Northern Illinois University
Application for the C. Peter Magrath University
Community Engagement Award

Community Collaboration, Incorporated

Principal Contact
Anne C. Kaplan, Ph.D.
307 Lowden Hall
Northern Illinois University
DeKalb, IL 60115
(815) 753-9503
akaplan@niu.edu

Region
North Central
Section 1. Abstract

Ten years ago, Northern Illinois University (NIU) and partners in Rockford, Illinois, faced an urgent problem well known across the nation: how to reduce the number of homeless people on the streets? Homeless individuals and families bring a multiplicity of personal problems, a continuing impact on local resources, and, too often, heart-breaking tragedies to the community. In the Community Collaboration, Inc. (CCI) project, NIU faculty, students, and community partners created a powerful solution that is revolutionizing social services and rebuilding lives. The partners developed collaborative, web-based case management tools that allow historically isolated service agencies to reduce homelessness by sharing information and expertise. Clients and agency staff now work together, using CCI software to create holistic, goal-oriented, recovery plans. Each agency does what it does best (e.g. food, shelter, advocacy, healthcare, substance-abuse counseling, job training) and then collaborates online in real time, communicating needs, goals, and successes as clients move toward stability.

Grounded in NIU’s long-standing collaboration with Rockford’s government, social service, healthcare, workforce, and community development agencies, CCI demonstrates NIU’s commitment to engaged research, engaged teaching, and engaged service. Applied research on homelessness and related issues by NIU scholars informed the strategic planning process with CCI partners, while NIU facilitators nurtured the partnership across potential agency turf boundaries. Believing that this consortium was absolutely the right thing to do, the partners and a local foundation committed more than $1.5 million to the start-up. NIU technology experts listened to CCI practitioners as they devised the innovative tools that encourage inter-agency collaboration and improve homeless services. NIU faculty members are now developing courses that integrate innovative technologies into human services, and students are delivering services to the homeless in clinical experiences with CCI agencies.

As of 2011, successful improvement of services motivated over 850 licensed users in seven states to adopt CCI software for community initiatives, helping an estimated 120,000 people address barriers to quality of life and education. NIU and partners are transforming the way they work together and creating new opportunities for research, learning, and innovation regionally, nationally, and globally. CCI vividly illustrates the magic of collaboration and the power of engagement.
Section 2: Relationship and Reciprocity between the University and Community

What brought the university and community together as partners?

Northern Illinois University (NIU) and Rockford have worked together in partnership projects for over a century. The third largest city in Illinois, Rockford is located 39 miles from the university. NIU – a comprehensive doctoral university serving about 25,000 urban, suburban, and rural students – operates a regional center in Rockford; participates in a myriad of civic initiatives for economic and workforce development, health and human services, and quality of life; and supports an extensive network of area alumni. Since the decline of Rockford's manufacturing industry in recent decades, the city has experienced the state's highest rates of unemployment¹ and has seen a sharp increase in homelessness and poverty. A Rockford entrepreneur contacted NIU in 2000 for help designing Carpenters Place, a new program to aid the homeless. The program was successful but its impact was limited. Attention turned to developing a systemic, multi-agency approach to service delivery.

How does such engagement fit into the mission, values and organizational structure of the university?

NIU’s historical commitment to engagement with the region’s communities has been strongly reinforced by 21st century strategic planning. NIU’s mission states that

The faculty and staff of the university are committed to sharing their teaching, research, artistry, and professional expertise with members of the broader public. Through clinical and technical services, consulting, non-credit programs, and cultural activities, the university opens new channels of communication and returns a portion of its resources to the community from which it benefits.

NIU’s commitment to engagement has been recognized by the Carnegie Foundation designation as an Engaged University for both curricular engagement and outreach and partnerships. NIU’s organizational structure includes a division uniquely qualified to support the Community Collaboration, Inc. initiative. True to its title, Outreach, Engagement, and Information Technologies (OEIT) division integrates innovative technologies into its operations (e.g. academic courses, partnerships for regional development of all kinds, conference services).

¹ Local Area Unemployment Statistics: [LAUS. http://lmi.ides.state.il.us/laus/metro2010.htm](http://lmi.ides.state.il.us/laus/metro2010.htm)
Who are the key community and university partners?

