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Building Healthy Communities: One Funder's Place-Based Approach to Help Neighborhoods Transform Themselves





Contents

1	Introduction
2	Background
2	Strategy and Approach
7	The Communities and Their Accomplishments
8	Clinton County
9	Brownsville, Brooklyn
10	East Harlem
11	Near Westside, Syracuse
12	North End, Niagara Falls
13	Two Bridges, Lower East Side
14	Complementary Grants
17	Evaluation Efforts and Early Results
20	Technical Assistance Activities
22	Impact
24	Challenges and Lessons Learned
26	Looking Ahead
29	Conclusion



Introduction

Three years ago, the New York State Health Foundation (NYSHealth) launched a new priority area focused on improving access to healthy, affordable foods and safe places for physical activity in six diverse neighborhoods throughout New York State. Along the way, we have heard from and consulted with other funders across the country considering or pursuing a similar place-based approach to improving community health. As we look back on the start-up and early phase of NYSHealth's work in this area, we have identified key processes, program elements, and lessons that can inform other funders' investments. This report documents NYSHealth's approach to develop the new priority area; identify targeted neighborhoods, partners, and grantees; adapt and adjust our work over time; and assess our progress and impact. It also highlights some of the key accomplishments and challenges of the first three years of NYSHealth's work in this area. Our hope is that other funders can learn from our experience as they consider investing in place-based initiatives to engage communities and improve the health of neighborhoods.





Background

In 2015, NYSHealth created a new priority area, [Building Healthy Communities](#). The goal of the initiative is to invest in innovative, scalable approaches to help New Yorkers lead healthier lives by increasing access to and consumption of healthy, affordable food and expanding access to safe places to be physically active. This priority area emerged from the Foundation's earlier work in [Diabetes Prevention and Management](#), which focused on helping to ensure that patients with diabetes got the best possible care, as well as connecting those diagnosed with prediabetes to evidence-based lifestyle interventions to help reduce their risk for developing the condition. As NYSHealth's work in diabetes prevention and management evolved, the link between health and place became clearer. A growing body of evidence has shown that an individual's ZIP code has a greater impact than his or her genetic code on health, and that the path to significant health improvement does not necessarily occur in the doctor's office, but rather, where people live, work, and play. Accordingly, NYSHealth recognized that place-based investments—working intensively alongside community leaders in a handful of neighborhoods across New York State—was the next logical step in addressing the root causes of obesity and associated chronic conditions, such as diabetes. By shifting our investments to better address social determinants of health, such as the availability of fresh, affordable food and safe places for physical activity, NYSHealth's goal is to make it easier for New Yorkers to lead healthier lives.

STRATEGY AND APPROACH

Before launching the Building Healthy Communities priority area, our staff conducted a literature review on the extent to which a neighborhood's socioeconomic condition affects whether residents have healthy diets and exercise regularly.

The availability of safe playgrounds and sidewalks, after-school physical activity programs for young people, and affordable, nutritious food has been shown to nudge people to adopt and sustain healthy behaviors. We convened key leaders in the field of place-based initiatives, who emphasized that residents are also more likely to thrive if they live in a community

with easy access to good jobs and economic opportunities and alongside neighbors who look after one another. Living in neighborhoods without these essentials, the population is more





Background (continued)

likely to be burdened with high rates of obesity, diabetes, heart disease, depression, and other chronic illnesses. Clearly, place matters in improving health outcomes. In determining where the Foundation could make a significant impact, we looked to former Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Tom Frieden's Health Impact Pyramid:



Interventions at the top of the pyramid have a larger impact on the individual—but the net impact grows toward the base, where interventions can reach a larger number of people. Although there is strong evidence behind clinical interventions, such as prescribing medication for hypertension, these types of interventions can be limited by issues of access to care and unpredictable patient adherence. Counseling and education programs may also be effective, but can reach only a small number of people and are costly to implement.

For an investment in a place-based initiative to be effective, a long-term, systematic approach would be needed. In 2014, NYStateHealth issued an invitation-only Request for Proposals (RFP) for the *Healthy Neighborhoods Fund* initiative—targeting neighborhoods that have suffered from high rates of chronic disease and years of disinvestment and neglect, which in turn left residents with few tools to empower themselves and keep themselves healthy. As a core part of our Building Healthy Communities priority area, NYStateHealth would initially invest \$2 million over the course of 2 years in the *Healthy Neighborhoods Fund* initiative to support the development of healthy and active communities (the program was subsequently renewed for an additional 3 years and an additional \$2.5 million through 2020). RFP applicants were expected to address three core priorities:

- **Increase the availability of healthy, affordable food:** For example, providing incentives to increase access to farmers markets and the availability of fresh produce at local food outlets;



Background (continued)

- **Improve the built environment:** For example, increasing the proportion of streets, parks, playgrounds, and other open spaces that are safe and conducive to physical activity, and incorporating architectural design features that encourage healthy living in new housing initiatives; and
- **Link residents to programs that support healthy behaviors:** For example, connecting residents of all ages to evidence-based programs that support healthy weight.

The selected grant recipients would be the key organization located within each neighborhood serving as a community convener. The community convener would act as the main coordinator and project manager for the work undertaken in the neighborhood. Crucially, it would be tasked with assembling and mobilizing coalitions of partners to achieve the shared goals of supporting access to nutritious, affordable food and improving the built environment to promote physical activity. For these goals to be achieved—and sustained—a multifaceted effort by a range of community partners and stakeholders would be required: community residents, local businesses, government agencies, advocacy groups, schools, faith-based organizations, and others. This model of coordination and cooperation resonated with us and mirrored how NYSHealth approached previous investments in diabetes prevention.

As NYSHealth's work in this area was getting started, the [New York Community Trust](#) was planning a similar initiative in three neighborhoods of the South Bronx. To better leverage resources, NYSHealth and the New York Community Trust agreed to launch these parallel initiatives in a coordinated effort. The two foundations would pool their resources to support collaborative learning opportunities for their grantees at convenings and provide technical assistance and evaluation support for each neighborhood.

