



Kingston, NY

▲ Community Example from Chapter 3 of “Lessons for Leaders:”  
*Lessons in Community Engagement for Equity*

## Community Background

In the racially and ethnically diverse City of Kingston, the Healthy Kids for Kingston (HKK) partnership did not run from challenges. The partners knew they needed to embrace and creatively manage diverse perspectives and tensions to achieve sustainable healthy community change through their *Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities* (HKHC) initiative led by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Ulster County (CCEUC).

## Community Action

CCEUC also knew that a well-structured and functioning partnership was necessary to achieve its HKHC goals. Partners were patient and resilient, trying various approaches to organizing and operationalizing their partnership. In the first year, they created a HKK leadership committee comprised of various stakeholders. They soon found that partners disengaged if they were not paid or if the HKHC project activities did not align well with their individual or organizational interests.

Next, the HKK partners developed an advisory network to draw upon the diverse perspectives and contributions of partners. The advisory network evolved into a forum for networking rather than one that drove action for the HKHC work. The HKK partners regrouped, reflected on their experiences and developed a coalition model called Live Well Kingston. According to Project Director Kristen Wilson, “With Live Well Kingston, we are not thrusting one organization’s grant program onto others; we are co-creating a vision for Kingston’s future. It seems that people can participate more genuinely when the road isn’t already laid out and they have a true investment in the development of the roadmap regardless of whether they are being funded or not.”

While professional organizations and partners are embracing the Live Well Kingston coalition model, Kristen knows that it also needs to resonate with community members. Because it is not realistic to expect community members, who often have competing priorities, to engage deeply in every stage of HKK’s overall vision, the partnership intentionally engages community members during the more “hands-on” stages. In this way, they can contribute most meaningfully and effectively through multiple venues and ensure their priorities and interests are served.

The creation of a community garden at a public housing complex is another example of how the HKK partners embraced tension creatively and successfully. After the Kingston Common Council passed a resolution supporting community gardening in 2011, the partnership identified the area around the Kingston Housing Authority’s Rondout Gardens complex as both a food desert and suitable site for a community garden. Maria Lazo, a resident at the complex with gardening experience, emerged as a champion. As Maria led the work with support from HKK partners, different perspectives and tensions emerged. Some HKK partners with formal education in horticulture wanted the community garden designed in neat, equally-sized plots and were surprised when Maria presented a design that included triangular-sized plots of various sizes without fencing. The HKK partners reminded themselves that Maria had the best connections to residents and that her perspective should be respected. As a result, the community garden met the diverse needs of everyone in the housing complex, from an elderly woman who wanted a very small plot, to a family of ten who signed up for four plots. In 2013, the garden fed 25 families totaling 70 people, and had even more impact through donations to other community residents.