director, PANA, Partnership for the Advancement of New Americans, San Diego

A common challenge in undertaking ambitious, transformative efforts to improve conditions that affect men's and boys' mental wellbeing is finding ways to embed the work in the community so it will endure beyond grant cycles, leadership transitions, and shifting political climates. Several key strategies emerged at the convening for sustaining this work: recognizing and nurturing existing assets, including indigenous

approaches; building skills and capacities; engaging across diverse communities to ensure all partners are committed to the work; and undertaking thoughtful planning that considers questions such as whether these transformations could bring negative consequences like displacement.

Communities agreed that sustainability relies on seeing and drawing on community strengths, from bonds across generations, to historical knowledge, to peer supports.

In the [discussion on indigenous wisdom](#), participants explored the possibilities that emerge when communities look beyond Western clinical approaches. One example that resonated across communities is collectively planting, growing, and preparing food, in the process creating common experiences that connect boys and men with the land and one another. “There’s a really important... aspect of collectively, communally taking care of one another that has implications across so many other things outside of making that meal,” said Christopher Ramírez, of Together for Brothers in Albuquerque.

Participants in the indigenous wisdom conversation talked about how wisdom that has endured for thousands of years can instill a sense of belonging and connection among men and boys and offer a more positive, resilient frame of reference. Kokua Kalihi Valley’s Jeffrey Tangonan Acido described the Hawai’ian concept of *weiwai*, or wealth, which “monetizes” knowledge that is not always explicitly valued in Western culture, such as knowing how to build a house, or how to speak different languages. “Indigenous wisdoms move out of a framework of wealth,” he said. “We have a lot... that we can expand and grow and nurture.”

Expanding the notion of wealth makes it easier to see the array of talents and assets that men and boys can contribute toward transforming their communities as well as their own futures. This framework extends to being mindful of the origins and integrity of these resources that are rooted in the land and that are intended to contribute to generations of community wealth and wellbeing. Speaking of the water resources potentially imperiled by the Dakota Access Pipeline, Jeffrey said: “This is water that another community will drink, that seven generations from now they will be drinking, so that’s what we have to be thinking about.”

[Click here to listen](#) to a podcast on Elevating Indigenous Wisdom featuring Jeffrey Tangonan Acido, Kokua Kalihi Valley; Tomás Madrigal, Tacoma; Tamara James, Oklahoma; and Christopher Ramírez, Albuquerque.

Partners identified intentional community engagement as a fundamental aspect of sustaining the work to transform community conditions to improve men’s and boys’ mental wellbeing. One element of this is identifying existing efforts and connecting

them to discover common aims. This approach leverages the deep commitment of groups that have been working in these communities. "The reason partners stay at the table is because we were already doing this work," said Carmetrus Parker, from the Urban League, a partner in Tacoma's Making Connections work. Another element is staying in relationship; not simply asking questions or extracting information and vanishing. PI Director Sheila Savannah drew parallels between recycling and sustainable engagement: use everything you have, minimize waste, and reinvest in ways that are meaningful. Critical to this cycle of renewal, she said, is ensuring that everyone at the table is actively contributing in some way, whether it's with time, talent, or other resources. This builds shared and sustainable systems.

Also key for sustainability, partners said, is capacity building, particularly among young men. "If we're really invested in prevention, we have to have a youth component," said Tomás Madrigal, from Tacoma. "We have to seriously take that role or that responsibility of advancing youth leadership and youth wellbeing and health. These are the folks that are going to grow up to do this work. If you want to do prevention, you have to do youth work, no matter how hard it is and no matter the setbacks you might experience."

Finally, convening conversations highlighted the importance of considering and addressing unintentional consequences of the work, for example the possibility that improvements arising from community members' efforts may result in increased investment and development that ultimately prices them out of their own neighborhoods. This displacement can be especially stressful for men, who have been socialized to be providers.

In a discussion on development without displacement with community members from Boston, New Orleans and San Diego, Ramla Sahid described the challenges she's seeing in San Diego, where the workers serving the rapidly growing tourism industry cannot afford to live where they work. "What's particularly tragic is that you've got investments in communities, to deal with blight, to deal with crime, to deal with poverty issues and then...the community gets pushed out," she said. "So the communities that worked so hard to make their livelihoods better, their communities better, don't get to benefit from the good that they've created."

Marcos Beleche, of Boston's Codman Square Neighborhood Development Corporation, said his group is working to help aging home owners consider whether they want to hold on to their properties and perhaps include them in their estate planning. In a convening panel discussion, he put it this way: "It's now an act of resistance to say, 'No, I will not sell.'"

Sallie Bachman, from HopeHealth in Florence, South Carolina, talked about how HopeHealth has been intentional about growing in a way that reflects the community, including tapping board members that well represent the patients and populations they serve, and building new facilities along bus lines to reduce barriers to access, especially as more people move into the more rural areas of the region.

[Click here](#) to view the video discussion on *Development Without Displacement* featuring Charles Corprew, President of WYRevolution Consulting in New Orleans; Marcos Beleche, Associate Director at Codman Square Neighborhood Development Corporation, Boston; and Ramla Sahid, Executive Director, PANA, Partnership for the Advancement of New Americans, which is working in San Diego's City Heights neighborhood.

Approaches for building sustainable infrastructures include:

- Seeing and drawing on community strengths, including existing partnerships and indigenous practices and frameworks.
- Being intentional about community engagement; recognizing and building on existing efforts, ensuring that all partners remain actively involved and contributing.
- Building capacity to support engagement.
- Considering and addressing unintentional consequences, e.g., creating development plans that will not displace existing residents.

Final thoughts

In the closing circle of the convening, participants honored the wisdom, experience, and power of the Making Connections community. Many said the convening had fortified them to do the slow, steady work of improving community conditions for men's and boys' mental wellbeing.

Changing mental health and wellbeing for men and boys is tough work, and so this is a place where they can draw inspiration, they can remind each other that yes, this is hard but yes, this is essential.

- Sheila Savannah, Director, Prevention Institute