Our Children, Our Future

What We Should Know
Why We Should Care
What We Can Do

New Britain Discovery Collaborative
Dear Friend of New Britain:

For the past 12 years, I have had the pleasure of helping to meet the health care needs of the people of New Britain at the Community Health Center of New Britain. Our facility, at the corner of Washington and Lafayette Streets, sits in the heart of a neighborhood filled with families struggling to make ends meet and do what’s best for their children, often without adequate health coverage or guidance.

As medical advisor to the Consolidated School District of New Britain, I also have a front-row seat in seeing how inadequate health care and nutrition can adversely impact a child’s learning. Make no mistake, healthy children make for healthy learners – a commodity, sadly, that is far too scarce in our community.

For this reason, I am proud to lend my voice to the New Britain Discovery Collaborative’s effort to bring the community together to address the health care and early education challenges facing New Britain and its families. It is not an easy task.

At the Community Health Center, our goal is to provide a broad range of primary care services not only to the insured, but to the underinsured or uninsured. Unfortunately, there are far too many families in our community who lack adequate insurance, are not insured at all or fail to seek out aid and assistance in the midst of sometimes chaotic lives.

This status quo most impacts those who can least afford it, our children. Failing them – including our disproportionate number of teenage moms with inadequate prenatal care – at a tender age starts a domino effect of low birthweights, poor nutrition, lack of preventive care, developmental delays and underachievement in school that leads to a host of health care crises and social ills we cannot afford.

Whether you are a fellow medical professional, agency provider, concerned parent, school-teacher, elected official or business owner – or just simply a New Britain citizen concerned about our future – I heartily encourage you to take part in this planning effort.

Our future just may depend upon it.

Sincerely,

Robert Dudley, M.D.
Medical Director
Community Health Center of New Britain

Dear Friend of New Britain:

It is with great pride and tremendous optimism for the future that The Herald presents today’s special section, Our Children, Our Future, in collaboration with the New Britain Discovery Collaborative.

The people of New Britain have a lengthy history of community pride and working together for a good and just cause. Ensuring that the children of our city have the means and access to all that they need to lead healthy, productive lives is just that kind of cause, one that makes sense not only for the people involved, but for the entire community as well.

Just what is the measure of a healthy community? Is it strong, visionary leadership? Is it a vibrant, diverse school system? Is it committed, motivated families dedicated to making their neighborhoods safe? Is it a healthy, caring business community that understands the bottom line starts with the very people who produce and sell their services and wares?

It is all these things and more. Today’s New Britain is a very different community than the one The Herald began covering more than a century ago. We have evolved from our industrial roots to become a rapidly changing, diverse city whose residents come from all corners of the globe. Like many cities, our largest manufacturers and employers have largely uprooted, forcing us all to address a changing economy and social landscape.

We have new challenges today that are different and more complex than ever. But a fundamental truth remains: If we as a community are not only to survive, but thrive, we must work together and begin with those who hold the key to our future – our children.

The Herald applauds and supports the New Britain Discovery Collaborative’s bold initiative to jumpstart community-wide discussion about how we can set a better course for our future. We encourage our readers to get involved in this laudable effort.

And our fervent hope is that, five, 10, 15 years from now, you will be reading in The Herald about how, way back when, the people of New Britain welcomed a challenge, set a course for change, and took the steps necessary to build a brighter future for us all.

Now that would be a story we’d look forward to covering.

Sincerely,

Ed Gunderson
Publisher

About the New Britain Discovery Collaborative

The New Britain Discovery Collaborative brings together parents, childcare providers, the school system, area social service providers and local government to work on improving the lives of New Britain’s children from birth to age 8. The Collaborative’s current priorities are to:

• Increase the supply of high-quality affordable early care and education
• Improve the quality of currently available early care
• Train parents to advocate on behalf of children

We would also like to thank the dedicated families who graciously agreed to share their stories, as well as the following individuals for their contributions to our planning effort and this special report: our “Champions,” Dr. Robert Dudley of the Community Health Center of New Britain and Ed Gunderson, Publisher of The Herald; Tracey Madden Hennessy, Associate Executive Director, YWCA of New Britain and Chairperson of the

New Britain Discovery Collaborative; Kimberly Jackson, Director of the Family Resource Centers for the Consolidated School District of New Britain; Lisa Pavlov, a New Britain parent; Stephanie Rubenzahl, former Community Investment Manager, United Way of the Capitol Area; and Susan Wilson, consultant, Child Health and Development Institute of Connecticut.