In February 2015, NYSHealth announced the selection of six *Healthy Neighborhoods Fund* communities—three in New York City and three upstate, representing half a million New Yorkers—along with the community convener organizations to lead the work. The grantee organizations were diverse and ranged from large county health departments to small grassroots neighborhood coalitions, reflecting the communities that they serve.



Background (continued)

COMMUNITY	COMMUNITY CONVENER
Clinton County	Clinton County Health Department
Brownsville, Brooklyn	Community Solutions
East Harlem	Fund for Public Health in New York
Near Westside, Syracuse	Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion
North End, Niagara Falls	Create a Healthier Niagara Falls Collaborative
Two Bridges, Lower East Side	Two Bridges Neighborhood Council

To support the six communities in achieving their goals, NYSHHealth made additional funding available in four areas to help the neighborhoods elevate, replicate, and enhance the core efforts supported by the initial grants:

- 1. Complementary funding** to support other local organizations in their collaborative efforts to improve access to food and physical activity at the programmatic, policy, or advocacy level. For example, NYSHHealth awarded Field & Fork Network a modest grant (\$15,000) to provide technical assistance in developing a wholesome foods pop-up market in the Niagara Falls community. Field & Fork leveraged NYSHHealth's support to secure additional funding from a local foundation (\$20,000) and a three-year grant (\$30,000) from the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture to implement a food-purchasing program that offers Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, also known as food stamps) recipients a matching value on dollars spent at farmers markets on fresh, locally grown produce.
- 2. Community engagement funds** on a one-time basis to train, activate, and sustain resident leaders so they are better able to advocate for place-based efforts. For example, in the Near Westside of Syracuse, a community leadership team was created to provide leadership development training for residents, who have since organized and produced dozens of events to improve community cohesion and create a safer and more welcoming neighborhood.



Background (continued)

- 3. Technical assistance funding for local organizations** intended to respond to small, one-time, time-sensitive projects related to Building Healthy Communities priorities. For example, NYSHealth supported [NYC Bike Share LLC](#) to lay the groundwork for a bike-sharing campaign in East Harlem and Two Bridges to develop a community engagement strategy for increasing ridership.
- 4. Technical assistance for community convener organizations**, in the form of content experts and organized learning collaboratives, so that they have the opportunity to network and learn from one another.

The final priority was to have a strong evaluation component embedded into the initiative, which would be integral for learning which strategies to improve health worked and—equally important—which did not work. NYSHealth is committed to identifying promising or proven models that can be replicated and spread and sharing them with other funders, policymakers, advocates, and stakeholders. Our staff recognized that an evaluation of the *Healthy Neighborhoods Fund* would contribute to the evidence for place-based initiatives, specifically the strategy of making investments in the built environment and healthy food access in communities. To that end, NYSHealth selected an external evaluation team, [New York University School of Medicine](#) (NYU) to **(1)** evaluate the impact of our investment in the six communities and **(2)** collect baseline data from which to measure longer-term outcomes, such as increased consumption of healthy foods or increased levels of physical activity. Some early findings and insights from the NYU evaluation team are described on page 17 of this report.





The Communities and Their Accomplishments

The six communities reflect the range and diversity of New York State itself—upstate and downstate, in urban and rural regions. Residents of these communities can face a host of chronic conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, and asthma. This is particularly the case in Brownsville and Niagara Falls, which generally have higher rates of chronic disease relative to the broader New York City and State areas. Lack of access to nutritional foods and safe physical activity increases the risk of many of these diseases, including coronary artery disease, heart failure, and hypertension.



Although each community is working to overcome specific challenges and obstacles particular to their neighborhoods, all have a similar commitment to empowering their residents to lead healthier, more active lives. And while place-based investments take time to yield long-lasting, sustainable results, NYSHealth grantees have had many short-term accomplishments to date:



Clinton County



In rural Clinton County, residents must travel farther for everything: school, health care, exercise, food, and social activities. Poverty and unreliable transportation exacerbate this problem for low-income residents. Another significant issue is the lack of access to healthy food. More than 75% of the population does not consume the recommended servings of fruits and vegetables. Although geographically large, Clinton County does not have the same concentration of community-based organizations as New York City and other urban centers. As the community convener, the Clinton County Health Department (CCHD) has nonetheless forged an impressive array of cross-sector partners in its efforts to improve the health of its population, including the Parks and Transportation Departments, a network of food pantries, local farmers, and the local hospital. Through these partnerships, CCHD has worked with the City of Plattsburgh and the 14 towns and associated villages located within the county on the following activities:

- Designed and implemented a locally tailored Better Choice Retailer program (a healthy food certification program for small food retailers) that has now grown to more than 20 local convenience stores and food store outlets. These food outlets, typically located in food deserts, received technical assistance to offer and display healthier food items. Local farmers also reached out to CCHD in an effort to provide these retailers with produce items to promote healthy, local produce and keep more dollars in the local community;
- Developed or improved community walking trails;
- Used complementary funding awarded to the Foundation of Champlain Valley Physicians Hospital to retrofit 10 inactive outdoor and indoor spaces for public use, and established a Fitness in the Parks program at 6 locations across the county to serve youth. The 10 public spaces were refurbished for activities such as tennis, pickleball, and soccer golf courses. Parks and Recreation staff are maintaining the courts and continue to coordinate organized leagues to increase use. The Fitness in the Parks initiative was located at existing parks within 13 towns, exposing young people to age-appropriate activities such as archery, karate, and yoga;
- Recruited 17 local farmers to accept the local food incentive program, Farm Fresh Cash, creating more opportunities for the neediest residents to purchase local, fresh food;
- Created a video series, [Better Choices, Better Health](#), to inform residents about healthy food and physical activity options in Clinton County and motivate them to make healthier choices; and
- Launched an [online directory](#) of healthy lifestyle programs and events that allows users to search for health improvement programs, physical activity opportunities, and classes and events aimed at increasing knowledge of healthy nutrition practices.



