

The Development of a Community Research Alliance (CRA)

The Community Research Alliance established in 2011, is a network of community organizations and institutions serving the Central Connecticut area. The CRA came into existence as a central feature of the UCONN Connecticut Institute for Clinical and Translational Science Community Engagement Center, offering the CICATS guidance and input from leading community voices to improve the contributions of science to the reduction of health disparities. Its members were dedicated to confronting health – related disparities and committed to the use of evaluation and community based health research partnerships to address them.

With initial support from the CICATS it grew from a core group of five community organizations to a network of 22 organizations from 2013 to 2016. As it clarified its mission and objectives, it became an independent alliance, with infrastructural support from the Institute for Community Research, Hartford, and in-kind time and resource contributions from member agencies. In 2018, the CRA formalized its structure, and sought funding to support a coordinator position from the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving. With a strategic plan in place, the Foundation provided three years of funding to grow the Alliance and its activities.

Below is a timeline that highlights the CRA’s activities from its inception to the present: **2011 – 2012**

There are disparities in access to valuable clinical trials because African American, Latinx and other, low resource communities do not know about them, and because of trust gaps between patients and medical researchers. To close this gap, a pilot training program to address questions about the conduct and availability of clinical trials, and actions community residents and organizations can take to ensure properly informed recruitment and engagement of Hartford area community residents in clinical trials was developed and implemented. Funding was provided by the CICATS. The curriculum was developed by ICR and supported by a consortium of interested community agency representatives in the Greater Hartford area and a selected group of informed clinical trial researchers from UCONN. The curriculum was tested for feasibility and acceptability with 5 members of 2 community-based organizations (CBOs). It was well accepted.

2013

With an increasing focus on new research approaches of community benefit including clinical trials research in the fields of drug development, genomics and tailored medicine, biotechnology developments, and community prevention research, it is important for communities, particularly underserved and marginalized groups, and the organizations that serve them, to be knowledgeable about these initiatives in Connecticut in order to ask the right questions, make informed decisions regarding participation and critique the process and outcomes of the research. ICR began work in collaboration with community organizations to ensure that appropriate information about and opportunities for research in these emerging fields are accessible to community organizations and the diverse populations that they serve. ICR developed a pilot survey to explore issues around participation in and use of research results and tested it with 12 CBOs. In June, 2013 representatives from 7 of the 12 organizations met to review survey responses and discuss interest in developing a community research alliance.

The positive initial community response to the concept of a Community Research Alliance provided a strong argument to support its establishment. The first members of the CRA agreed to meet regularly and to work in collaboration with other researchers and community-based organizations to contribute to the development of high quality cutting edge health research that could benefit communities experiencing health disparities resulting from inequitable access to health care and treatment innovations.

2014

The CRA expanded to 19 CBOs and continued its work to develop, expand and sustain a stable Community Research Alliance by working on priority projects. The first project of the CRA members was to create Guidelines for Community Partnership Research. The guidelines developed “best practices” for researchers and community organizations to create strong research partnerships around practical studies with scientific and social value. CRA Members and ICR staff drafted guidelines which were reviewed by all CRA members and approved. Next they were reviewed together by CRA members and UCONN Health, UCONN Storrs, UHAR and USJ researchers. There are three versions of the guidelines: a) a one page document entitled *Principles for Effective Community Partnership Research*; b) a longer Executive Summary; c) a backup document with references called *Guidelines for Community Partnership Research, an Executive Summary*. The guidelines are posted on the CRA website and the ICR website.

2015

In 2015, CRA meetings continued with a focus on CBO capacity building. This involved presentations by researchers on their current work and discussions around collaboration possibilities; a collaborative research training curriculum for all experience levels. During this year and part of 2016, in facilitated exercises, the CRA developed the Community Research Agenda. The result is a list of general topics considered to be of priority interest in the Hartford urban area with research related questions, potential groups or demographics that could benefit from research in that area, and organizations interested in each topic. Several meetings between CBOs and researchers from CCMC were held to discuss possible research on children. We learned that these meetings needed more lead up training and follow-up technical assistance. CBOs and researchers need this support to continue their development.

2016

Some members of the CRA continued to meet on a regular basis in 2016 without funding forming an informal steering committee. Membership expanded and the SC promoted the network with university faculty, and began to plan to formalize its infrastructure.

2017

2017 marked the creation of a functioning steering committee, co-chairs, a mission statement, a set of goals and objectives, and a plan to move forward that included a search for financial support for a part time coordinator. Since our inception, we maintain our vision that, working collaboratively, we can strengthen alliances, conduct research and build programs that have great potential to benefit both communities and researchers, and to further the goal of decreasing health disparities through equitable, accessible and ethical research partnerships.

2018

The CRA Steering Committee continued to meet on a regular basis and developed and submitted a proposal for support for the coordinator position over the year. The CRA also partnered with the UCONN center InCHIP – the Institute for Collaboration on Health, Intervention and Policy – on a large scale FORUM held at the main library in Hartford that brought community organizations and other institutions together with university-wide faculty, students and other researchers. 137 people responded, and 88 attended. The program included CRA organizations partnering with UCONN researchers. Some long term relationships developed from this event.

2019

The CRA was awarded funding from the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving to increase the capacity of the Alliance. We hired a part-time Coordinator and we increased Steering Committee and Affiliate membership. The Alliance is focused on establishing new funding mechanisms and increasing our presence in the community and within academics institutions through networking events, presentations of interest to community agencies, and negotiation of researcher/CBO relationships. Events in 2019 are listed on the CRA website: <https://cracthealth.org/events/>

2020

In 2020 The Steering Committee meets regularly every 2 months or as needed. We hosted our first all Alliance Quarterly Meeting. The CRA website is in development. More workshops and events are planned, both virtual and, when possible, face to face. The CRA developed a partnership with the UCONN Department of Public Health Sciences focused on facilitating dialogue between CRA affiliates and department faculty interested in community based collaborative research.

We will continue to host community workshops and trainings to address the needs and interests of affiliate organizations and to enhance the capacity of organizations and university faculty to work together for a common goal - to decrease health disparities in Connecticut.

Acknowledgements

- * Since May 2020, the UCONN Department of Public Health Sciences has provided funding and support to assist in building community-based research partnerships between CRA affiliates and department faculty. Special thanks to Department Chair Douglas Brugge for supporting the CRA's vision to develop community-based collaborative research partnerships.
- * Founding members include: Jean Schensul, ICR, Candida Flores, Family Life Education, Martha Page, Hartford Food System, Robyn Harper-Gulley, NCAAA, Kim Radda, ICR, Grace Damio, Hispanic Health Council. Since 2011 **Initiating Members** of the CRA have dedicated their time and effort and personal resources to CRA meetings, activities and materials development.
- * Since 2010 the **Institute for Community Research** has provided institutional support as a base for the Community Research Alliance including staff time, meeting space,

materials development and communications links. Special thanks to ICR Executive Director Margaret Weeks for supporting the concept of the CRA.

- * **The UCONN CICATS** provided two years of staff funding to support the formation of the CRA. Special thanks to Judith Fifield, and Linda Barry, for their belief in community engaged research.