A special thanks, also, to The Herald of New Britain for graciously printing and distributing this report.

New Britain Discovery Collaborative

c/o Community Foundation of Greater New Britain
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New Britain, CT 06052
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Merrill Gay, Executive Director
Visit us on the web at www.nbdiscovery.org
New Britain’s children and families are failing – perhaps worse yet, we are failing them.

The bluntness of this assessment may be off-putting to some. But it is meant to be honest and forthright – and hopefully stirring enough to make all of us want to do something about it.

The New Britain Discovery Collaborative, which brings together parents, childcare providers, the school system, area social service providers and local government to work on improving the lives of New Britain’s children from birth to age 8, is attempting to do just that by bringing to you this special section, Our Children, Our Future: What We Should Know, Why We Should Care, What We Can Do. It is designed to be a frank presentation of how behind the rest of the state. Why should we care? It isn’t difficult to grasp the notion that as our children go, so goes our future. The challenges facing New Britain are many, but at the top of the list has to be the proper nurturing of the youngest among us, those who the community is relying upon to sustain us in the future, to help us grow, to help us thrive.

Let’s take a quick look at these four key areas:

Health

Nearly 45 percent of children born to New Britain families did not receive timely, adequate prenatal care in 2005. As a result, more of New Britain’s children are born with a low birthweight and the accompanying complications. More than 10,000 of New Britain’s children rely on Connecticut’s HUSKY plan for their healthcare, making it more difficult to find doctors and dentists willing to treat them. New Britain’s children are more likely to have asthma, be obese, and be exposed to environmental hazards like lead from chipping paint in old apartments than children in the rest of the state.

Family Support

All parents bringing home a newborn need support. It may be as simple as good information about what to do when their baby won’t stop crying. For other families facing greater challenges such as poverty, poor health, an absent parent, domestic violence, substance abuse, depression or other mental illness, there are greater needs for family support. The family is a child’s first teacher; when they are struggling with other issues, parents are less able to focus on their children’s optimal development.

Early Care and Education

Most parents in New Britain, even those with young children, are working. This means that children are being cared for by someone else while they are at work. For families with more than one young child, childcare can easily be their second largest expense after housing. New Britain has made great strides in expanding the supply of high quality, affordable preschool for three- and four-year-olds, but more still needs to be done. Quality care for younger children remains scarce and too expensive for most of New Britain’s families.

Emergent Literacy

The ability to read well by the end of fourth grade is widely viewed to be a key indicator of future success. The vast majority of children who are poor readers at the end of fourth grade are still poor readers when they start high school. This dramatically reduces their chances of graduating. The typical inmate in Connecticut’s prisons reads at a fourth-grade level. In the “Ready by 5, Fine by 9” plan, the final measure of success is a child’s ability to read well on the fourth-grade Connecticut Mastery Test. By this measure, New Britain ranks next to last in the state with 70 percent of current fourth graders reading below grade on the test last spring.

We can do better. Our children deserve it. We deserve it.

Blaming the schools for poor test scores is too simplistic. In reality those scores reflect a child’s accumulated learning and development. When children are deprived of language and social stimulation at home or have suffered the toxic stresses of violence, substance abuse or chronic hunger, they start school far behind their peers.

To deal with these issues we need to pay far more attention to a child’s early development. We hope you will join the pursuit of a better future for us all.
Being healthy as a young child starts the engine for success throughout school and later in life. But in New Britain, this engine is being derailed; the number of underinsured and uninsured children and families continues to rise, and providers remain reluctant to accept patients covered by the state’s HUSKY health insurance program for low-income families. More than 10,000 New Britain children rely on this safety net[1] and it is fragile.

This lack of access to high-quality healthcare is harming New Britain families and the community.

WHAT WE SHOULD KNOW

- **Connecticut’s HUSKY health insurance program remains flawed.**

Too many healthcare providers will not accept HUSKY patients due to low reimbursement rates. Changes in eligibility requirements frustrate patients and discourage participation; many children who are eligible are not enrolled.

