

# Empowering Communities Through Grassroots Initiatives

March 2023





## Background

YEAR	GRANT AMOUNT
2016	\$160,000
2017	\$126,000
2019	\$160,000
2020	\$100,000

Evidence shows that an individual's ZIP code has a greater impact on health than their genetic code. It also shows that the path to better health outcomes is not found in the doctor's office, but rather, where people live, work, and play. In 2015, the New York Health Foundation (NYHealth) launched Building Healthy Communities, a place-based initiative focused on investing in innovative, scalable approaches to help New Yorkers lead healthier lives by (1) increasing access to and consumption of healthy, affordable food and (2) expanding access to safe places to be physically active in six diverse neighborhoods throughout New York State.

For a place-based initiative to be successful, we knew that we had to work in tandem with community leaders. Tapping into the knowledge that community leaders and residents have is a vital component of solving local problems. While policymakers can create large-scale change in communities, they may not be tapped into hyperlocal needs—for instance, that a dangerous intersection discourages walking, or that local students are motivated to transform a vacant lot next to a school into a teaching garden. When residents implement their own solutions, they build community participation, neighborhood cohesion, and long-term stewardship. However, ideas from resident leaders and small grassroots groups have traditionally been an underfunded, overlooked source of fast, inexpensive solutions to a number of interconnected challenges to building healthy communities.

ioby (an acronym for "in our backyards"—the positive opposite of NIMBY, "not in my backyard") is a national nonprofit organization headquartered in Brooklyn with project leaders in more than 150 cities across the United States. ioby deepens community engagement by connecting ideas to create change with the resources to make it happen. ioby provides individuals who want to lead service projects in their neighborhoods with an online crowdfunding platform, paired with one-on-one fundraising coaching.

In 2016, NYHealth awarded [a grant](#) to ioby to provide the resources for resident leaders to tackle some of their most pressing community health concerns. The ioby team used its



## Background (continued)

innovative model of mobilization to spur neighborhood-level action in nine communities across New York State: the six NYHealth Building Healthy Communities neighborhoods and the three Healthy and Livable Neighborhoods sites in the South Bronx funded by the New York Community Trust. ioby recruited project leaders interested in improving access to food and nutrition education, creating opportunities for physical activity in safe public spaces, and fostering community engagement; trained them on crowdfunding best practices; supported their campaigns; and managed money disbursement and data collection. Over the course of four grants, NYHealth invested a total of \$546,000, most of which was used to leverage \$476,106 in citizen philanthropy through a 1:1 matching campaign—that's \$1 in funding provided for every \$1 raised through crowdfunding.



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# Grant Activities and Outcomes

## PHASE 1

ioby designed the [Healthy Neighborhood Challenge](#) with two goals in mind: (1) to provide resources to strong resident leaders improving the health of their communities; and (2) to strengthen the capacity of residents and increase resources for communities facing the greatest health inequities.

ioby identified resident leaders through a variety of in-person and digital outreach methods. It delivered 14 free, customized, in-person trainings to 168 residents in the upstate communities of Niagara Falls, Plattsburgh, Syracuse and the New York City communities of East Harlem, the Lower East Side, Brownsville, Hunts Point, Morrisania, and Claremont to build the skills of leaders in fundraising, community organizing, and online communications.

In addition to in-person trainings, ioby's communications team used several print and digital tools for outreach, including paid media; earned media; recruitment fliers and handouts printed in English, Spanish, and Mandarin; and shareable online media. It also leveraged NYHealth and partner networks to recruit participants. The team developed a [video](#) describing the Challenge and also produced a report featuring ioby Leader Sheryll Durrant and her project at the [Kelly Street Garden](#) to highlight in outreach efforts. ioby worked with public relations firm Berlin Rosen to place seven articles in AM New York Metro and a variety of other local publications in the Lower East Side, Brownsville, the Bronx, and Syracuse. By the end of the grant period, Facebook and Instagram ads reached nearly 20,000 residents in the target neighborhoods.

Projects eligible for matching funds focused on (1) food production, distribution, education, access, and justice; (2) active transportation solutions surrounding pedestrian access and encouragement and bicycling; (3) green spaces, parks, recreation, and play; and (4) solutions to address acute health concerns, such as diabetes. ioby's Leader Success Strategist Team provided one-on-one support and coaching to project leaders throughout the entire fundraising process. It helped project leaders build high-quality fundraising pages on ioby's website, plan out their project budgets and social media strategies, and run successful Challenge campaigns.

