



Supporting Healthier Families Through Early Childhood Education and Neighborhood Engagement

ALLENTOWN, PA

The
**BUILD
HEALTH**
Challenge®



The Families First in Franklin Park collaborative in Allentown, Pennsylvania, is a cross-sector partnership focused on strengthening health and education equity for local families.

The collaborative focused its efforts on early childhood education because evidence shows it is an important factor that contributes to lifelong health. In one example of responding to key priorities of neighborhood residents, the collaborative established the UPLIFT Afterschool Program. The collaborative partners, with support from The BUILD Health Challenge®, committed to a long-term strategy of community-centered engagement and have become an established and trusted presence in the Franklin Park neighborhood.

COMMUNITY IMPACT



Established the UPLIFT Afterschool Program for children in kindergarten through 8th grade to improve the long-term health of local children and their families.



Aligned strong cross-sector partners to provide whole-person care for new moms, children, and families.



Built trust and lasting relationships with Franklin Park residents through deep listening, community meetings, and family-friendly events.

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



Supporting Families with Healthcare and Educational Opportunities

When the Families First in Franklin Park collaborative began holding neighborhood events in 2023, local residents were skeptical — community meetings and family gatherings hosted by the collaborative were sparsely attended. Despite this, the organizations in the collaborative did not lose hope. They had a goal to support families with critical resources.

Over the next two years, members of the collaborative continued showing up, hosted engaging family events, and worked to build meaningful relationships with local families. Today, the Franklin Park neighborhood in Allentown, Pennsylvania, is flourishing in new ways. One example is the establishment of the UPLIFT Afterschool Program that ensures all families in the community have equitable educational opportunities. The afterschool program was a key focus because research shows that early childhood education enhances lifelong health by reducing chronic diseases, improving mental health, and promoting healthier behaviors.

The collaborative is dedicated and steadfast in its commitment to the Franklin Park community, and residents excitedly show up to local events these days.

“Now in Franklin Park, when families see us at the park, they know something’s happening. Families are coming out and kids are coming out,” said Judy Vega, a community health specialist with the City of Allentown’s Health Bureau. She added how the collaborative’s efforts have also thrived through strengthened relationships: “Everyone’s working together, sharing information and just being with the community — I think it’s really great and amazing to see the outcome.”

The Families First in Franklin Park collaborative was formed with support from The BUILD Health Challenge® (BUILD) in 2023. The collaborative consists of cross-sector partners, including the local health department, hospital system, and civic and social organizations focused on health, well-being, and early childhood education.

“We saw BUILD as a way to help coalesce all the different organizations that are working in the neighborhood and give them a common focus,” said Cheryl Arndt, manager of community health evaluation and impact at the Leonard Parker Pool Institute for Health. “[The core values of this project] are health and education equity and the interaction between the two.”



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— CHERYL ARNDT
Leonard Parker Pool
Institute for Health

Investing in Early Childhood Education & Building Neighborhood Trust

Through meetings with elders in the community, the collaborative learned about challenges affecting the neighborhood, including that a beloved afterschool program had shuttered during the COVID-19 pandemic. Quality child care support was something the Franklin Park community really wanted and needed, not only for the children in the neighborhood, but for the working families who depended on it. In 2024, the collaborative responded by partnering with Ripple Church to establish the UPLIFT Afterschool Program. “We wanted to provide a safe space for the children to help with homework, support social-emotional development, and offer free family meals,” said Kaitlyn Kelly, assistant director of community initiatives at Community Services for Children (CSC). “We’re lucky to partner with the health bureau. Their staff come in and talk about different health-related issues. Similarly, other organizations are coming in and sharing their expertise with the children in different ways, too.”

In addition to visiting the afterschool program for lessons on topics such as brushing your teeth and handwashing, the Allentown Health Bureau provides ongoing support services for Franklin Park families, including maternal home visits, ensuring families have the right car seat for their child, and administering vaccines.

Vega shared that families would ask her a wide range of questions — like where they could access a food bank, where to take their child to get a physical, which services were nearby and didn’t require transportation, or where to get housing rental assistance — and she was able to connect families to critical resources that met a variety of needs.

Members of the collaborative said this comprehensive support for families, starting with early childhood care and continuing with the focus on education and health, has helped transform relationships with local community members.

“Families consistently saw that in all aspects we were willing to help, willing to get involved, willing to get other community organizations all together to help the neighborhood,” said Erin Barron, clinical services manager at the Allentown Health Bureau. “I think if you’re consistent, you will gain trust and you will have people start to feel more comfortable with you.”

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— ERIN BARRON
Allentown Health Bureau





Turning Around Disinvestments to Prioritize Greater Health

The collaborative chose to focus on the Franklin Park neighborhood because of its unique combination of resources — many organizations were already plugged into the community — and because of its need for maternal and child healthcare. For example, the older housing stock in Allentown makes children more susceptible to lead poisoning, and historically, local families have lacked healthcare access.

The collaborative was focused on turning around years of disinvestment from the neighborhood that had created financial, food, and housing challenges for families. Arndt noted that challenges have been exacerbated in the current political environment. “All the strife at the federal level — it’s very trying for all of our nonprofit partners to find the time and the staff and any funds to be able to help support these kinds of initiatives because they’re all strapped more so than ever just trying to staff their own programs,” she added.

