



**Connecticut Community Foundation  
2014 Women's Issues Planning:**

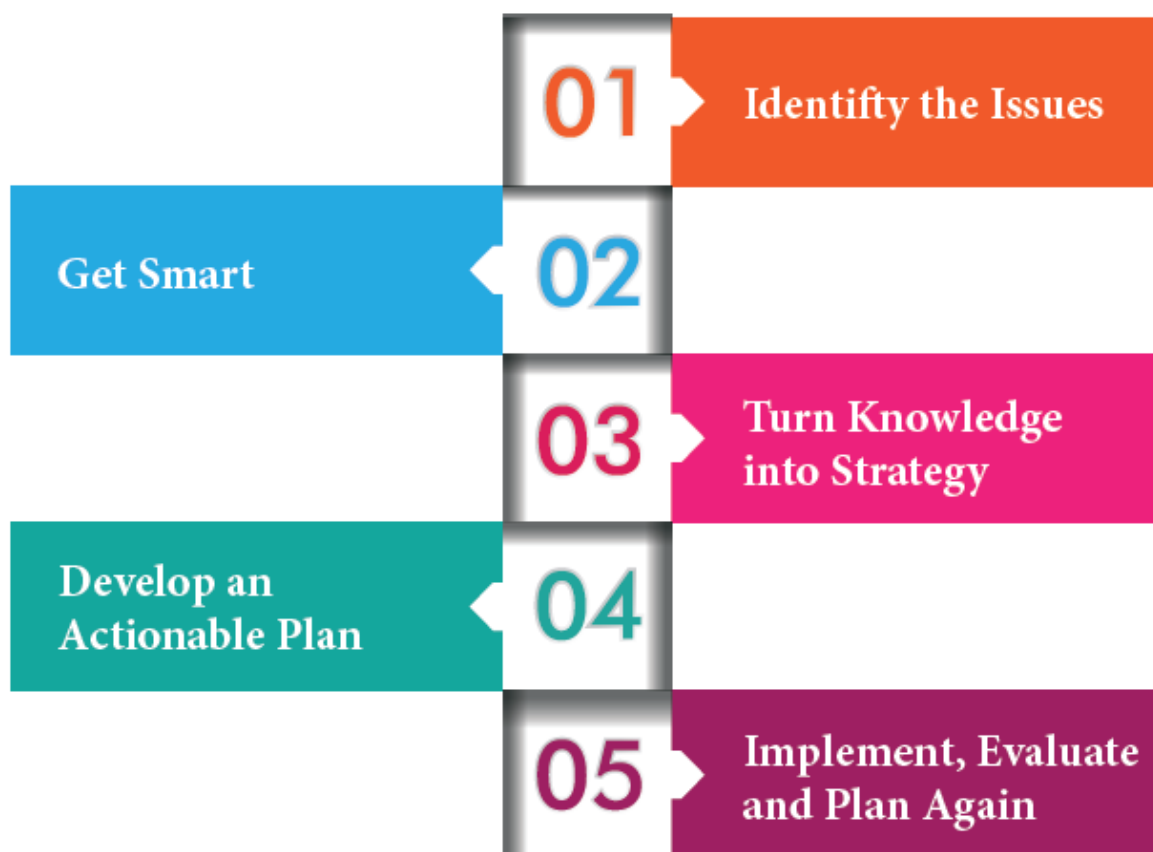
**Community Voices, Research Findings  
& A New Direction**

November, 2014

## Connecticut Community Foundation 2014 Women's Issues Planning: Community Voices, Research Findings & A New Direction

The 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Connecticut Community Foundation's Women's Fund prompted not only celebration but also contemplation. Reflecting on our grantmaking and other activities on behalf of women over the years and looking toward the future, we undertook an intensive effort in 2014 to listen to women and girls from across our 21-town region, to understand the issues they consider most important, and to think strategically about how the Foundation's resources – including the Women's Fund, various other funds held by the foundation that benefit women, and the Foundation's leadership activities – might best be deployed to maximize impact in a focused and strategic way.

We have followed the five-phase process depicted below in our efforts to refocus and strategize about the future of the Foundation's activities:



This document summarizes the work of the first three phases in this process and articulates a new strategic focus that will guide the Foundation as we craft a plan of action.

## Identifying the Issues

The Foundation conducted ten brainstorming sessions throughout our 21-town region in 2014. 165 women and girls participated in these discussions, which included broad cross-sections of women who met in Southbury, Litchfield, Woodbury, Cheshire, and Waterbury, as well as special gatherings of older women, teens, and women from college age into their forties.