Brownsville, Brooklyn



Brownsville is a neighborhood that can be described as both urban and rural—urban in its density, but rural in its disconnectedness from the rest of New York City. Brownsville has the distinction of having the highest concentration of public housing in the City, as well as the lowest life expectancy. Although Brownsville has suffered from decades of disinvestment, much is being done to improve social cohesion and the overall health and wellbeing of residents. Community convener Community Solutions, through its Brownsville Partnership, has engaged residents and partner organizations to improve the health, safety, and economic prosperity of Brownsville through a range of projects, including:

- Sold 35,000 pounds of local produce through two GrowNYC Youthmarkets (a network of urban farm stands operated by neighborhood youth and supplied by local farmers) and connected the Riverdale School with GrowNYC to pilot a produce stand led by parents and the Partnership for Children in the school;
- Supported Project EATS, a program that works to transform underused spaces in working-class and low-income neighborhoods into sustainable, productive urban farms. Project EATS oversees one of the Brownsville Youthmarkets and operates the Pharmacy program, which works with local health care providers to prescribe fresh produce to patients, who can then fill the prescriptions at a Project EATS garden or farm stand;
- Conducted outreach to businesses throughout the Pitkin Avenue Business Improvement District to connect them to the City's [Shop Healthy](#) initiative;
- Updated a health assets map (a visually engaging guide to healthy food options, fitness-friendly areas, and medical services within the neighborhood), and supported the New Yorkers for Parks' initial physical assessment in preparation of a more detailed [Open Space Index](#) to identify all physical assets in Brownsville;
- Helped form a 30-member resident workgroup to advocate for residents' desired renovations to be integrated into the City's improvement plan for Betsy Head Park. In August 2016, Mayor de Blasio announced that Betsy Head Park would be among 5 City parks to receive \$150 million in renovations funds (\$30 million per park) to support improvements such as new hiking trails and sports fields;
- Hosted a [ShapeUp Instructor](#) training for more than 50 Brownsville residents in partnership with the Brownsville Recreation Center and organized the Brownsville Youth Sports Zone Initiative, a 5-week basketball clinic for youth ages 6–14 in Betsy Head Park; and
- Hosted a series of events to bring residents together for activities, information on community resources, and feedback/ideas on priorities for Brownsville and community concerns.



East Harlem

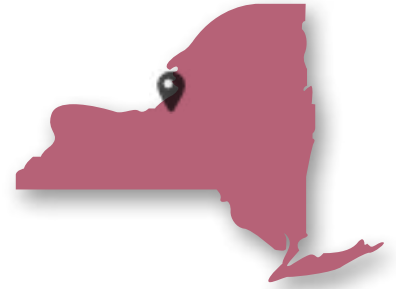


East Harlem was a welcoming community to immigrants for most of the 20th century. Beginning in the 1950s, urban renewal efforts led to a concentration of poverty in this neighborhood. Overlapping issues of poor health outcomes, high unemployment, and other social determinants of health have threatened the vibrancy of this community. East Harlem now has the second-highest concentration of public housing in the United States. The Fund for Public Health in New York, the nonprofit affiliate of the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), works in partnership with DOHMH to secure support for programs that improve the health of New Yorkers. As the community convener in East Harlem, the Fund worked with residents, neighborhood advocates, and the Harlem District Public Health Office to identify, coordinate, focus, and leverage efforts to increase opportunities for healthy eating and active living. Complementary funding has also enabled local organizations, such as the Randall's Island Park Alliance, to expand resident awareness of ways to be more physically active, including use of the New York City bike-sharing program. Other accomplishments to date include:

- Made Randall's Island a more accessible resource for residents through new signage and visual cues to encourage more pedestrian access to the island, where people can participate in free community programming and events related to health and wellness;
- Developed a 3.5-mile community walking trail that passes through public art installations, museums, community gardens, and cultural centers throughout the neighborhood and connects East Harlem to Randall's Island's park space;
- Engaged residents to survey the walking trail to inform the creation of a State of the Streets report, which will document the condition of the streets and neighborhood perceptions and include recommendations for improvements;
- Promoted Citi Bike's discounted membership rates for New York City Housing Authority residents and organized free community rides;
- Launched a [Fresh Food Box](#) program and distributed more than 2,200 boxes to community residents;
- Engaged residents and stakeholders in the planning process for the [East Harlem Neighborhood Plan](#) to inform the Department of City Planning on health-related issues that could be integrated into rezoning plans for the neighborhood; and
- Created the Health in Action Summit, engaging 200 residents in a participatory budgeting process to re-grant funding to smaller community-based organizations in the neighborhood that are focused on health issues, such as emergency preparedness, cooking classes, and walking groups.



Near Westside, Syracuse

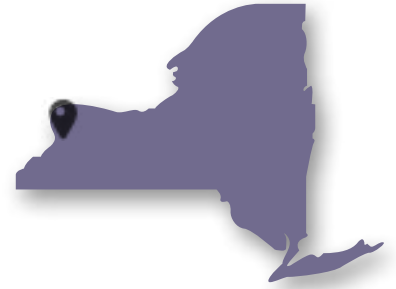


The Near Westside neighborhood of Syracuse was once directly connected to the downtown. However, a series of transportation projects—coupled with a loss of manufacturing jobs—severed that connection, isolating the community and eroding resources. This led to the deterioration of the neighborhood and loss of a significant number of housing units, employment that paid a living wage, and access to basic needs like food. As community convener, Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion (at the Maxwell School at Syracuse University), in collaboration with the Near Westside Initiative, worked with local partners, such as a locally owned supermarket and community health center, on efforts that address safety, perceptions of safety, community engagement, and healthier, affordable food options, including:

