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# First Person

## with Luis C. Cabán

*Southside Institutions  
Neighborhood Alliance*



# Surmounting Obstacles *in* Hartford

**I**n 1997, *Communities & Banking* featured an article on a major development initiative just getting underway in the distressed neighborhoods of south Hartford, Connecticut. The effort was led by the Southside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance (SINA). Luis C. Cabán, the current executive director of SINA, helped design this initiative and shares his thoughts here on the past seven years of the project.

When I began my work with the Southside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance (SINA) in 1995, this neighborhood development organization had been working in south Hartford for 17 years. When SINA was founded in 1978, Hartford's economy was shifting to the suburbs and out of the inner city. Working class neighborhoods had declined. Factories had closed, and no new jobs had moved in. Residents were trying to survive on government assistance and low paying jobs, and the physical and social infrastructure



of many communities had severely deteriorated. Things were particularly bad on the south side of town, where neighborhoods had largely failed to face the post-industrial reality.

Realizing a need for help, community leaders in the southside neighborhoods of Frog Hollow, Barry Square, and South Green asked for assistance

from three major institutions that had long been anchors of the community—Trinity College, Hartford Hospital, and the Institute of Living, a mental health hospital. With major capital investment in the neighborhoods, these three organizations understood that their future success depended on the community's vitality, and they

responded to the neighborhood's call. They formed SINA and together began working to improve the quality of life in these neighborhoods. SINA's early efforts began to change long-held perceptions that these institutions were unconcerned about their home neighborhoods. The days of minimal interaction and island-like campuses were

replaced with a new commitment to neighborhood improvement and an emphasis on working with neighborhood residents.

However, when I came on board almost two decades later, the neighborhoods still had a long way to go. SINA decided to beef up its efforts and began to contemplate making some “bricks and mortar” investments in the neighborhoods. My task was to determine a plan of action that would improve both the physical environment and the area’s quality of life.

As I began to study the SINA neighborhoods, I had to fight an inner voice that kept uttering “insurmountable problems.” The degree of blighted housing stock was frightening. Lining the streets were once beautiful historic multifamily homes, including many of Hartford’s famous “perfect six” apartment buildings from the early 1900s. The majority of these architectural gems were in severe disrepair, and many were abandoned. These neighborhoods had clearly been ravished by gang violence, drug abuse, crime, and unemployment, and their reputations terrified the rest of Hartford. The high percentage of absentee landlords begged the question: “Does anybody out there care enough to improve these neighborhoods?”

Given the state of things, I could not help but wonder whether SINA was an unenthusiased “pie in the sky” effort on behalf of powerful institutions residing in a deteriorating neighborhood. Very likely, I thought. In my 20 years of community development experience, I had seen this type of situation before.

Fortunately, it was not long before the sincerity, caliber, and commitment of those involved convinced me that this was for real. I began to catalog the

multitude of assets present in the community. Schools, businesses, churches, and community organizations were present here and working for change. Real people resided in these neighborhoods. They had hopes and dreams, and they had leadership skills, energy, and “can do” attitudes. With some resources and a realistic and viable plan for the future, this neighborhood had the potential to succeed.

When *Communities & Banking* last reported on the initiative in 1997, SINA had finished developing its

the city of Hartford. The Corridor includes state-of-the-art science, performing arts, and athletic facilities, as well as a library—all of which are accessible to community members. Quite possibly, it is the most racially, ethnically, and economically diverse campus in the country.

In addition to the Learning Corridor, SINA has undertaken a comprehensive assortment of other initiatives that we believe address the systemic challenges facing these depressed neighborhoods. Over the past seven years, these programs have successfully developed affordable rental housing, made investments in streetscape improvements, increased community safety, and worked to provide employment opportunities for local residents. Closest to my heart has been SINA’s recent work in developing homeownership opportunities.

During the late 1970s and mid 1980s, I worked with the National Hispanic Housing Coalition, bringing affordable housing resources to Latino communities around the country. In those years, I came to believe that the root cause of neighborhood deterioration was the

absence of homeowners that had a vested interest in maintaining the quality of a neighborhood. I even testified before the U.S. Congress to emphasize the importance of redirecting rental housing subsidies toward increased homeownership opportunities. So, when the SINA institutions decided to focus on developing and rehabilitating the neighborhoods’ housing stock to increase homeownership, I was thrilled.