**Community Partners**  The Carpenter’s Place, United Way of Rock River Valley, City of Rockford, Winnebago County Government; a private foundation

**University Partners**  OEIT: Center for Governmental Studies (CGS), Information Technology Services (ITS), Outreach Communications; Colleges of Business, Health and Human Sciences, Liberal Arts and Sciences

How did the university and community work together; what was the role of each partner?

In 2000, NIU partnered with Rockford contractor Allan Barsema through a College of Business social venture program to create the Carpenter’s Place, a homeless outreach center in Rockford. Barsema applied his project management skills and worked with NIU students, staff, and faculty to develop a database his staff could use to assess an individual’s needs, set life goals, help teach clients accountability, and transition them into stable housing. Frustrated that area agencies were not taking a systemic approach to addressing the causes of homelessness, Barsema approached NIU again in 2006 and worked with university partners to create a web-based “central nervous system” for social services. NIU provided financial support, strategic planning, and technology expertise for the partnership that became Community Collaboration, Inc. (CCI). The Vice-President for OEIT orchestrated services in her division and at NIU while NIU personnel and Barsema recruited local agencies.

OEIT’s Center for Governmental Studies (CGS) facilitated meetings among Rockford’s human service agencies, created a business plan, and developed inter-agency agreements. Another OEIT unit, ITS, developed CCI’s MPOWER software, the application that allows traditionally fragmented human service agencies to assess and address all client needs and to collaborate effectively on shared case plans in real time. ITS continues to provide CCI with software programming, database hosting, and network support critical to the web-based components. OEIT’s Outreach Communications created CCI’s marketing identity and designed a website and brochures to attract funders and clients. College of Business students conducted market feasibility research and recommended ways to make the software more competitive in the marketplace.
What did this partnership accomplish?

The CCI project produced a partnership infrastructure and software that allow providers from the traditionally fragmented human service delivery system to collaborate on cases for individuals and families. Agencies dealing with housing, healthcare, legal aid, food, mental health, childcare, job training, and other services can now holistically assess and address client needs. They can view, update, and jointly manage common case plans in real time, achieving goals for individuals, organizations, and the community. The software is compliant with HIPAA, HUD, and HMIS Security Regulations. More successful and cost-effective collaborative services are reducing homelessness and improving Rockford’s quality of life. By strengthening communication and respect between the university, human service agencies, and local governments, NIU and CCI have built a model for developing future collaborations in Rockford and elsewhere.

What were the anticipated benefits for the university and community partners?

The CCI partners hoped to reduce homelessness in Rockford and to initiate collaborative delivery of human services by local agencies to address other human needs. On his website for the Mayors’ Task Force on Homelessness, Rockford Mayor Larry Morrissey says his vision to reduce homelessness involves using “the services of the community in a cooperative and collaborative manner to achieve stabilization.” NIU saw opportunities for students to gain hands-on experience with real-world problems as they assisted in delivery of services and developed technology applications to serve the public good. CCI also presented new topics for university research and teaching on the efficacy of innovative technologies in human services. In addition, NIU’s reputation was expected to help recruit additional collaborators and funders for CCI.

Discuss how this project demonstrates shared decision making and empowerment of partners.

CGS’s strategic planning and partnership development activities engaged all stakeholders from the start. The partners agreed on a process for establishing CCI and committed substantial start-up funding. While NIU shared resources and expertise with community partners, the university also relied on the real-world experience of local case workers, providers, and government leaders. Core agency partners met throughout the software
development process to shape the tools to meet their collective needs and improve service delivery. Developers were also in regular contact with homeless individuals at service agencies, because they too needed to work as partners in their own renewal. Case managers now use CCI’s software, MPOWR, daily to make shared decisions about services for clients, and to help clients set goals to rebuild their lives.

Section 3: Impacts

3.1 What has been the impact on Community Partners? Collaboration, Accountability, and Expansion

NIU and CCI efforts helped introduce the language and methods of collaboration into Rockford’s dialog on homelessness and related social service issues. Agency and governmental entities continue to meet regularly to discuss better ways to serve the homeless and other distressed persons.