Families also do not have the security of continuous coverage due to continual recalculations of income eligibility. Repeated changes in managed care organizations administering HUSKY also disrupt services, contributing to stress, confusion and ultimately more children getting less of the healthcare they need.

- **Too many young children and their families are uninsured or underinsured.**

Nearly one in 10 low-income children in Connecticut is uninsured.[2] While estimates for specific communities are not available, this figure is likely significantly higher in New Britain, a community with a high level of risk factors associated with lack of coverage.

- **There are large gaps in available health care.**

This is particularly true in pediatric dentistry, mental health, substance abuse treatment and many medical specializations.

- **Preventive care is most critical in the early years.**

High-quality preventive care and nutrition at the earliest ages not only intercepts potential health problems and development delays, but is a critical factor in determining a child’s readiness to learn. Increasing levels of childhood obesity and asthma are a particular concern; more New Britain children today are at risk of developing diabetes than ever before. Yet, a significant number of HUSKY-eligible children still do not receive the recommended number of well-child visits.

- **Too many babies are born to mothers, including teens, with inadequate prenatal care.**

In 2004, 16 percent of births in New Britain were to teens age 15-19, more than double the statewide average. Prenatal care was inadequate in nearly 45 percent of all city births.[3]

WHY WE SHOULD CARE

- **Healthy children begin with healthy births.**

Some 9.5 percent of New Britain babies born in 2004, the latest year for which statistics are available, had low birth-weights, compared to 7.8 percent statewide.[4]

- **Early detection of developmental delays is critical.**

Research shows that early experiences have a profound impact on a child’s later cognitive, social, emotional and physical development.

Identifying and treating delays early before they start to impact a child’s education is better for the child and more cost effective.

- **Parents need an established relationship with a medical practice.**

They need providers they can trust and rely upon, and information they can understand.

- **Children who are unhealthy miss school.**

Maintaining adequate oral health is a particular challenge. When it was learned that nearly 40 percent of New Britain’s 2nd and 4th grade students suffered from tooth decay, the New Britain Oral Health Collaborative – a group consisting of community healthcare and social service organizations, private dental providers and the Consolidated School District of New Britain all dedicated to increasing access to dental services for HUSKY-enrolled and uninsured children – stepped in to address the challenge.

With funding from the Connecticut Health Foundation, the Collaborative created the Start Smiling program. With Start Smiling, if schoolchildren weren’t going to get to the dentist, the dentist would get to them.

With a van transporting all variety of dental equipment, Start Smiling sets up shop on a monthly basis inside New Britain’s elementary schools, sort of a rock tour for dental hygienists. Appointments are made, teeth are cleaned, cavities are repaired and children are cared for – access guaranteed.

“It’s a great program and school administrators, who might be naturally concerned about a dental clinic disrupting their school day, have really come on board and supported it,” said Raquel Abbasi, Start Smiling Program Manager. “Seeing the children’s healthy smiles makes it all worth it.”

Collaboration WORKS

START SMILING!

The connection between good healthcare and healthy learning cannot be underestimated. Many New Britain children, particularly those in low-income families, are at significant risk for a host of healthcare problems in early and later life, including poor nutrition, obesity, asthma and even diabetes, among others, all of which can ultimately impact academic performance.

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FAMILY SUPPORT

All families with young children can benefit from some family support services. Parents need information and reassurance about how children grow and develop, the importance of preschool and availability of programs, and where to go for help with the wide range of child-rearing issues that can impact any family. But in New Britain, with a disproportionate number of families living in poverty and at risk, the need for such support is magnified.

Necessary support for such families goes far beyond simple advice on child-rearing. Many of these families face multiple, intense stressors and risk factors, ranging from poverty to domestic violence to substance abuse to mental illness, any or all of which demand costly, intensive services in order to ensure the adequate health and development of children living in such a household.

WHAT WE SHOULD KNOW

• Poverty for New Britain families with young children is rapidly rising.