Participants in each session brainstormed issues that affect women and girls in our community. After the groups generated dozens of ideas, each participant voted individually, awarding one vote to the issue she considered most pressing or deserving of the Foundation's attention and another vote to a second top priority.<sup>1</sup>

Collectively, participants articulated more than 300 ideas. These were striking both for their diversity and for what they had in common. While people identified an array of concerns that ranged broadly from literacy to parenting skills to globalization to STEM education to the challenges facing the so-called sandwich generation, when it came time to vote, participants across all sessions zeroed in on consistent issues and themes.

The table below summarizes first and second priority votes for the top clusters of issues across all sessions.<sup>2</sup>

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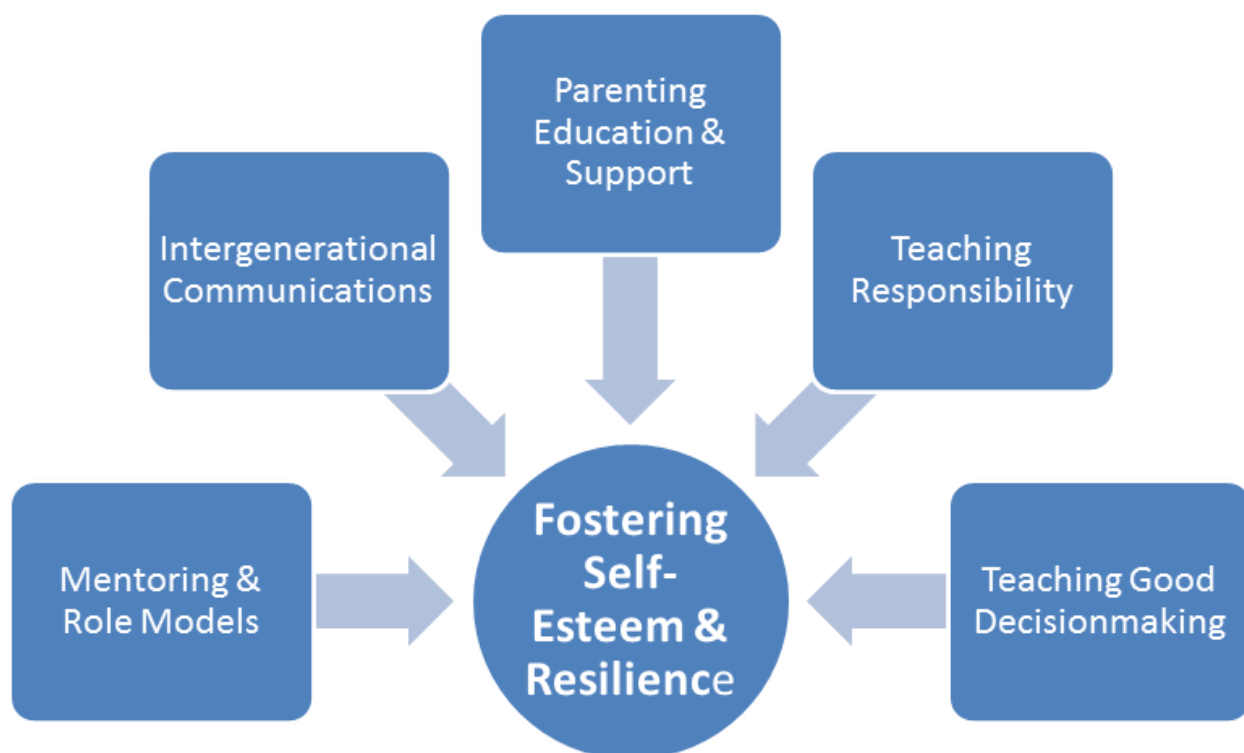
<sup>1</sup> We also invited each participant to identify any single issue about which she had insufficient information or wanted to learn more, and another single issue she did not consider appropriate for the Foundation's focus. This document does not summarize these votes, except to note that issues related to the strategic focus discussed below did not attract significant numbers of votes indicating the Foundation should not address them, the presence of which might have suggested a lack of consensus about priority issues.

<sup>2</sup> In some cases, the table reflects subjective determinations that specific issues fit into a broader category. For example, votes for "feelings of worthlessness among teens" are reflected in the self-esteem/self-respect for girls/adolescents category.