Two discrete, time-bound fundraising campaigns were held in [2016 and 2017](#): 23 projects were supported in the first round, and 21 projects in the second round. ioby leveraged \$100,000 in matching funds from NYHealth to help project leaders raise an additional \$128,522—for a total of \$228,522 in funding for 44 projects. The average project budget was \$5,194, with an average of 31 donors per campaign.



## Grant Activities and Outcomes (continued)

To understand if its trainings were effectively serving residents, ioby surveyed participants before and after trainings to understand the confidence, knowledge, and experience gain of leaders in fundraising, community organizing, and the impact of public spaces on health. Evaluators at New York University that reviewed the data found statistically significant increases among respondents in the use of social media, self-efficacy using social media, and confidence launching a crowdfunding campaign.

Based on additional feedback from the evaluators, ioby realized that marketing the matching funds opportunity as support for “healthy neighborhoods” was potentially excluding people who may not use the framework of health as a primary driver of their work. ioby recognized a need for deeper outreach to residents and for helping them see the potential health impact of project ideas focused on topics like housing, after-school programming, community gatherings, neighborhood safety, and food education.

Evaluators found statistically significant increases among ioby leaders in the use of social media, self-efficacy using social media, and confidence launching a crowdfunding campaign.

### PHASE 2

Given the popularity of the matching funds campaign, in 2017, NYHealth awarded ioby [a second grant](#) to continue advancing hyperlocal, innovative ideas for building healthy communities. In this second phase, ioby adjusted its model based on lessons learned from the first round. Applications were accepted on a rolling basis, instead of in two time-bound, deadline-driven campaigns. ioby also introduced a matching funds cap of \$10,000 per project. This model provided a more flexible, low-barrier way for residents with great ideas for their community to engage their neighbors and bring ideas to life.

ioby provided a mix of in-person trainings and monthly webinars to more than 80 residents across the 9 neighborhoods and leveraged the print and digital resources developed in the first round to deepen community outreach efforts. It advised new and returning project leaders on the modified program model, including timing, match eligibility, and project planning.

ioby leveraged \$100,000 in matching funds from NYHealth to help project leaders raise an additional \$122,819—for a total of \$222,819 in funding [for 22 local healthy neighborhood projects](#). Half of these projects were led by local leaders who had fundraised with ioby at least



## Grant Activities and Outcomes (continued)

once before. Those leaders were able to build on their previous experience and network-building and raised an average of over \$2,000 more in their second rounds.

Examples of successful repeat project leaders include:

- **[We Run Brownsville](#)** is a group dedicated to improving health outcomes for women in Brownsville, Brooklyn, by creating a safe space for women to take ownership of their wellbeing through running. It raised \$2,845 in the first ioby Challenge and \$5,443 in the second. We Run Brownsville leveraged the ioby matching funds campaigns to raise build a significant donor base, raising a total of \$26,648.
- **[Project Green Space](#)** worked to transform a vacant lot in Niagara Falls into a community garden to provide much-needed access to green space, community events, and healthy food for residents. Project Green Space raised \$500 in its first campaign, \$1,250 in the second, and \$8,638 in the third.
- The **[West Chazy Park Revitalization Committee](#)** in Clinton County raised \$20,645 through several fundraising events for upgrades to West Chazy Recreation Park, including the installation of an ADA-compliant playground and a new multi-use, all-season trail in the park.





## Grant Activities and Outcomes (continued)

To better understand the demographics of project leaders, in addition to measuring change in knowledge and skills in fundraising and crowdfunding, ioby implemented a tracking system in the second phase to measure equity indicators such as self-identified race and household income. Survey data found that the majority of the project leaders (60%) were women and people of color, earning a range of annual household incomes. The majority of leaders with household incomes of \$100,000 or higher were staff of local nonprofits leading campaigns, while more than half (64%) of volunteer resident leaders earned less than \$75,000 annually.

### PHASES 3 & 4

In 2019, NYHealth awarded ioby [a third grant](#) to continue the matching funds campaign. In the third phase, ioby leveraged \$100,000 in matching funds to help residents raise an additional \$169,897—for a total of \$269,897 in funding for 19 local projects, including projects that responded to the impact of COVID-19.