Carpenter’s Place Director of Guest Services, Cathy Barsema, states that the software generates greater accountability by all parties. Agencies use the reports to project budgetary needs, apply for additional funding, track staff performance, and monitor clients’ achievements. Because case workers from various agencies can now access each other’s information, they are motivated to create higher quality plans and more detailed notes to help their partners better understand an individual’s needs. Cheryl Rogers from Shelter Care Ministries sees stronger relationships among case workers in the shared system as they move clients together toward self-sufficiency and reduce duplication of services. The most important impact is on the homeless themselves. In 2009, the Carpenter’s Place alone provided case management to 1,386 individuals using CCI software and helped 321 long-term homeless find stable housing. “People bring in their goal sheets and are excited to show us what they’ve done,” says Cathy Barsema. Carpenter’s Place guests have found employment, maintained housing, and enrolled in higher education programs.

In a Winnebago County Jail reentry project, CCI software was used to assist homeless parolees and reduce recidivism. The 12-month project report showed that the recidivism rate for the 88 participants was 18%

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5 Barsema, Cathy. Director of Guest Services, Carpenter’s Place. Personal Interview. 17 Feb. 2011.
compared to the county average of 85%, and the average county jail stay for participants was 10 days compared to 77 days. The reduction in jail-stays alone saved Winnebago County an estimated $348,920 over one year.⁶

CCI’s impressive results have drawn added support. CCI founder Allan Barsema received the National Purpose Prize, which brought $100,000 to Carpenter’s Place and CCI-related ventures. CCI’s software has proven so successful in increasing collaboration and positive outcomes that over 140 agencies with 850 licensed users in seven states adopted it for community initiatives, helping an estimated 120,000 people address issues of homelessness, poverty, recidivism, truancy, unemployment, and other barriers to life and education.⁷

Identify initial funding that supported development of this outreach/engagement initiative

The CCI partners believed that CCI would dramatically improve delivery of cost-effective human services. They contributed the following start-up funds: City of Rockford, $200,000; Winnebago County, $288,000; United Way, $200,000; NIU, $200,000 in subsidized technology development; and $800,000 from a private foundation.

3.2 What has been the impact on University Partners?

NIU has placed many students in internships and service learning experiences with CCI partners such as Crusader Clinic, where nursing students complete community health rotations. Interacting with homeless individuals, students create posters addressing common homeless health concerns (such as blood pressure, diabetes, asthma, smoking cessation, HIV, and nutrition) and then present posters and deliver medical counseling to the homeless during health fairs. Students from Notre Dame, the University of Illinois, Judson University, Rock Valley, Rockford College, and Kishwaukee College also work with CCI providers on health and life skills training.

Faculty in the Division of Public Administration participated in development of the CCI partnership and placed student interns in Rockford. The university has created the new Center for Non-Governmental Leadership and Development (NGOLD), which “offers opportunities for engaged learning, scholarship and research, and skills enhancement of current nonprofit leaders.….” Recognizing the value of public and private collaboration, NIU invited Allan Barsema to join CGS as a Senior Research Associate working on social innovations.

⁷ Burchett, Steven H. President and CEO, Community Collaboration Inc. Personal Interview. 18 Mar. 2011.
How has the department/unit changed as a result of this partnership?

In OEIT, CCI’s success accelerated efforts to integrate innovative technologies into regional partnerships. For instance, the division has recruited faculty and staff in five colleges who will develop broadband applications with partners in education, healthcare, business, and cultural arts. These applications will utilize the 2,200 mile broadband network that the division is building with regional partners to 600 anchor institutions in nine northern Illinois counties, thanks to $68 million in state and federal funding. In another new direction, One Body Collaboratives is bringing the CCI model to scale by working with U.S. and international university partners to document the effectiveness of church and faith-based resources in addressing social issues.

Section 4: Lessons Learned and Best Practices

How did the community and university partners meet the challenges they faced?

Helping the university see the value of investing in a not-for-profit venture - NIU president John G. Peters grasped the public value of CCI and channeled $200,000 into Information Technology Services, so that ITS could afford to develop the CCI software at a reduced rate.