Issue	First & Second Priority Votes
Mentoring/role models/intergenerational communications	31
Self-esteem/self-respect for girls/adolescents	24
Parenting education/support	20
Teaching responsibility and good decision-making; fostering resilience	17
Housing issues facing older women	15
Financial literacy/life skills	13
Activities to engage girls	12
Pay equity/living wage	6
Bullying (various stages in life)	5
Mental health	4
Isolation/engagement of older women	4

## Getting Smart

Among the issues listed in the table and deemed most important by the brainstorming groups, a number overlap and have particularly strong impacts on girls and young women. In particular, several pertain to the core aims of fostering self-esteem and resilience, as depicted below.



***Together, issues relevant to girls’ self-esteem, confidence, and resilience garnered 104 first and second priority votes*** – a clear mandate to further explore how the Foundation might have an impact in these areas.

Before narrowing the focus of our research, we also considered certain other relatively high vote-earners and determined that they either were too dependent on broad economic factors for the Foundation to have an opportunity to make significant impact with its funds earmarked for women (e.g. pay equity/living wage), or were being or could be addressed by other Foundation program areas (e.g. housing and isolation issues of older women, both within the scope of our Pathways for Older Adults program).

### *Survey of Research*

We surveyed available national research on the issues identified by participants in our brainstorming exercise as most important. The research validated these issues as major areas of concern and need. Studies particularly underscored the problem of low self-

esteem among pre-teen teenage girls, and suggested that activities targeting pre-teen girls might have the greatest impact. As a report by the Girl Scouts of America reported, **“7 out of 10 girls ages 8 through 17 have negative opinions about themselves in some capacity** – regarding their looks, school performance, or relationships with peers or family.”<sup>3</sup> Sixty-one percent of girls with low self-esteem **talk negatively about themselves**, and 75 percent report **“disordered eating, cutting themselves, bullying others, or smoking or drinking**, compared with 25 percent of girls with high self-esteem.”<sup>4</sup> Research demonstrates that **positive role models, tools for coping with stress-inducing events, and healthy relationships** can help girls manage the peer and societal pressures that lead to low self-esteem and low self-confidence.

Low self-esteem in the pre-teen and teen years can have a lasting impact, and may be related to a woman’s overall success in education, occupation, and income. The American Association of University Women (AAUW)<sup>5</sup> has determined that girls’ self-esteem drops sharply during the transition from childhood to early adolescence. AAUW research has found that **“girls’ self-esteem dropped significantly as they made the transition from elementary to middle school whereas boys’ self-esteem did not drop as much. By high school, adolescent girls were less confident of their math and science abilities, were less interested in these courses, and expressed lower career aspirations than boys.”**<sup>6</sup> A study in New Haven conducted by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research drew the same conclusion in our back yard: “Although girls generally outperform their male peers in New Haven’s public schools in the third through eighth grades, their relative success compared with boys in high school is more mixed.”<sup>7</sup>

As with self-esteem, the research validated our participants’ interest in encouraging responsibility, good decision-making, and resilience. Research reveals that the key factors in promoting resilience are the individual herself; the degree of functioning, positive family

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<sup>3</sup> Schoenberg, Judy, Kamla Modi, Kimberlee Salmond, Mark Mather, and Linda Jacobsen. *The State of Girls: Unfinished Business*. Rep. New York: Girl Scouts of the USA, 2013 (citing The Dove Self-Esteem Fund, “Real Girls, Real Pressure: A National Report on the State of Self-Esteem,” June 2008). 56. Print.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> The AAUW has been studying these issues for decades. Many of the indicators of poor self-esteem identified in the organization’s pivotal work in the early 1990s continue to be relevant today and to be cited and scrutinized in current research by many in the field.

<sup>6</sup> Mahaffy, Kimberly A. “Girls’ Low Self-Esteem: How is it Related to Later Socioeconomic Achievements?” *Gender and Society*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Vol. 18. N.p.: Sage Publications, 2004. 309. Print.

<sup>7</sup> Hess, Cynthia, Rhiana Gunn-Wright, and Claudia Williams. *The Status of Women and Girls in New Haven, Connecticut*. Rep. Washington D.C.: Institute for Women’s Policy Research, 2012. Print. 45.

support; binding and stable discipline; and the community and environment, which provide social support.<sup>8</sup> A recent Girl Scouts study concluded that girls need **programs that promote advocacy and skill development while fostering resilience**.<sup>9</sup> More broadly, encouraging resiliency – as well as self-esteem and self-respect – involves positive role models and mentors and intergenerational relationships (categories rated highly by our session participants).