- Launched in collaboration with Nojaim Bros. Supermarket the NuVal nutritional scoring program, a food-indexing system that educates customers about better choices while shopping in the grocery store. NuVal was paired with the Healthy Shopper Reward program and nutrition education both at the store and at neighboring St. Joseph's Primary Care Center-West. Purchases of healthy items at the supermarket increased by 5%;
- Renovated an underused, dilapidated tennis court into a box soccer court at Skiddy Park, the neighborhood's only public park;
- Organized the Summer Fun at Skiddy Park program (which hires local youth to organize opportunities for physical activity, including a soccer clinic), a partnership with Syracuse Housing Authority for a summer softball league, a partnership with a local church and the Boys and Girls Club for a teen baseball clinic, and a movie night series;
- Completed the Skiddy Park field house, which includes community space and a neighborhood police outpost for improved safety;
- Held physical activity programs at a family center in collaboration with the YMCA for seniors, adults, and teens;
- Worked with a local church to provide indoor organized physical activity opportunities for youth in the winter months;
- Launched "50 Events in 50 Weeks" campaign to connect neighbors and activate public outdoor and indoor spaces, with a total of 55 events; and
- Conducted a comprehensive street light inventory, which led to a total of 75 street lights repaired by the City of Syracuse and National Grid.



North End, Niagara Falls



Niagara Falls is home to one of the most spectacular waterfalls in the world. Alongside this magnet for tourism, the Highland Avenue and Hyde Park neighborhoods of Niagara Falls are home to working-class and vulnerable communities. As community convener, the Create a Healthier Niagara Falls Collaborative worked with residents and community leaders, including Niagara University, to address the lack of access to affordable nutritious food, as well as gain community support for improvements to the built environment that increase connectivity and walkability, including:

- Built five new community gardens;
- Expanded the number of farmers markets using electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards and accepting SNAP benefits;
- Organized a meeting attended by 170 residents with Price Chopper supermarket to show the community's interest in having a local supermarket in the Highland Avenue area;
- Launched a Pop-Up Park series to activate existing public spaces, such as parks and empty lots, for adults and youth. In addition to engaging in physical activity, residents also had an opportunity to voice their opinions and tell personal stories about the growth potential in Niagara Falls;
- Developed a mobile grocery food truck program for the neighborhood; and
- Developed a resident engagement council, which trains residents to take on leadership roles and advocate for community improvement initiatives.



Two Bridges, Lower East Side



The Two Bridges neighborhood on Manhattan's Lower East Side is an economically, culturally, and ethnically diverse neighborhood. In spite of a recent wave of gentrification and the loss of a large local supermarket, tens of thousands of working-class and low- to moderate-income individuals and families call this neighborhood home. As community convener, Two Bridges Neighborhood Council worked to ensure that residents' needs and concerns are built into the changing landscape of the neighborhood by partnering with other local organizations, including [Gouverneur Health](#) and [GrowNYC](#), on a range of projects, such as:

- Relocated its summer [Fresh Food Box program](#) (in partnership with GrowNYC) to a new site with Gouverneur Health, which doubled participation in the first year to 122 families, and expanded the program to include a winter season;
- Increased the distribution of incentives for a senior farmers market and Health Bucks coupons, which can be used to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables;
- Installed concrete barriers to establish a pedestrian/bike path on heavily trafficked South Street in the neighborhood, which included community-designed murals on the barriers to make them visually appealing; and
- Worked with the New York City Department of Transportation on reaching the milestone of 1,000 miles in the City's network of bicycle lanes, with that mile running through the Two Bridges neighborhood (East Broadway and Grand Street). This stretch of bike lane includes improved signage and protected lanes and paths exclusively for biking.



The Communities and Their Accomplishments (continued)



COMPLEMENTARY GRANTS

As noted on page 5, in addition to funding the community convener organizations, NYSHealth supported a range of complementary grants to other organizations that are also working in or across the six *Healthy Neighborhoods Fund* communities. These investments were meant to accelerate, support, and complement the interventions that are happening in these neighborhoods and often focused on policy efforts to improve access to affordable nutritious food and opportunities for physical activity. Nearly 30 complementary grants were awarded during the initiative's first two years. Some examples include:


COMMUNITY FOOD ADVOCATES led an advocacy campaign for the system-wide implementation of universal free school lunch for all school children, regardless of income, throughout all New York City public schools. In the City, 75% of the 1.1 million public school students had been eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. However, one in three eligible students were not participating, with many skipping the lunch to avoid the stigma, shaming, and bullying associated with free and reduced-price lunch. By making meals free for all students, universal free school lunch delinks school food from family income and removes the stigma and shaming, which in turn leads more students to participate in the lunch program and gives them the energy required to learn and grow. Community Food Advocates—with support from NYSHealth, [Global Strategy Group](#), and other partners—won this fight when, at the start of the school year in September 2017, Mayor de Blasio announced that every student in New York City public schools would have access to free lunch. 




The Communities and Their Accomplishments (continued)

THE LAURIE M. TISCH CENTER FOR FOOD, EDUCATION AND POLICY

assessed nutrition education programs (NEPs) in New York City and New York State. NEPs are school-based strategies designed to increase healthy food choices and improve nutrition-related behaviors. However, little research had been done on how New York State and City governments currently support, implement, or coordinate nutrition education. The Tisch Center produced both [City and State reports](#) that provide comprehensive, accurate data on NEPs so that stakeholders can make more appropriate decisions about nutrition education. 