Addressing frustration and burnout among human service workers - Service agency personnel record “positives” on a daily basis by logging goals and steps their clients have completed. The computerized system also streamlines paperwork, helping case workers better manage their work and reducing staff turnover.

Ensuring that agencies could easily implement jointly-developed software - NIU created a web-based system that eliminated the need for new hardware and required only high-speed internet access. ITS worked with case managers throughout design, implementation, and training to ensure that the software was user-friendly, intuitive, and complemented their existing workflows.

Recognizing lack of communication between agencies not just in Rockford, but at the system level - NIU and its partners have joined forces with like-minded groups, such as the Illinois Association for Criminal Justice and the national Bridges Out of Poverty initiatives to raise awareness, facilitate dialogue, and suggest policy changes that encourage technology-supported collaborations at the state and federal levels.
What were the benefits of this partnership?

*Improved services and opportunities for Rockford’s most vulnerable populations* - Homelessness and recidivism of parolees are being reduced. Homes, food, jobs, healthcare, and education are available to more citizens, improving the local workforce and social climate.

*Increased efficiency and cost-effectiveness of social services* - Collaboration between agencies improves services, outcomes, and credibility with funders and clients. Other benefits include better working conditions and more rewarding careers for social services professionals.

*National recognition* - CCI received a 2010 Harvard Ash Center Innovation in American Government “Bright Idea” award, and Allan Barsema received the Civic Ventures 2010 National Purpose Prize and $100,000 for his leadership in forming CCI. NIU featured CCI in its applications for Carnegie recognition as an Engaged University.

*Evidence of university capacity* - NIU’s success in the CCI partnership demonstrated a unique capacity that combines developing partnerships and creating technology solutions for critical problems, a combination that attracted external funding and new partners.

What conclusions and best practices can be drawn from the partnership?

*Create a coalition of the willing* - Enthusiastic people will help identify and develop solutions for project success instead of focusing on barriers.

*Combine solid methodology with useable software tools* - While CCI software makes information-sharing possible, the power of this system resides in its foundation of action-oriented collaboration. ITS built the tool as part of a team with providers and clients who would be using it every day for setting and achieving goals. Shelton Kay, program director at Crusader Clinic’s Healthcare for the Homeless says, “Clients get the feeling we are working together for a common goal. We are!”

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Involve local government and community leadership in decision making - The Rockford mayor, County Board chairman, and United Way CEO provided funding and served as principle investigators, which helped designers gather immediate feedback on the software.

Measure your results and gather positive outcomes - Mayor Morrissey says that CCI’s measured outcomes showed him that the program improved the human service delivery system and moved people forward. New funding and collaborators followed.

Cultivate long-term relationships - NIU’s existing relationships in Rockford helped the university establish trust and bring partners together for the CCI project. NIU and CCI partners are maintaining and expanding this relationship even after Information Technology Services delivered the software.

Engage where your heart is - NIU’s ITS staff was enthusiastic about developing CCI’s software because they could see how their work would help those in need. Passion and a big-picture attitude motivate partners to complete complex, long-term projects.

Section 5: Future

The Magrath Award would help NIU expand its engagement with community partners to alleviate social issues and barriers to education throughout the region and the nation by the following initiatives: (1) Reach new clients through NIU’s partners in Community Drug Court programs, Treatment Alternatives for Safe Communities, Prison Fellowship Ministries, DeKalb’s Continuum of Care, Habitat for Humanity and others. (2) Help translators refine CCI’s multi-language capability to support more Spanish-speaking users and clients. (3) Support NIU/community partners through paid internships, research projects, and clinical experiences for undergraduate/graduate students in multiple fields to promote leadership in collaborative human services delivery. (4) Use CCI software at NIU to help at-risk students work with advisors to create life plans that will increase retention and encourage academic success. (5) Support course development for NGOLD’s new undergraduate program, the Civic Leadership and Community Engagement degree.