### *Local Context*

In order to confirm that the issues considered most salient to the participants in our brainstorming sessions are in fact in need of resources within our community, we looked to local data. In particular, many of the towns we serve regularly assess the degree to which teens report possessing forty different Developmental Assets, validated by the Search Institute, a Minneapolis-based organization that promotes the well-being of children and adolescents nationally.

We looked specifically at the local data on self-esteem – part of a category of assets linked to positive identity – broken out by sex. The table below reports the percentages of students by town who report having high self-esteem:<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Fleshman, Paula, and Judy Schoenberg. *The Resilience Factor: A Key to Leadership in African American and Hispanic Girls*. Publication. Girl Scout Research Institute, 2011. Web. 13 Aug. 2014. 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 11.

<sup>10</sup> Based on ranked responses to the following statements: (1) On the whole, I like myself; (2) At times, I think I am no good at all; (3) All in all, I am glad I am me; and (4) I feel I do not have much to be proud of.

### Students in Grades 7-12 Who Report Having High Self-Esteem

Area	Total	Males	Females
National Sample (2010)	52%	55%	49%
Naugatuck	47%	59%	34%
Region 14 (Bethlehem, Woodbury) (2009)	54%	58%	51%
Region 15 (Middlebury, Southbury) (2011)	56%	59%	54%
Thomaston	44%	56%	33%
Waterbury (2013, not broken out by sex)	51%		
Watertown (2011)	51%	60%	43%
Wolcott (2012)	52%	61%	45%

As the data reflect, in many of the communities we serve **less than half of girls in the 7<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grades report having high self-esteem, and in every town surveyed girls' self-esteem lags considerably behind boys.**

#### *Discussions With Local Agencies*

In the course of researching these issues, Foundation staff has had informal conversations with several local agencies that serve teens. The goal was to determine whether there are evidence-based programs that are already in use locally or that might be expanded or replicated in our area should the Foundation make girls' self-esteem a focus area and should area agencies – individually or in collaboration – be interested. The agencies have all agreed that this is a critical issue for girls where the Foundation could have a positive local impact. Several report that there are few truly evidence-based programs whose results have been tested and validated over time, in large part due to the difficulty in tracking girls who have participated in a single program over a course of several years to determine outcomes in college and career. However, these organizations did cite the following evidence-based programs and approaches to the issues as some they might be interested in exploring if they had access to sufficient resources:

- **Girls Circle.** This is an evidence-based program for girls ages 9-18 that offers structured support groups and focuses on being responsive to adolescent female development by taking into consideration the effects of a girl's culture, gender, relationships and environment and by establishing group experiences that



recognize and foster girls' capacities for healthy relationships, empathy, self-expression, and other skills. The program aims to foster accountability through "strengths-based, motivational interviewing principles and practices that generate awareness and ownership of decisions and goals within a collective atmosphere of support." The California-based program began in the 1990s and is used in hundreds of programs throughout the country, including several in Connecticut.

- **Media Literacy.** Several organizations we met with agreed on the importance of programs that enable girls to view the media in which they are immersed critically and to deconstruct it. The program would be part of an effort to promote healthy body image. Some Girls Inc. chapters may have implemented such programs; Girls Inc. of Southwestern Connecticut in Waterbury is looking into programs in other areas and will provide us the information it finds.
- **Girls on the Run.** This physical activity-based program for girls in the 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grades teaches life skills through dynamic, interactive lessons and running games. The program aims to unleash confidence through accomplishment while instilling an appreciation of health and fitness. The program began in North Carolina in the late 1990s and currently serves over 150,000 girls in more than 200 communities in North America. (The cost for a local start-up is estimated to be \$7,500.)
- **Positive Youth Development Programs.** The Oregon Commission on Children and Families has compiled a list of model programs that rely on Positive Youth Development, a perspective that supports young people in developing a sense of competence, usefulness, belonging, and empowerment. Some examples include Beacons (school-based centers for disadvantaged youth, not necessarily gender-specific) and Big Brothers/Big Sisters. The Oregon agency has also compiled a list of resources and was recommended by CNVRAC as a potential source of good information about replicable programs. Wake County, NC has also compiled resources on Positive Youth Development programming.

The programs described above demonstrate the existence of strong programming and interest among area nonprofits in addressing issues affecting girls' self-esteem. The list is not exhaustive, nor is it certain that any organization or group of organizations would ultimately seek funding to implement one of these particular programs. The Foundation anticipates convening nonprofits and other organizations that serve girls throughout our region and encouraging them to identify model programs, build on successful programming that is already under way, and collaborate when possible to ensure the broadest impact possible.