FIELD & FORK NETWORK is working to expand and improve participation in the Double Up Food Bucks program in New York State. Double Up Food Bucks is a food-purchasing program that offers SNAP recipients a matching value on dollars spent at farmers markets on fresh, locally grown produce. For instance, a family that spends \$10 in SNAP benefits at a participating farmers market receives an additional \$10 in Double Up Food Bucks that can be used to purchase fruits and vegetables at the market. With a successful track record nationwide, the incentive program is a proven model that simultaneously delivers health and economic opportunities. Currently, Double Up Food Bucks operates in 11 counties across Western New York. NYSHealth's grant to expand the program across Western and Central New York will not only increase access to affordable produce for low-income individuals and families but also redirect more food assistance dollars to local farmers and local economies. 

THE FOUNDATION OF CHAMPLAIN VALLEY PHYSICIANS HOSPITAL (CVPH) partnered with local Parks and Recreation Departments in Clinton County to increase residents' opportunities for and access to physical activity. Under this grant, CVPH is helping to develop a portion of the Saranac River trail to increase physical activity and outdoor recreation opportunities, including walking, jogging, biking, kayaking, and snowshoeing. CVPH has retrofitted 13 inactive outdoor and indoor spaces for public use and established a Fitness in the Parks program at 6 locations across the county to serve young people. 



The Communities and Their Accomplishments (continued)

ioby (an acronym for "in our backyards") worked on recruiting, training, and supporting *Healthy Neighborhoods Fund* residents to lead and carry out projects to improve access to food and nutrition education, create opportunities for physical activity in safe public spaces, and foster community engagement. Much of NYSHealth's investment was used to leverage an additional \$100,000 in citizen philanthropy through a 1:1 matching campaign by ioby to bring community-based crowd-funded projects to fruition. All projects that participated in the campaign met their desired fundraising goals, a few of which are highlighted below:

- In Niagara, a community clean-up project raised the funds to transform a vacant lot into a community garden and education space.
- In East Harlem, the Child Welfare Organizing Project raised funds to upgrade its kitchen to meet New York City food standards.
- In Rouses Point, Clinton County, funding was raised to provide lighting, benches, and outdoor exercise equipment to a newly renovated local park that previously had gone unused.





Evaluation Efforts and Early Results

The *Healthy Neighborhoods Fund* represents a significant investment by NYSHHealth in a place-based grantmaking strategy, so it was crucial from the outset to have a robust evaluation strategy in place to measure the program's impact. NYU was selected to design and implement an evaluation plan, and is tasked with assessing both the implementation of interventions at individual sites and the overall impact of the *Healthy Neighborhoods Fund* initiative. NYU established baseline metrics across all six neighborhoods, measuring progress in three areas:

1. Access to healthy, affordable foods (e.g., number of healthy retail sites, new supermarkets, food incentive programs, and farmers markets);
2. Improvements to the built environment (e.g., park activation, number of place-making projects and recreation facilities); and
3. Availability of healthy lifestyle programs (e.g., participation in healthy eating/active living programs).

Additionally, NYU is examining individual-level behavioral changes in three neighborhoods (Brownsville, Syracuse, and Two Bridges) by tracking metrics such as changes in physical activity levels, increased use of public open spaces, and healthy and unhealthy eating indicators. NYU will be conducting a long-term (five-year) analysis of activities and outcomes of NYSHHealth's investment. At this stage, many of the results have yet to be reported and published. However, there are some preliminary findings to report:

- **Access to Healthy Food:** Grantees are working to improve both supply and demand—quality and affordability are major issues in many neighborhoods. To date, 25 new access points to healthier food have been created across all *Healthy Neighborhoods Fund* communities. Availability of farmers markets has increased 25%.

Grantees have worked with more than 26 small local food retailers, 21 farmers markets, 16 farm stands, 2 urban farms, 2 fresh food box distribution centers, and 2 food pantry networks. At these sites, improvements were seen in the selection of healthy foods, beverages, and snacks for sale; enhanced acceptance of SNAP benefits; and distribution of fresh food to local residents. Grantees also worked to increase demand by offering supermarket tours, conducting cooking demonstrations, and providing nutrition lessons and food incentive coupons to participants.



Evaluation Efforts and Early Results (continued)

- **Improvements to the Built Environment:** NYU tracked grantees' relationships with municipal agencies to support improvements to parks and other open spaces, as well as improvements to enhance safe and welcoming pedestrian walkways. To date, tens of millions of dollars have been committed to parks and open spaces in the *Healthy Neighborhoods Fund* communities as a result of our grantees' advocacy and community engagement.

Improvements have been made to approximately 50 parks and public spaces, including creating [walking trails](#) and [wayfinding signage](#), establishing free, formal [exercise programs](#), and activating [unused public spaces](#). Programming encourages people to visit and use the spaces for physical activity.

Our investment in evaluation allowed the community convener organizations to focus on their community projects and activities while knowing that their work was being rigorously evaluated by an experienced team of researchers—often an overlooked investment in neighborhood-change efforts.

In the next phase of the evaluation, the NYU team will also look at measures of social cohesion, as well as sustainability. In addition, the Foundation's policy and research staff will examine indicators of public safety, given the influencing factor it plays on whether residents use public spaces. The following indicators will be used to measure progress toward each goal:

Indicators of Access to Healthy and Affordable Food:

- presence and/or count of farmers markets;
- healthy food outlet density; and
- presence of food retail incentive policies or programs.

Indicators of Access to Safe Opportunities for Physical Activity:

- recreational facility outlet density;
- availability of shared-use community facilities (such as school gyms);
- nonschool-organized physical activity-related activities (such as New York City's Summer Streets and Shape Up NYC campaigns);
- availability of outdoor recreational space;



Evaluation Efforts and Early Results (continued)

- square footage of park land and open space programming efforts; and
- implementation of street-scale policies to promote physical activity, such as Complete Streets.

Indicators of Individual-Level Behavior Changes:

- healthy food purchasing and consumption rates;
- physical activity levels;
- knowledge and motivation regarding healthy eating and physical activity;
- awareness of community-based resources;
- opportunities and activities for healthy eating and physical activity; and
- activity in selected parks or physical activity spaces.