Section 6: Appendix

Endorsement Letters

John G. Peters, President, Northern Illinois University

Lawrence J. Morrissey, Mayor, City of Rockford

Mark Kendall, Chief Operating Officer, Crusader Clinic

Scott H. Christiansen, Chairman, Winnebago County Board

Summaries of News Articles


Additional Media Resources about CCI

Community Collaboration, Incorporated. “Support: Video Links” http://www.cciunites.org/videos/  Note that the Username is: public; password is: access

Encore Careers. “Allan Barsema: Founder and Board Member, Community Collaboration, Inc. Purpose Prize Winner 2010.” http://www.encore.org/allan-barsema


March 18, 2011

C. Peter Magrath Community Engagement Award Selection Panel
Association of Public and Land Grant Universities
1307 New York Avenue, NW
Suite 400
Washington, DC 20005

Dear Selection Panel Members:

I am delighted to offer my heartiest endorsement to Northern Illinois University’s application for a 2011 Magrath Award. The Community Collaboration, Inc. (CCI) project in Rockford is a powerful example of community-university engagement, uniting, innovating, and transcending the traditions of academia and social services.

NIU and its CCI partners’ ambitious goal was to revolutionize the social service industry for the purpose of rebuilding lives and communities. With Rockford’s large homeless population as their initial clients, the partners worked with NIU technology experts to develop centralized software tools that foster a collaborative, holistic approach to the multiplicity of issues that confront the homeless. They also built a human and financial infrastructure for collaboration, facilitated by NIU’s Outreach, Engagement, and Information Technologies division. Thanks to CCI, more of Rockford’s homeless are returning to productive lives. Collaboration among the more than 25 government, healthcare, and human services agencies has reduced duplicative and even conflicting services along with costs.

The university’s mission of engaged teaching, engaged research and engaged service finds true meaning and value in projects like CCI. Local business, community and government leaders sincerely refer to CCI as a transformational project for the Rockford area. The diffusion of this innovation to other communities in a relatively short period speaks to the power of CCI as a concept for which the time had come.

The knowledge that NIU’s students and faculty joined with Rockford leaders to develop something that is truly changing lives and communities is enough to make all of us tremendously proud. We hope to receive the 2011 Magrath Award in order to share our story with others who might be similarly inspired to create or reinvigorate community-university partnerships. As we have seen with CCI, the benefits are mutual and the results are powerful.

Sincerely yours,

John G. Peters
President

Northern Illinois University is an Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Institution.
March 15, 2011

C. Peter Magrath University
Community Engagement Award Selection Committee
1307 New York Avenue, NW
Suite 400
Washington, DC 20005

Dear Selection Committee,

It is my pleasure to recommend Northern Illinois University for the 2011 C. Peter Magrath University Community Engagement Award in recognition of the work NIU, the City of Rockford, and Winnebago County have accomplished together to establish Community Collaboration, Inc. (CCI).

As Mayor of the City of Rockford, I am deeply committed to aligning existing local resources to address our community’s challenges. CCI is an ideal example of university, local government, and business leaders uniting our resources and expertise to address the needs of a significantly challenged sector of our city’s population in a comprehensive and integrated manner.

As someone who personally values and aspires to deploy innovative methods in all aspects of community governance, it has been gratifying to be part of a team that has developed a new model for the efficient delivery of social services. While the process was truly collaborative, NIU faculty and staff were the guiding force in bringing the right people together, facilitating productive discussions, developing and supporting the case management database that is at the heart of CCI’s services, conducting research, and creating a marketing plan. Today, CCI is not only enhancing the quality of life in Rockford, it is being implemented in seven states and helping more than 90,000 clients.

I sincerely believe NIU is deserving of this award based on its important work with CCI and many other engagement activities the University has underway in the region. I hope you will agree with me and recognize NIU for its efforts with the 2011 C. Peter Magrath University Community Engagement Award.

Very truly yours,

Lawrence J. Morrissey
Mayor
City of Rockford, Illinois

LJM/ls
March 16, 2011

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing this letter on behalf of Crusader Community Health in appreciation of the role that Northern Illinois University and Community Collaboration, Inc. (CCI) have played in improving the lives of our patients and our community.

