

# Helping Elsie Ortiz 'Move Up!'

How a partnership is strengthening the region's adult literacy system

Elsie Ortiz sought out Literacy Volunteers of Greater Hartford with the goal of earning her high school diploma. As a mother of two teenagers and a 21-year-old UConn student, Elsie wanted to not only earn a diploma to improve her own job prospects, but to show her children that no matter how old a person is, it is never too late to accomplish one's goals. After a great deal of hard work and with the support of instructors at Literacy Volunteers, Elsie earned her high school diploma.

"Going to school was the easy part," Ortiz said. "The homework was a difficult task because sometimes I got frustrated with some of my work. But the special people at Literacy Volunteers provided me with the support and motivation I needed to make sure that I succeeded. They showed me that I was smarter than I thought I was and helped to make me feel secure with myself. They are special to me and I will never forget them."

With a significant portion of Greater Hartford residents lacking basic literacy skills, the need to link people to the wide range of adult education services in our region is substantial.

As a part of its ongoing efforts to respond to these challenges, the Hartford Foundation in 2012 awarded a two-year, \$450,000 grant to provide infrastructure support for MoveUp! (formerly known as the Capital Region Adult Literacy Partnership). MoveUp! is working to implement the 2009 regional adult literacy plan, which identifies opportunities to strengthen Greater Hartford's adult literacy system to ensure that adults of all ages are ready for success in college or employment.

"The Hartford Foundation has made a major investment in improving adult literacy in the region, and now has the opportunity to further nurture this regional partnership," said Sharon O'Meara, director of workforce investments at the Hartford Foundation. "MoveUp!'s work will address vital areas that need to improve if our region is to produce an educated and skilled workforce."

Yanil Terón, co-chair of MoveUp! and executive director of the Center for Latino Progress, says this partnership is particularly important to the region's growing Latino community.

"Hartford's Latino community has the second highest unemployment rate in the nation, and one in three adults cannot speak English very well," Terón said. "Being part of MoveUp! helps us to raise the visibility, voice and issues of our community before a system previously working in silos. We are hopeful that by linking the silos, building on strengths, and affecting policy we'll generate a stronger community for all."

Capital Workforce Partners (CWP) serves as MoveUp!'s fiscal agent and the Capitol Region Education Council (CREC) is responsible for providing content expertise. CREC and CWP are contributing substantial in-kind services to the organization during the first year of operation.

"As the region's workforce investment board, Capital Workforce Partners recognizes its strategic work is best accomplished through participating in the partnership's collective action goals," said Jim Boucher, Capital Workforce Partners' strategic development director. "The work toward these goals galvanizes multiple public/private stakeholders to support thousands of families and individuals needing education and workforce skill upgrades that are in demand by employers."

"This partnership of providers, funders, business leaders and policy makers focused on adult literacy is truly unique," said Sarah Dudzic, MoveUp!'s project director. "Having an organization like the Hartford Foundation make a substantial commitment to sustain the initiative will ensure that Move Up! can focus its efforts on creating the systems change that is necessary to meet the needs of the people not being served and help to create a more coordinated system of adult learning services in the region and the state."

CJ Hauss, executive director of Literacy Volunteers and co-chair of MoveUp!, cites an early example of how the organization is filling gaps and enhancing collaboration among the various providers. A new initiative was designed to respond to two major obstacles to student success: student persistence, and the large number of students who went from one program to another without ever completing the course of study. The initiative was also designed to collect data on where the service gaps were, geographically and programmatically.

"MoveUp! is a lot like a really good granola bar," Hauss said. "Those cashews, dried cranberries and oats are delicious on their own. But, put them together, in the right combination, and you've got an irresistible energy bar. That's us. Singularly, we all do great work in the community. We all help our students' journey toward their goals. But together, we have the resources to energize this community and move it toward its full potential, a potential we can only reach when our citizens have the skills to communicate well, to do the jobs that employers need, and to pass these skills on to the next generation, lest we continue this painful cycle of low literacy."

The referral and evaluation work relies on several partners to provide these broader, standardized assessments. Recognizing their expertise in information and referral and data collection, United Way's 2-1-1 service was brought into the project. Individuals calling 2-1-1 are briefly assessed for literacy needs, and then referred to one of the assessment centers for a more thorough evaluation and referral to an appropriate provider. Callers will also benefit from 2-1-1's ability to refer them to other social and support services.

"MoveUp! is about creating new partnerships and this new referral and evaluation initiative is a great example of creating a more cohesive adult learning system that not only provides a mechanism to more effectively assess people's educational needs but also help to introduce adult literacy services into a larger human services network to create a more holistic system," said Andrew Tyskiewicz, CREC's director of community education. "MoveUp! is also helping to build the capacity of the region's adult learning system by providing professional development at the local level to adult education providers."

Another key component of this initiative focuses on the policies and resources that comprise the adult literacy system. Chaired by the Hartford Foundation president, the Adult Literacy Policy Cabinet addresses regional issues with significant statewide policy and system implications to enhance access to adult literacy services. Members of the cabinet are drawn from government, education, nonprofit and philanthropic sectors.

Elsie Ortiz, left, recent student at Literacy Volunteers of Greater Hartford, with CJ Hauss, LVGH executive director and co-chair of MoveUp!