Indicators of Social Cohesion:

- measurements of participants in community and resident engagement activities;
- number and types of community and resident engagement activities available;
- number of participants in these activities; and
- leadership training and volunteer opportunities.

Indicators of Sustainability:

- integration of health into the mission of the organization;
- provision of program leadership by a key staff member;
- support for program activities across departments; and
- leveraged grants and program investments.

Indicators of Public Safety:

- rate of crimes, including felony assault, robbery, and grand larceny in and around the *Healthy Neighborhoods Fund* parks before and after the initiative; and
- perceived safety of community parks at the start of initiative compared with perception afterwards, using survey data.



Technical Assistance Activities

To further support the neighborhoods in achieving their goals—and maximize the impact of our investment—we provided technical assistance grants intended to respond to small, one-time, time-sensitive projects in both the NYSHealth-supported neighborhoods and communities from the New York Community Trust’s complementary *South Bronx Healthy and Livable Neighborhoods* program.

NYSHealth also funded Active Living by Design (ALBD) to provide overarching technical support directly to the community convener organizations. ALBD has helped to build capacity within and among communities to leverage and sustain opportunities for active living, healthy eating, and resident engagement. ALBD also plans and facilitates twice-yearly learning collaboratives, which bring together all nine communities (*Healthy Neighborhoods Fund* participants and New York Community Trust neighborhoods) to connect grantees with organizations such as ioby and the Participatory Budgeting Project; address common challenges (e.g., safety, resident engagement, and sustainability); share resources and best practices; and develop relationships within and across the neighborhoods.

Examples of other technical assistance grants that we made during the first phase of the initiative include:

- An NYSHealth technical assistance grant made it possible for eight staff members from three *Healthy Neighborhoods Fund* organizations to attend The Teaching Kitchen training held at the Lenox Hill Neighborhood House. The Lenox Hill Neighborhood House has become a leader in the farm-to-institution movement by creating a model program that serves 400,000 fresh, healthy, and locally sourced meals to low-income New Yorkers annually. The Teaching Kitchen at Lenox Hill Neighborhood House is a course for nonprofit food service program workers that helps food workers implement actionable steps to increase their low-income clients’ access to and consumption of fresh, healthy, and local food without raising costs. More broadly, the program supports local institutional food systems and seeks to improve the health of low-income New Yorkers. To help scale up The Teaching Kitchen, NYSHealth awarded Lenox Hill Neighborhood House another grant in spring 2018 to provide a year of no-cost training and technical assistance to 50 nonprofit organizations, organize cohorts from the same community to increase purchasing power, and expand the geographic scope of the program to organizations beyond New York City.
- The Center for Active Design (C4AD) received a technical assistance grant to gather baseline data as part of an evaluation of the impact of active design strategies on affordable housing in Brownsville, Brooklyn. A substantial body of evidence links the design of the



Technical Assistance Activities (continued)

built environment to physical and mental health outcomes. Active design is an evidence-based approach that offers practical urban planning and architecture design solutions to support healthy communities. In addition to collecting baseline data, C4AD produced a [policy brief](#) and [video](#) detailing active design features within Prospect Plaza (an affordable housing complex in Brownsville) and findings from a similar project, Arbor House, in the Bronx.





Impact

Since we first began investing in building healthy communities in 2015, there has been a groundswell of place-based investments at the city, state, and national levels. In New York State, NYSHealth was one of the first organizations to make a commitment to this then-unconventional way of investing in health by recognizing that health does not only occur in the doctor's office or in the hospital. Along the way, we have established ourselves as a collaborative partner with cities, counties, community-based organizations, and fellow funding partners, and our work has informed State and City leadership. For example, in his 2017 State of the State address, Governor Cuomo announced the launch of a comprehensive agenda to promote health and wellness, with many of his proposed programs aligning with NYSHealth's Building Healthy Communities priority area, such as increasing the supply of healthy food, creating opportunities for physical activity, and encouraging healthy behaviors.

Other private and public funders are also now investing in healthy communities and have introduced similar measures, including New York City, which shortly after we began our initiative, launched its own Building Healthy Communities program targeting 12 neighborhoods, 2 of which overlap with NYSHealth's neighborhoods (Brownsville and East Harlem). The momentum and interest that is being generated from NYSHealth's *Healthy Neighborhoods Fund* grantees and partners is helping to build the case for the value and impact of a place-based approach. Ongoing and future evaluation of the communities' efforts will provide additional insights into the impact of this flagship program for improving the health of neighborhoods and can help inform other New York State and national efforts.

At the close of the first three years of the *Healthy Neighborhoods Fund* initiative, NYSHealth's initial investment has leveraged an additional \$181 million in funding for the six communities—helping nearly half a million New Yorkers residing in these communities have greater access to healthy, affordable food and safe ways to be physically active. Some of our leverage successes also will have a broader impact going beyond the six neighborhoods. Examples of leverage include:

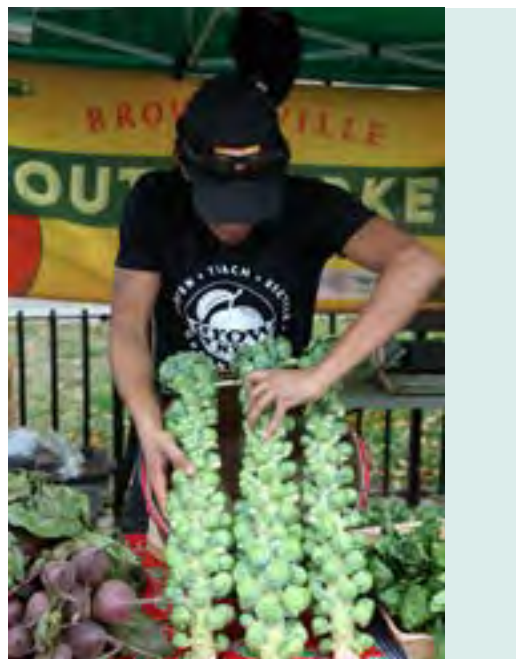
- New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio announced in 2016 that 5 parks across the City, including Betsy Head Park in Brownsville, will receive \$150 million (\$30 million per park) to support improvements such as new hiking trails and sports fields.
- In 2015, Field & Fork Network received a \$15,000 technical assistance grant from NYSHealth to develop a business plan to create and sustain a wholesome foods pop-up market in Niagara Falls. This grant resulted in Field & Fork Network securing an initial seed investment of \$20,000 from the Community Foundation of Greater Buffalo to support the



Impact (continued)

pop-up market. In addition, a subsequent NYSHealth grant to Field & Fork Network in 2016 helped it to meet the matching funds needed to receive a \$400,000 federal grant that will allow SNAP beneficiaries to increase their purchasing power of healthy foods across 22 counties in New York State.

