

Healthy Neighborhood Fund/Healthy and Livable South Bronx Initiatives Year 4 Evaluation Report

Spring 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There are communities in the United States where people are less healthy due to a combination of genetics, clinical care, and social factors greatly shaped by local conditions that contribute to put residents' health at risk, and lead shorter lives. No one factor determines the health of a neighborhood or its residents, and the mix of factors is particular to each neighborhood. Increasingly, broad-based coalitions of local organizations and residents are being asked to work together to prioritize community health needs and begin the long-term process of building healthy communities. The results of this process are shaped by the characteristics of organizations that collaborate, the resources they can access and apply to local needs and the level of resident engagement. Their successes will likely be measured in short term changes to the environment and more sustainable solutions through systems or policy changes.

The New York State Health Foundation, in partnership with New York Community Trust, brought this approach to New York State in 2015. The Healthy Neighborhood Fund and Healthy and Livable South Bronx Initiatives (referred to as the “**Initiative**” throughout this report) challenged disparate organizations in nine New York State neighborhoods to develop a range of strategies to improve the local food and built environments. The nine neighborhoods include defined geographic areas in Niagara Falls, Syracuse, the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan and the whole of Clinton County where the health disparities are in stark contrast with nearby communities. There is a great deal of variation across grantees, sites and projects. Now in its fourth year, the Initiative is a place-based effort to encourage the collaboration of organizations, institutions, agencies and residents, across sectors to design environment change solutions and embed health considerations into all phases of the assessment, planning and development process.

Relying on extensive interviews with key project staff and stakeholders, site visits and a careful review of documents, the projects have matured to a point where we can begin to make some meaningful analysis. The first section of the report provides an update on the Initiative's 2018 activities and accomplishments. In its fourth year, the foundations supported grant activities and invested in building capacity for the projects and key staff through a menu of technical assistance and trainings. With this support, the sites fine-tuned their projects, and focused on the strategies, approaches and partnerships that work. A second section of the report looks at four key lessons learned that have emerged more clearly at this point of the Initiative and reflect on how and in what ways the Initiative's design has shaped its implementation. In particular,

we examine the role of core grantees in forming collaboratives, the importance of local capacity in terms of organizations and other resources, and the challenges of linking a neighborhood-based effort with city, county, or state policy. Both sections of the report include specific examples for the key accomplishments and lessons listed below. The Appendices include the data tables retrieved from secondary sources as well as data reported by grantees and partner organizations.

Key Accomplishments Year 4

The sites have achieved stability in their programming and activities and a level of clarity in their vision for their place-based work. At this point in the grant cycle, the sites have largely determined what works and are focused on what programming is sustainable. Networks of organizational relationships have been established and that will likely continue to produce funding and programming opportunities.

Sites used and adapted the set of available food access tools to make modest changes in the neighborhood food environments, increasing availability and access to healthy food options. Local food environments are complex and require a wide variety of efforts to make healthier food available, accessible and affordable for local residents. Most of these efforts are modest in comparison to the advantages of the commercial food industry. Since 2015 there has been growth in the number of local farmers markets, in the audience for cooking demonstrations and market tours and in the demand for Health Bucks. The response to grantee efforts suggests that there is a market for fresh produce and healthier food items when they are available, residents know about them and price incentives bring them within financial reach.

Programming continued to be an important and effective strategy for drawing people into improved public spaces through public events and regularly scheduled activities. Sites organized health fairs, monthly community events, guided bicycle rides, street fairs, park days, walking groups and family movie nights that successfully engaged residents and activated under-utilized and unsafe spaces in the neighborhoods. Government-funded efforts to improve local parks continued in 2018 in New York City, Niagara Falls and Clinton County.

Collaborations and partnerships continue to be central to changing local environments. A variety of approaches and resources were and remain needed to support changes in the neighborhoods. Broadly focused collaboratives brought together the many different types of organizations to broadly address resident health needs. Other groups were more narrowly organized to focus on particular projects or activities.

Key Lessons

- 1. Health-focused lead organizations and those with strong a priori health partnerships brought stronger perspective, capacity and resources to leading the Initiative in their neighborhoods.** The leadership of a health-focused organization and strong health-

based community connections ensures health is maintained in the forefront of the work with their network of organizations.

2. **The networks that have developed from the Initiative have been an asset for keeping health in the conversation at the neighborhood level, and networking activity has increased.** As network hubs, grantees received information about health initiatives, funding opportunities and resources, and disseminated the information through the networks. Sustaining these networks keeps health in the conversation and creates outlets for new information and services.
3. **The external organization infrastructure and policy environment are often more robust in New York City than in upstate communities.** Grantees and their partners look to government to support their efforts to improve neighborhood health or they can look to other non-profit organizations and institutions for resources. Municipal and county governments have different budget capacity to invest in public health projects, reflected in the differing levels of support available in upstate communities and in New York City.
4. **To build upon these efforts, sites could benefit from better understanding how their work might be furthered and enhanced by leveraging city, county, or state policies.** One of the tradeoffs of place-based health efforts is understanding how local neighborhood experiences and solutions can link to policies and policy change, which may focused on a grander scale such as city or state. In addition, the policy space for food environment work is distinct from that of built environment work, and these can be difficult to integrate.

The above accomplishments and lessons make it clear that the general model for the Initiative is sound. The projects are mature and implementation is stable, and each project added value to their neighborhood through a range of services and community conversations around health. With increased understanding of how the model works with different types of leadership and different settings, it is possible for funders to make investments in projects and sites that closely align with their health goals. Future investments can build strong organizational relationships through local networks, and identify critical points of support for the broader resource and policy environments. Scaffolding the necessary infrastructure to connect place-based work to larger networks potentially lays a pathway to develop more sustainable policy solutions.