There has been a dramatic increase in the number of New Britain children living in poverty, from 25 percent in 2000 to 34 percent in 2006, a startling 36 percent rise in just five years. This essentially means that more than 800 children, or the approximate equivalent of an entire grade-level worth of city children, have fallen into poverty in just five years. Between 2001 and 2005, the number of New Britain children utilizing food stamps jumped approximately 20 percent to nearly 6,800.

• There is a critical shortage of intensive family support services in New Britain.

By any reasonable measure, at least 200-300 of the approximately 1,000 children born each year in New Britain require intensive family support services. But the Nurturing Families Network program, which offers home visitation for families at risk for up to five years, can only see 30 families regularly. So, as the population that needs these services continues to multiply, the availability to deliver services remains stagnant. We currently have the capacity to serve less than five percent of families with the greatest need.

WHY WE SHOULD CARE

• Making a priority of family support services is a wise investment.

The cost of early support in strength-based programs is less than the cost of later support for families in crisis. An inadequate support system results in families who spiral through crises, which stretches New Britain’s resources.

• Family support makes parents, families and the community stronger.

Parents who are supported with their own needs can attend more effectively to the needs of their young children, resulting in stronger families. Stronger families mean stronger neighbors, resulting in stronger neighborhoods.

• Children with involved parents have greater academic success.

Research shows that children who have committed, involved parents engaged in their lives perform better in school and ultimately in life.

WHAT WE CAN DO

• Raise the stakes.

Understand that our current level of services is inadequate and work to increase capacity to meet the family support needs in New Britain.

• Work together.

Coordinate family support to more effectively address the complex needs of today’s families.

• Take responsibility.

Address the issue of who should take responsibility for the outcomes of support to families when multiple support agencies are involved.

SEEK AND YE SHALL FIND

It was at about 15 months of age that Mark and Ghada Maroun of New Britain noticed that something didn’t seem quite right with their son, Daniel. “We knew something was wrong, but we didn’t quite know what,” says Ghada.

Fortunately for Daniel, Ghada Maroun is the kind of mom who does not stop at the first closed door when seeking answers, particularly when her child’s well-being is at stake. Still relatively new to the city at the time and frustrated that no one seemed to share her concerns, Ghada called Connecticut’s Infoline (211) and was referred to Connecticut’s Birth to Three system.

From there, it was only a short time before Daniel was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. Today, at three years of age, Daniel is getting monthly visits through the Jefferson Elementary School Family Resource Center’s Parents as Teachers Home Visitation Program, is enrolled in an integrated special education class at Gaffney Elementary School, and he and his mom — every Tuesday and Thursday morning — take part in the Parents as Teachers Playgroup at Jefferson. There, Daniel’s development is enhanced through structured play with other children, while Ghada gets support by spending quality time with other parents while learning how to effectively manage the challenges posed by the disorder.

Ghada’s enterprising nature even landed her in the New Britain Discovery Collaborative’s Parent Leadership Training Institute, where she learned to advocate for New Britain children and issues such as the city’s new all-day kindergarten program.

Last November, she was honored for her efforts at the Family Resource Center’s Thanks for Giving Breakfast.

“Too many parents just don’t know about the wonderful programs that are available,” she says. “I personally think that doctors should do a better job of guiding you through these things. I was fortunate; most kids don’t get diagnosed until much later.

“If I didn’t seek out help on my own, I wouldn’t have gotten anywhere. This happens to too many kids.”

The Maroun family, left to right: Mark, son Daniel, Ghada and daughter Christina.
Research shows that high-quality early care and education is a major contributor to the healthy development of young children, and can be of particular benefit for children growing up in poverty. In New Britain, the need for these programs is acute.

Programs with trained staff can provide a nurturing learning environment for a young child at a tender age, promoting social and emotional development as well as enhancement of literacy and math skills.

**WHAT WE SHOULD KNOW**

- Reliable early care is a necessity for most New Britain families.

65 percent of New Britain children under age 6 live in families where all parents in the household are working.

- There is an extreme shortage of infant toddler care in New Britain.

Families with children under age 3 continue to struggle to find regulated care. There are only seven licensed childcare spaces available per 100 New Britain infants and toddlers. Also, the cost of such care is far more than most New Britain families can afford without assistance – more than 25 percent of the average New Britain family’s annual income.

- Most New Britain preschoolers are enrolled in programs.