- NYSHealth has created opportunities for grantees to benefit from and bolster parallel government initiatives, including leveraging \$130 million from the Mayor's Fund to Advance New York City's Building Healthy Communities program. In Brownsville, the Department of Transportation worked with the Brownsville Partnership to implement the Neighborhood Plaza Partnership program, which helps neighborhoods transform underused streets into vibrant public spaces. In East Harlem, the partnership with the City has supported training for instructors of Shape Up NYC (a free City-sponsored fitness program). The East Harlem training classes were the first to be led in Spanish and have attracted resident volunteers from all over the City to be part of the program.
- An NYSHealth grant to GrowNYC to support additional staffing (in anticipation of the Greenmarket Regional Food Hub supported by the State) helped prepare GrowNYC for the State's eventual \$15 million investment in the South Bronx. The hub will be a state-of-the-art 120,000-square-foot facility that will greatly expand capacity for GrowNYC and others to bring fresh, healthy, affordable, and regionally grown produce to all New York City neighborhoods.





Challenges and Lessons Learned

Given the scale and scope of this place-based investment, inherent risks and unexpected challenges also emerged. Neighborhoods may experience setbacks that are simply beyond any organization's control. For example, the Near Westside of Syracuse has faced challenges as a result of violent events, including a murder near Skiddy Park. Another challenge was the loss of a neighborhood food site, Nojaim Bros. A long-standing partner and locally owned supermarket in the Near Westside, Nojaim had to close its doors in 2017 as it could not compete with the opening of a new supermarket less than a mile away. Brownsville, despite the influx of capital and programmatic funding, received a new designation in 2017: the neighborhood with the highest child mortality rate in New York City.

A core principle of NYSHealth's *Healthy Neighborhoods Fund* is to build off the strengths and capacity of the neighborhoods and to be responsive and flexible to their needs, so it is to be expected that adjustments with community conveners would need to be made over time. In East Harlem, Brownsville, and the Near Westside of Syracuse, given the changing priorities of the original community conveners, NYSHealth brought on additional conveners to support the goals originally articulated. In Niagara Falls, the initiative has moved from one driven by the local Mayor to instead being powered by residents with the Mayor's support. In the Two Bridges neighborhood, staffing changes resulted in decreased capacity at Two Bridges Neighborhood Council, which in turn led to a necessary shift in the community convener.

We have learned many lessons about place-based grantmaking from the successes and challenges encountered over the initiative's first three years, with some key takeaways on:

Access to Safe Spaces:

Availability of safe spaces presented a challenge for many neighborhoods as they tried to promote opportunities for physical activity. This was the case in Syracuse's Near Westside neighborhood, where the only public park had been a notorious spot for drugs and gang violence. In response, the Lerner Center worked with community partners to place a field house in Skiddy Park that houses a neighborhood police outpost for improved safety. Safety is a necessary precursor to encouraging use of public and open spaces; the next phase of our investment in the *Healthy Neighborhoods Fund* initiative will address safety more explicitly.

Community Engagement:

Direct and sustained resident engagement is critical for overcoming the deeply seated skepticism that has built up over time in many of these neighborhoods as a result of consistent and systematic disinvestment. The *Healthy Neighborhoods Fund* initiative aims to deepen



Challenges and Lessons Learned (continued)

community engagement and strengthen connections among residents, local organizations, health care institutions, and county and municipal agencies to improve residents' health awareness, access, and behaviors—all known predictors of healthier outcomes. Over the course of the first phase of the initiative, we were able to see a deeper level of engagement and cohesion in the neighborhoods. For example, the Create a Healthier Niagara Falls Collaborative established a resident engagement council, with the goal of developing and training a cadre of community-based planners and food advocates. These resident leaders have since spearheaded community improvement initiatives such as activating underused parks and public spaces, developing a local community garden, and building the capacity of a youth track-and-field club.

Policy and Advocacy Education:

Grantees have expressed a need for policy and advocacy training to strengthen their capacity to influence policy, systems, and environmental change. In East Harlem, DOHMH responded to community requests to have a greater voice in neighborhood changes, leading to a series of workshops that let residents contribute their ideas and concerns. These workshops were reflected in the East Harlem Neighborhood Plan, which documented the top 12 resident objectives and more than 200 recommendations, of which health was a crosscutting theme throughout. The plan will in turn inform the City's rezoning process and guide projects for neighborhood development.

Regular Communication to Share Lessons and Best Practices:

Implementing regular communication between NYSHHealth and grantees helped to shape strategies moving ahead, as well as effectively respond to challenges—such as safety concerns and residents' perceptions of safety—as they arose. This practice of open communication also allowed us to connect grantees to other key organizations and resources to support their work.