Approximately 40% of project leaders in the third round were repeat ioby project leaders. These project leaders consistently rated themselves higher on fundraising experience, confidence in asking their community for support, and confidence in planning a campaign than they had in previous rounds. Of note, phase 3 had a higher number of projects led by formal nonprofits than in previous phases; however, nearly all nonprofits reported operating budgets of less than \$1 million with about half reporting budgets of less than \$100,000.

Building on the successes and lessons learned from the first two rounds of the Challenge, ioby developed and disseminated a [Healthy Communities Toolkit](#), a comprehensive guide for individuals interested in starting their own campaign, featuring [in-depth video interviews](#) with five project leaders offering inspiration and tips and a [downloadable guide](#) featuring practical advice on assessing a project idea, conducting a needs assessment, getting community buy-in, and more.

In 2020, NYHealth awarded ioby a [fourth](#) and final grant. In this phase, ioby shifted its program model to entirely virtual outreach and training efforts as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. ioby started the Challenge by reaching out to past participants to give grassroots-led projects a head start before reaching out to established nonprofits, which had grown increasingly interested in the program by 2020. In this final phase, ioby leveraged \$75,000 in matching funds to help residents raise an additional \$149,760—for a total of \$224,765 in funding for 17 local healthy neighborhood projects, including projects supporting COVID-19 relief efforts.



## Lessons Learned

There is no one-size-fits-all solution for addressing health inequity. Our work with ioby was a unique philanthropic approach in that the decision-making to design, fund, and implement community projects lay entirely in the hands of the residents of that neighborhood. The leaders of the more than 100 Healthy Neighborhoods Challenge projects across the four phases of NYHealth-funded work demonstrated the true spirit of community crowdfunding through an incredible variety of approaches to improving neighborhood health outcomes. Success was self-defined differently by various leaders—some projects aimed to draw neighbors to a fitness event for the first time, while others made ongoing food access programs more sustainable; expanded greenspaces; or added active-living amenities to their neighborhood's built environment.

There are many aspects of this program worked well. In particular, providing highly customized one-on-one coaching to every project leader, as well as multiple opportunities for in-person and online fundraising trainings, was key for the success of this program and for building leaders' fundraising capacity. A true partnership among ioby, NYHealth, and partners across the State allowed us to conduct effective outreach to local resident leaders who were best positioned to benefit from the program.

Between the first and second phase, several changes were made to the structure of the program to make it more accessible, equitable, and effective for more leaders. ioby simplified the application process to lower barriers to participation, using a basic intake form and phone conversations to help groups apply. It gave all eligible projects access to the same maximum amount of matching funds to ensure an equitable distribution of funds. Project leaders were able to set their own timeline and pace for projects, rather than adhering to hard grant deadlines. Lastly, ioby distributed funds on a first come, first served basis until the pool of matching funds was spent, allowing funds to flow toward more urgent community projects. ioby found that accepting projects on a rolling basis was the most flexible and effective way to meet community needs.

In this grassroots funding model, the amount raised by a campaign was not an isolated indicator of success. Participants were able to set fundraising goals that matched the scale of their projects and immediate funding needs. For some, \$300 provided meaningful support for a first-time pop-up event; for others, raising more than \$20,000 allowed projects to expand existing public programs or pilot ideas that were difficult to fund through traditional philanthropy.

Our work with ioby led to positive changes among resident leaders and grassroots groups. NYHealth learned of several successful groups that were otherwise unknown to us; as a result





## Lessons Learned (continued)

of their success in fundraising, we were able to cultivate relationships with and award larger grants to five ioby project leaders: We Run Brownsville, Concrete Safaris, SCAN New York, Uptown Grand Central, and Champlain Valley Family Center.

The outcomes of ioby's work are focused on the impact on project leaders and resident donors themselves. ioby projects allowed residents to address the health-related issues that affected them the most—not only housing and food security, but also political empowerment, happiness, giving back, a sense of community, and a feeling of belonging. In testimonials from many Healthy Neighborhood Challenge participants, project leaders reported that they gained confidence, skills, experience, and know-how in leading real, meaningful change, and they felt more connected with and more responsible for their communities.

NYHealth's partnership with ioby was an important step into the emerging field of grassroots grantmaking, where best practices are not yet a standard. By providing a matching funds program like the Healthy Neighborhoods Challenge, funders like NYHealth can move beyond traditional grantmaking to empower resident leadership and find new ways to invest in communities. ioby has shared the successes of this NYHealth-supported program as a model with other funders to be replicated in other areas. The [Kansas Health Foundation](#) has supported a Healthy Communities Challenge, and other funders have also begun to express interest.





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