SINA began the Cityscape Homes initiative with the hope of achieving what had frustrated many inner city housing experts for years: finding a solid market of buyers for the neighborhoods’ housing. In much of Hartford, the cost of developing housing is greater than the price for which homes will sell.



strategic plan and was in the process of putting it into action. Connecticut Children’s Medical Center and Connecticut Public Television and Radio had joined the three original members of SINA, and the five institutions were knee-deep in several major neighborhood development projects.

The flagship of their ambitious revitalization effort was the construction of the Learning Corridor, a campus of four magnet public schools—a Montessori elementary school, a middle school, a performing arts high school, and a science and math high school. Completed in 2000, the complex today serves 1,500 students from over 40 districts in the region, including a large percentage of children from



Yet there are many working families paying rent that could be paying off a mortgage. To address this quandary, we brought together an advisory group of residents and designed a new home model that includes a rental unit to generate income for the home buyer, making these new homes affordable for neighborhood families. As we began constructing these homes, SINA leveraged its financial resources to fill any remaining development cost gaps. The program has been a tremendous success; to date, we have built 18 Cityscape Homes, and we have plans for 33 more.

The strategic plan that I first worked on years ago has expanded, and SINA has taken on new initiatives. For example, in this community of largely Puerto Rican migrants and Latino immigrants, Park Street is a center of Latino commerce and culture. SINA, together with other community partners, is working to infuse a new vitality and physically upgrade this important commercial corridor. We funded a comprehensive revitalization study that was

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used to secure over \$6 million in government aid for streetscape and infrastructure improvements. These enhancements have been a catalyst for further development on the street, including a new mixed-use project, the creation of a new “special services district,” and the renovation of a historic building donated by SINA and slated to be occupied by Mi Casa, a local youth and family services organization.

In sum, the past decade has yielded a marked turnaround in south Hartford, and institutions from around the country have asked me, “How did you do it? What are the critical factors to success?” I’ve pondered these questions over time and have identified what I believe are a cluster of eight important elements to our success. It is not any

one of them alone; all, or almost all, of these must be present:

First, maintaining a comprehensive approach to development that addresses every aspect of a neighborhood’s needs has been the overall principle that has guided our work.

Second, this approach encourages the formation of community partnerships, and we have engaged community partners in all of our projects.

Third, communications are important, both internally and externally. We regularly inform and update our members, residents, and community partners about our plans and what they can do to help. On the external side, negative news articles about south Hartford adversely affect residents, employees, and would-be visitors, and generating positive news to counteract bad press is one of our important objectives.

A fourth key to our success has been our financial stability and independence. Our member institutions pay an annual fee that covers the costs of management and general expenses, educational programming and scholarships, and community partner projects. Used as leverage, this base of financial support also substantially increases our ability to obtain outside sources of funding.

The ability to make timely and targeted investments is also of utmost importance. For example, we foresaw that the future success of our housing initiative could increase property values and negatively affect affordability in the neighborhood. To control this effect, we purchased and land-banked properties that today, as land values increase, we can use to develop affordable housing.

A capable and committed staff, dedicated to the established goals of the initiative, is an absolute must. It doesn’t have to be big. We operate with



a staff of five, yet time and again I’ve heard the comment, “I thought you had a staff of 20.”

Tied to staff is the importance of committed leadership from our member institutions. These CEOs and our board set the tone for success by committing both financial and human resources.

As a group, these leaders not only provide guidance, but also advocacy in spheres of influence and power, completing the array of interdependent ingredients that I believe have been essential to our success.

Much work remains to be done in the neighborhoods on the south side of Hartford, but over the past decade, our work has produced a solid foundation from which we can generate future progress and begin to focus on sustainability. Our most important accomplishment has been our ability to instill hope that this community can rebound. I, myself, am a product of this success. I have become convinced that there are no insurmountable obstacles here, and I bought a house and moved into our neighborhood.

*For more information about SINA, please visit [www.sinainc.org](http://www.sinainc.org)*