Looking Ahead

Over the course of the *Healthy Neighborhoods Fund's* first few years, the residents, community convener organizations, and other community partners have begun to see tangible results and progress happening in their neighborhoods. But real community transformation takes time—especially in neighborhoods that have traditionally experienced years of disinvestment or have been overlooked. In 2017, we reauthorized the *Healthy Neighborhoods Fund* to continue this initiative over the next three years, working in partnership with grantees and other partners toward the ongoing goals to (1) increase access to healthy, affordable foods and (2) improve the built environment to increase opportunities for physical activity. Our *Healthy Neighborhoods Fund* grantees plan to leverage their experiences and lessons to date to move full speed ahead in this next phase. Examples of some planned activities include:

In Brownsville, the Brownsville Partnership will continue to focus on its anchor park, Betsy Head, which was one of five New York City parks chosen to receive a \$30 million capital improvement grant. Although this is a significant investment in and opportunity for the neighborhood, residents who already use the park for track, swimming, baseball, or pick-up basketball games will be displaced during the construction phase. As a result, the Brownsville Partnership will continue to work with Friends of Brownsville Parks and the NYC Parks Department to plan for alternative venues and opportunities for physical activity during the multiyear renovations.



The Brownsville Partnership's expertise lies in the work it has done to improve the built environment in the neighborhood. Given the Partnership's scope and recent organizational changes, we identified Project EATS as an appropriate alternative organization to take up the food access work in Brownsville. A program of Active Citizen Project (ACP), Project EATS has a successful track record of providing fresh, affordable produce to Brownsville residents. Specifically, ACP will partner with GrowNYC to expand the Brownsville Youthmarket by hiring local youth to work in the market and on the local Project EATS farm; increase Project EATS farm stand operations; and pilot a mobile bicycle-driven farm stand to sell food throughout the neighborhood to the most vulnerable residents. In addition, ACP will expand Project EATS'



Looking Ahead (continued)

Farmacy program, which works with local health care providers to prescribe fresh produce to patients with chronic diseases, who can then fill the prescriptions at the Project EATS farm. It will also support the delivery of nutrition education activities for customers such as food preparation and cooking demonstrations.

Adjustments to the community convener were also made in the Two Bridges neighborhood. Staffing changes at Two Bridges Neighborhood Council resulted in a lack of capacity to continue the work undertaken during phase 1 of the *Healthy Neighborhoods Fund* initiative. NYSHHealth has identified University Settlement as the organization to continue the work on the Lower East Side. With a century of work in the community, University Settlement is poised to build on its direct service work to convene key organizations and facilitate action to increase access to fresh, healthy food and opportunities for physical activity.

In the Near Westside of Syracuse, the [Center for Court Innovation](#) (Peacemaking) has taken over as the convener organization in the community. Located across the street from Skiddy Park, the Peacemaking Project will build on the previous work in the community, leading a Take Back the Streets campaign and connecting residents with community-based conflict resolution services. Peacemaking aims to promote healthy relationships, improve the health and safety of the community, and elevate the public's perception of the Near Westside. To achieve these goals, the Center will provide community-based conflict resolution services; increase resident engagement and leadership; and facilitate collaboration and communication among neighborhood partners, including community-based organizations, local businesses, community leaders, and local government agencies.

In Clinton County, comprehensive community health planning and built environment initiatives have brought issues related to the food environment to light. Unlike most urban areas where poverty is concentrated, Clinton County has unevenly dispersed pockets of poverty, and disparities are exacerbated by a lack of reliable transportation. More than 50% of the county's population lives in a census tract with no healthy food outlets. Additionally, prices for healthy food options outside the City of Plattsburgh are nearly 40% higher. CCHD will recruit new healthy retail stores and work with local chambers of commerce to help with enrollment in and promotion of the Better Choice Retailer program. It will also pilot a customer incentive component of the program, where, for example, a customer purchasing a food item identified as a healthier option would be offered a discount on a second item. CCHD will also continue its work to ensure that the most food-insecure residents have access to healthy food at the numerous food pantries located throughout the rural county.



Looking Ahead (continued)

The Create a Healthier Niagara Falls Collaborative will further solidify its role as a voice and a place for action in the forgotten neighborhoods of Niagara Falls. It has secured funding for a communications coordinator to spearhead its plan for raising the profile of the Collaborative, as well as engage more residents in leading and advocating for health improvement initiatives. It will also embark on a time-banking project to encourage neighbors, organizations, and groups to work together on local community projects. These projects will further efforts to break down social silos, increase social cohesion among high-need areas in the neighborhood, and identify key community leaders to carry on this work.

In East Harlem, the CUNY Urban Food Policy Center will join the Fund for Public Health in New York as a community convener. CUNY will carry out activities designed to strengthen the capacity of community-based and youth organizations in East and Central Harlem to participate more fully in shaping local food environments. CUNY will assist local community and youth organizations in taking action to increase access to fresh, affordable produce and reduce the promotion and availability of the unhealthy foods that contribute to the area's high rates of obesity, diabetes, and other diet-related disease. The Fund will build on its existing work with the trail-making committee it launched with NYHealth support. The Fund will also begin working with the New York Restoration Project to implement resident recommendations for removing barriers to park and open spaces use.





Conclusion

In launching the *Healthy Neighborhoods Fund* initiative, NYSHHealth was committed to having neighborhood-defined needs and existing assets drive our grantmaking. Investments in these neighborhoods were always meant to help residents transform their own neighborhoods, rather than for us to dictate what those transformations would look like. Throughout the past three years, we remained flexible, adapted accordingly, and supported multiple complementary grants—all the while honoring the expertise of the neighborhoods and those who work daily to make their neighborhoods places where residents can be physically active and eat healthier. This approach has proven to be the guiding force behind this place-based investment. Seeing these investments come to full fruition may take decades, but already the communities are making progress. NYSHHealth has learned from the successes and challenges experienced across the six neighborhoods over the past three years, lessons that inform our continued efforts help improve neighborhood health and reduce neighborhood-level health disparities.





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VOICE:
212-664-7656

FAX:
646-421-6029

MAIL:
1385 Broadway,
23rd Floor
New York, NY 10018

WEB:
www.nyshealth.org