Three years ago, Crusader Community Health joined other social service organizations in using the Community Collaboration, Inc. technology tool (MPOWER) and methodology in our community with the goal of collaborating with them to support patients in our Healthcare for the Homeless and Pre-Natal programs with comprehensive services.

While Crusader Community Health has for thirty-eight years provided excellent healthcare to patients in the Rockford and surrounding area, we are increasingly aware that the continuing health of our patients depends on their ability to meet other essential needs in their lives. We have always attempted to cooperate with a number of local agencies and churches who provide food, housing, education, employment and other services to our patients in great need. When we joined the CCI community collaborative, we were able to take this attempt to provide comprehensive care to a whole new level by providing and receiving real-time information from cooperating agencies and participating with the patient in a holistic plan with specific goals to improve their lives and health. Since that time, many of our patients’ lives have been positively affected.

We have also found the community collaboration and technology tool to empower our ability to use data to analyze and report outcomes that have been unavailable in the past. Our Community’s Homeless Task Force, in which we participate actively, has also used MPOWER data to accomplish the same objectives.

I understand that Northern Illinois University (NIU) has from the beginning been critically involved in the development of the CCI methodology and technology tool. I have directly observed NIU’s involvement during the period of time that we were customizing the MPOWER tool to meet some of our unique needs for internal data collection and management. Their technology staff made some new applications to MPOWER for us that have served us well in improving our services. Two Northern Illinois Center for Governmental Studies consultants led our community’s Jail Alternative Programs initiative as we developed our collaborative efforts in serving prisoner re-entry programs. They were tenacious as well as skilled in helping us develop new shared processes and overcome barriers that enhanced our collaborative services.

In summary, the citizens of the Rockford Area community and patients of Crusader Community Health are indebted to Northern Illinois University and Community Collaboration, Inc for their leadership and hard work in developing the Community Collaboration methodology and MPOWER tool.

Sincerely,

Mark Kendall
Chief Operating Officer
March 11, 2011

C. Peter Magrath University
Community Engagement Award Selection Committee
1307 New York Avenue, NW
Suite 400
Washington DC 20005

Dear Selection Committee Members:

Re: Northern Illinois University Application for the 2011 Peter Magrath University Community Engagement Award

I am pleased to support Northern Illinois University’s (NIU) application to the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU) for the prestigious 2011 C. Peter Magrath University Community Engagement Award for the work NIU and community agencies have accomplished together in the formation and development of Community Collaboration, Inc. (CCI).

CCIs’ holistic and collaborative case management tools are now currently utilized in 7 states, and in 140 organizations, with over 850 case managers helping over 90,000 clients. The CCI project could not have happened without strong community partnership such as the collaboration with Northern Illinois University.

I applaud NIU as they have provided critical support to both Carpenter’s Place and the CCI project. Listed below is a short list of the many commitments that NIU has done to help insure the success of CCI:

- Provided assistance at various levels in the founding of Carpenter’s Place in 2000
- Assigned NIU students and staff to help Carpenter’s Place develop a case management database
- Created a business plan, facilitated meetings of agencies that formed CCI’s first consortium, and established the initial capital structure for the partnership that became CCI
- Generated contracts and successful grant applications that allowed NIU to subsidize $200,000 in software development costs
- Developed the technology tool, MPOWER, that multiple social service, healthcare, and government agencies share in order to coordinate services to individual clients
- Hosting the CCI database and providing ongoing server and network support
- Students conducted market feasibility research and identified areas of improvement for software that would be competitive in the marketplace.
- Promoted CCI by creating a marketing identity and developing a website, brochures, and fact sheets to attract additional funders and partners
- Coordinated NIU students, faculty, and staff in a multi-disciplinary, cross-institutional approach to addressing a regional problem with local partners and innovative technologies

Because of NIU’s outstanding assistance to CCI and our community, I hope you will consider them for the esteemed 2011 C. Peter Magrath University Community Engagement Award.