New Britain’s supply of preschool slots has increased dramatically: 75 percent of children entering kindergarten today have attended preschool. This means that there is now the capacity for a substantial number of children to get two years of preschool. In order to make preschool available to all 3- and 4-year-olds, New Britain will need about 400 more spaces.

- New Britain public schools now offer full-day kindergarten.

This doubles instruction time and can be an important tool for improving reading proficiency.

- Community support services for teen parents are lacking.

Consistent cuts to programs supporting teen parents increase the likelihood that they will not graduate high school and that their children will grow up in poverty.

**WHY WE SHOULD CARE**

- Parents with reliable child care lead more productive lives.

This allows parents to maintain their jobs – avoiding state welfare assistance – and teen parents to finish school. Quality care and education works for both families and employers.

- High-quality early care pays off in school success, especially for poor children.

Poor children and those with poorly educated parents begin to fall behind their peers as infants and toddlers. Consistent attendance in a single, high-quality care setting is particularly important to children whose personal lives are filled with stress and constant change. And, children who attend preschool are more likely to graduate high school.

**WHAT WE CAN DO**

- Find ways to meet the demand.

Increase the supply and quality of infant/toddler and school-age care, and address the issue of capacity for more high-quality preschool programs.

- Seek creative solutions to the cost factor.

So long as affordable, high-quality care remains elusive, so will change.

- Prioritize aid and assistance for teen parents.

Failing them only complicates an often complex, stressful scenario.

1. U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey

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**“DESTINY” FOR DAVID AND WIKTORIA**

To say that David Figueroa and Wiktoria Golebowska had the deck stacked against them is an understatement.

David, a Hartford native, grew up “the way kids shouldn’t,” as he says. He knew what it was like to grow up without a father, to face the dangers of the streets, to drop out of school, to have others tell him he’ll never make it.

When he met 17-year-old Wiktoria of New Britain, he was homeless. But the attraction was mutual, and when Wiktoria became pregnant and had to drop out of school, they both knew that something had to give in order to ensure a secure future for themselves and their child.

“I always said to myself it was my destiny to be a father, and that if I had the chance to be there for my own kids, I would raise them the way I always dreamed about,” says David.

A caseworker at the Friendship Center in New Britain, where David lived, helped expedite the young couple’s application for housing assistance and an apartment was found just in time for the birth of their first daughter – who else? – Destiny in 2002.

Shortly thereafter, David happened across a pamphlet for the YWCA of New Britain's Family Support Network. Again, it was “destiny” – the program has played a critical role in providing the guidance and support that the couple needed through the first difficult years of parenthood.

Both Wiktoria – who now works part-time at the YWCA – and David have completed their high school diplomas. Destiny is now 7 and has two younger sisters, Diamond, 4, and Delilah, who will be 2 in May. The children are dedicated regulars at the YWCA's day care program.

Though life remains difficult at times, as David says, they are a long way from his days on the street.

“When I was growing up, 75 percent of these programs weren’t even a thought,” he says. “Without the help we've received, I don’t know where we'd be.”

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David Figueroa and Wiktoria Golebowska, along with children Delilah, Diamond and Destiny.
EMERGENT LITERACY

Literacy begins at home, begins early, and is fundamental to a child’s adequate development. Here in New Britain, too many of our children are being shortchanged, unable to read at grade level.

In the first year of life, children’s brains grow at an amazing rate; long before they can say understandable words, babies are starting to associate sounds with things around them. At about one year of age, children start to say their first words. Parents or caregivers who talk, play, rhyme, sing and read with children are helping them develop the building blocks of language.

Even parents with limited literacy skills can be taught and encouraged to read to their children, giving them the kinds of experiences that foster healthy literacy development. Without help, a low-literacy parent will limit how well a child develops, irrevocably impacting that child’s life – and the community.

WHAT WE SHOULD KNOW

• New Britain’s children are failing at reading at the earliest grade levels.

Though 95 percent of children are capable of being taught to read(2), a startling 70 percent of New Britain fourth graders are reading below grade level. (2) Unless developmentally disabled to a significant degree, a child who is nurtured, read to and challenged can successfully learn how to read. Considering this potential, New Britain is coming up short.