## Turning Knowledge Into Strategy & Developing an Actionable Plan

In October, 2014, the Women's Issues Committee met to review the results of the brainstorming sessions and the information revealed by the research and in our discussion with area nonprofits. Having reviewed all of the input and information available to it, the Women's Issues Committee articulated the following as the focus of its efforts beginning in 2015:

**Identifying, convening, and supporting programs that promote advocacy and skill development while fostering resilience, self-esteem, and self-respect among girls and young women.**

This new focus will guide the Committee's grantmaking and other efforts. Early in 2015, the Foundation will convene agencies in our region that serve girls in order to explore possible approaches to addressing self-esteem and resilience in this population, and to encourage collaboration among organizations to maximize the impact of the available resources.

In connection with establishing this new focus, the Committee assessed the overall funding context within the Foundation, considering flexible funds that could be applied to a new focus as well as restricted funds that could serve complementary purposes.

The **Women's Fund** is an endowed fund and the primary source of flexible grant money available through the Foundation for programs that benefit women and girls. It is from this fund that the majority of grants in support of the new strategic focus will flow. **The Fund's current balance is \$558,000, and it will have \$47,238 available to grant in 2015.**<sup>11</sup>

As the Committee considered its strategic approach – and particularly as it explored the idea of *not* focusing its grantmaking in certain areas that may have been highlighted in the brainstorming sessions as being important to the lives of women and girls – it also considered other funds available through the Foundation for grantmaking beyond the Women's Fund. In addition to the Women's Fund, the following endowed funds are available to address a variety of the issues raised during our brainstorming exercises:

- **Lois Livingston McMillen Fund.** The McMillen Fund provides assistance to agencies that serve women and children who are victims of physical, emotional or psychological abuse, sexual assault and domestic violence. In 2014, the McMillen fund granted \$26,105 to six organizations at the direction of the Women's Issues

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<sup>11</sup> The amount available to grant for 2015 is higher than it has been for prior years because it reflects gifts made in 2013 for current grantmaking (non-endowment) and because we did not have a grant round for the Women's Fund in 2014.

Committee. *Current endowment fund balance: \$1.4 million; available to grant in 2015: \$37,239.*

- **Pathways for Older Adults.** Pathways is a program of the Foundation funded by the East Hill Woods Fund, which is a very large fund at the Foundation. Pathways works exclusively to address issues of concern to older adults, and would be an appropriate place to address a number of the issues raised during our brainstorming sessions that affected older women. *Current endowment fund balance: \$11.7 million; available to grant in 2015: \$345,588.*
- **James & Lydie Strobridge Fund.** The amount available to spend in this fund is designated every year for Planned Parenthood of Southern New England. Future grants could be targeted to address particular issues within the scope of the health, education and policy programs Planned Parenthood provides. *Current endowment fund balance: \$994,000; available to grant in 2015: \$29,967.*
- **Margaret M. Hallden Fund.** The amount available to grant from this fund is divided among the local chapters of the American Heart Association and the American Cancer Society. Future grants could be targeted to address particular issues raised during our sessions that fall within the purview of these organizations, such as nutrition, fitness, and wellness for women of all ages. *Current endowment fund balance: \$5.9 million; available to grant in 2015: \$179,767.*
- **Whittemore Women & Children Fund, the George A. Goss Jr. Fund, and the Fannie B. Wheeler Fund.** Each of these funds has aims consistent with the Women's Fund. Amounts available to grant from each of these funds are transferred to the Women's Fund annually. *Combined balance of these three endowment funds: \$282,000; available to grant in 2015 (combined): \$8,501.*

The availability of these other funding sources ensures that, while Women's Fund resources will primarily target programs aimed at fostering self-esteem and resilience in girls and young women, the Foundation will still have means of supporting work in other areas that affect women and girls in our region.

## Summary

Our efforts this year to engage women and girls throughout our region in discussions about the issues that matter most to them have been eye-opening and inspiring. We have been struck both by the overall breadth of issues in play, and by the broadly shared sense that certain key issues and needs – self-esteem, resilience, mentoring,

responsibility, good decision-making – are of immediate critical importance. The Women’s Issues Committee and Foundation staff envision that what we have learned and the direction the Committee has charted will shape the Foundation’s grantmaking and other related activities aimed at women and girls in the years to come.

We are grateful to all who have contributed, and look forward to reporting on our progress in the future.