Sincerely,

Scott H. Christiansen, Chairman
Winnebago County Board

404 Elm Street • Room 504 • Rockford, IL 61101 • Phone (815) 319-4225 • Fax (815) 319-4226

E-mail: countyboardchairmansoffice@co.winnebago.il.us • WEBSITE: www.co.winnebago.il.us

It is our mission to provide high quality services and promote a safe community for all people in Winnebago County.
Excerpts from News Releases

Allan Barsema Among 10 Winners of National Purpose Prize: $100,000 award honors extraordinary impact in an encore career


DeKalb, Ill — Civic Ventures today announced that Allan Barsema is one of 10 winners of its 2010 Purpose Prize. Barsema, the founder of two Rockford-based non-profit organizations, will receive $100,000 for establishing Carpenter’s Place, an outreach center for the homeless in Rockford, and then Community Collaboration, Inc., a not-for-profit software provider that has developed an online system to coordinate social services, first in Rockford and now expanded into five other states.

“I am very honored to receive this prize,” said Barsema. “The successes of Carpenter's Place and Community Collaboration, Inc. demonstrate how people can indeed rebuild their lives when we look at the whole person and work collaboratively to help them. My wife Cathy and I will be reinvesting all of the prize proceeds back into our various works to help rebuild lives and transform communities. This will include my new project, ‘One Body Collaboratives,’ which builds upon the existing efforts by mobilizing church and faith-based resources to collaborate more effectively to address individual, family and community needs.”

Harvard center recognizes innovative partnership between NIU, Rockford-area social agencies

http://today.niu.edu/2010/10/06/harvard-center-recognizes-innovative-partnership-between-niu-rockford-area-social-agencies/

The Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government has designated Community Collaborations, Inc. as a “Bright Idea” useful to leaders across the country who are trying to improve their communities. CCI joins 173 programs, including five from Illinois, on this prestigious list of innovations.

The Rockford program was the brainchild of Allan Barsema, a former construction general contractor who now serves as senior research associate for Community and Faith-Based Initiatives at NIU’s Center for
Governmental Studies. Trying to apply lessons from his work in construction, Barsema realized something was missing from the social services sector.

“The homeless have issues in all areas of their lives,” Barsema says. “It was evident that rebuilding those lives required assessment and planning, as well as linkage and coordination of multiple specialty service providers. However, there was no equivalent of an architect or general contractor involved.”

The CCI program provides that central planning capacity for all clients who are served by a community’s network of social service providers. Clients can work with case managers anywhere in the system to develop a holistic service plan that helps them achieve their goals. Each client can then authorize the software to share that plan with whichever providers they trust, which allows the different providers to collaborate easily to understand the client’s progress and ensure better outcomes.

“This kind of collaboration has been the dream of human service reformers around the U.S. for more than 30 years,” says Bob Gleeson, director of NIU’s Center for Governmental Studies and a member of the CCI Board of Directors. “Until recently, however, the IT technology was not up to the task and service providers were very skeptical. They care about their clients a lot, and they’ve seen many reform fads come and go. That makes the success of this project remarkable.”

“The environment is changing for human service providers,” he says. “Funding – whether from the state, the federal government or private sources – is growing increasingly tight. So a tool like this, that maximizes the value of every dollar spent, is incredibly valuable.”

Barsema is excited at the Bright Ideas recognition, but is quick to share the credit.

“Collaboration has been the key to the success of this project. From the involvement of NIU, social service funders and local businesses in the creation of the software, to the sharing of information between social service agencies, this has truly been a collaborative effort,” Barsema says. “But perhaps the most important collaborators are the clients who reach out for help from their community, and who are willing to allow providers to work together better on their behalf.”
Community Collaboration Inc. of Rockford Ill. has developed software that Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ) plans to use. According to CCI President and CEO Steve Burchett, the software allows government, social services agencies, and churches to effectively work together, so clients don't have to retell their stories every time they go to a new place for help.

“They have a single common plan for a family or individual rather than operating in silos,” Burchett said. You don’t have one agency saying, “I can help you but you need to go get your GED” and another saying, “I can help you but you need to stay home and take care of your kids.”

Community Collaboration now works with 77 organizations, primarily in Rockford, Ill. and the Twin Cities. It charges a one-time set-up fee and an annual fee to maintain and upgrade the system. Having a larger network creates an economy of scale, Burchett said. By creating a common database, a community can begin to take a better look at which interventions are working and which are not, he said.