• The educational and literacy level of New Britain parents hampers proper literacy development.

Some 56 percent of New Britain adults have poor reading skills(3), meaning that they cannot decipher a bus schedule, fill out a job application or read the instructions on a medicine bottle. In 2005, nearly 26 percent of mothers of newborns had not completed high school(4), while in 43 percent of homes, English is not the primary spoken language(5).

WHY WE SHOULD CARE

• Reading and language skills are the foundation for success in school.

Without this foundation, children are at risk of failure and dropping out before they finish high school.

• Literacy and language development for young people is an issue that impacts employers and the community as a whole.

Positive language development in the early years has a significant impact on success later in life. Currently, 31 percent of New Britain residents do not have a high school diploma. This means that their literacy skills are compromised, severely hampering not only their own prospects for success, but the available talent pool for employers.

• Low achievement creates a negative perception of the school system.

When children are behind early in building language and reading skills, schools struggle to get them back on track. If the majority of students are at remedial levels in school, even those students who are doing average or above average work are impacted. The school system is then perceived negatively, which makes the community a less-desirable place to live and work. It is important that New Britain be viewed as a supportive community that is capable of providing resources for its residents.

WHAT WE CAN DO

• Raise awareness.

Educating the public about the importance of literacy and how it impacts their lives is the first step toward addressing this issue.

• Identify children and families at risk.

Rather than playing catch-up by spending money after children fail, invest in children in the early years to promote success later in life.

• Intervene and support parents.

Addressing literacy needs of young children and families in a coordinated and comprehensive manner – early in a child’s life – not only promotes healthy development but intercepts greater problems down the road.

1 Connecticut Commission on Children
2 State of Connecticut Department of Education
3 United Way
4 State of Connecticut Department of Public Health
5 State of Connecticut Department of Education

A NEW BEGINNING

Coming to America three years ago from their native Colombia was a difficult decision for Elfride Rivera and Gerardo Lopez. The two were proud Colombians, and were living in the South American country’s capital of Bogota as successful owners of a printing business.

But a poor economy and a string of bad luck with their print shop forced their hand, and like so many others, they came to the United States to start a new life at the encouragement of Elfride’s brother, who had come to America some 25 years prior and lived in Kensington. The family, including daughter Sandra, then 7, and son Daniel, then 5, tried to adjust, but the pain of leaving their beloved homeland, and the uncertainty of moving to a foreign land – with a foreign language – was traumatic.

“It was very hard,” says Elfride. “Where do we go? What do we do? Who speaks Spanish?”

Elfride got a factory job. Using his printing experience, Gerardo found a job working third shift at a printing company in Newington despite his inability to speak English. He worked virtually every day for six months. The couple was tired and depressed, but their faith and family kept them strong.

Enter the Literacy Volunteers program at the New Britain Public Library.

Elfride and Gerardo have been faithful participants in the program, not only learning to speak English, but in so doing building the confidence they need to succeed and become acclimated to American society. Gerardo has found a better job with health benefits, and Elfride attends community college and is a substitute teacher. Both are actively involved in programming at Smalley Elementary School, where their bright children attend.

“Elfride and Gerardo, like all students who come to us for help, are motivated to improve their lives,” said Darlene Hurtado, Executive Director of the literacy program. “Our students realize how much they need to speak English and learn to read and write in order to succeed.”

Gerardo Lopez, left, and Elfride Rivera, bottom right, with son Daniel, daughter Sandra and tutor Paula Lapatosky

Enter the Literacy Volunteers program at the New Britain Public Library.
There is perhaps no greater challenge facing our communities today than ensuring that our children are equipped to lead healthy, productive lives.

That’s why the Community Foundation of Greater New Britain is proud to support the New Britain Discovery Collaborative. The Collaborative is a part of the Community Foundation’s First Years First initiative, a five-year, $1 million commitment to prepare the children of Berlin, New Britain, Plainville and Southington for success in school and in life by enhancing their early childhood education experience. Through groundbreaking, collaborative efforts like these, it is our hope that today’s children will become tomorrow’s leaders, keeping our communities strong and vibrant.

It’s an investment we can’t afford not to make.

For more information, call us at (860) 229-6018 or visit us on the web at www.cfgnb.org