Strategic Pivots and Strengthened Partnerships

It has taken time for the collaborative to find a good rhythm in its work within the Franklin Park neighborhood, as it has navigated some bumps along the way. The initiative began with a vision for robust data sharing across multiple entities that never quite panned out, and the collaborative made the strategic decision to focus on early childhood health and education.

While the collaborative's vision for data sharing has changed since the early stages of their work, it has made strides to enhance its understanding of the Franklin Park neighborhood through community listening and data collection. Led by the Leonard Parker Pool Institute for Health, the collaborative surveyed nearly 300 residents through the Flourishing Neighborhood Index to understand how residents feel about all aspects of living in the neighborhood, including safety, transportation, healthcare, and more. This provided baseline data for the collaborative to understand areas for further development in the neighborhood and will help inform future priorities and planning.

The Families First in Franklin Park collaborative spans sectors, approaches, and perspectives, but the group was determined from the beginning to improve the quality of life in the neighborhood by working through their differences.

"I think people trusted each other enough to consider everyone's ideas and have constructive conversations about conditions that affect health and early childhood education," said Belle Marks, associate director for personal health services at the Allentown Health Bureau.

It has also taken time for collaborative members to grow, learn, and find the right fit for their respective roles. "We needed to figure out whose roles are which, who's doing what, and figure out how to pull together and not step on toes," Arndt said. "That's been part of the process — us figuring out how to best support one another and switch lanes when we need to switch lanes or stay in our own lane."

The strength of this cross-sector approach has had a meaningful impact on residents. For example, if a middle school student attending the UPLIFT Afterschool Program is struggling with his or her mental health, that student now has access to a behavioral support specialist through Valley Health Partners, a member of the collaborative. "That's not something that we would've normally been able to provide without everybody working in this collaborative," Kelly said.

Joselyn Correa-Melendez, a project manager at Lehigh Valley Health Network, added that the collaborative has also opened the door to new partnerships with the Boys & Girls Club of Allentown and the Kellyn Foundation.

"It's been really exciting to be part of this collective impact work, demonstrating to others how we can all work together and establish these partnerships with shared values," Correa-Melendez said. "And it's been great seeing how that has ignited other projects, including new partnerships and the extension of partnerships."

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— **JOSELYN CORREA-MELENDEZ**
Lehigh Valley Health Network





A Model for the Future

Members of the collaborative have laid a strong foundation for continued work through the lasting relationships they have built with each other and residents, such as the establishment of a Parent Advisory Board for the afterschool program. They have also created a new roadmap for neighborhoods throughout Allentown that shows how to strengthen early childhood education and health.

"If I were in another part of Allentown, Families First in Franklin Park would stand out as a model," Marks said. "Wouldn't it be wonderful to do this throughout the city?"

Members of the collaborative expressed hope that as they look to the future, that strong sense of community and the feeling of belonging among neighbors in the Franklin Park neighborhood continues to bloom for years to come.

Barron shared, "I like to think that while everybody was probably nice with their neighbors, I think that having these events in Franklin Park and trying to bring people together made them feel like a community, where they take care of each other, have resources available to them, and they work together as a really cohesive neighborhood."



The BUILD Health Challenge® (BUILD) invests in multi-sector, community-centered partnerships that transform systems and elevate community power to advance health and racial justice.

Through learning, connecting, and amplifying these local initiatives, BUILD champions the national movement for health equity and moves attention, resources, and action upstream to support vital community conditions for health and well-being across the United States.

The BUILD Model for Transforming Community Health



Bold

Drive fundamental shifts in policy and sustainability, creating systems-level changes through a lens of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusivity.



Upstream

Focus on the social, environmental, and economic factors that have the greatest influence on the health of a community, rather than on access or care delivery.



Integrated

Align the practices and perspectives of cross-sector partners under a shared vision, establishing new roles while continuing to draw upon the strengths of each partner.



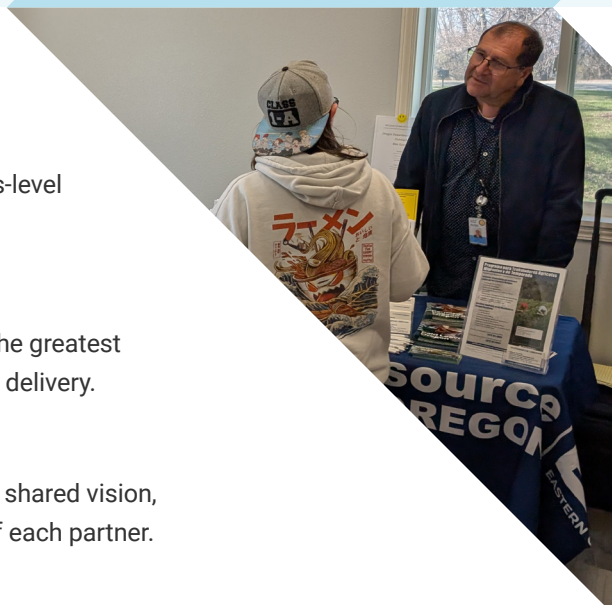
Local

Prioritize the diverse lived experiences, voices, and leadership of neighborhood residents and community members throughout all stages of planning, implementation, and evaluation.



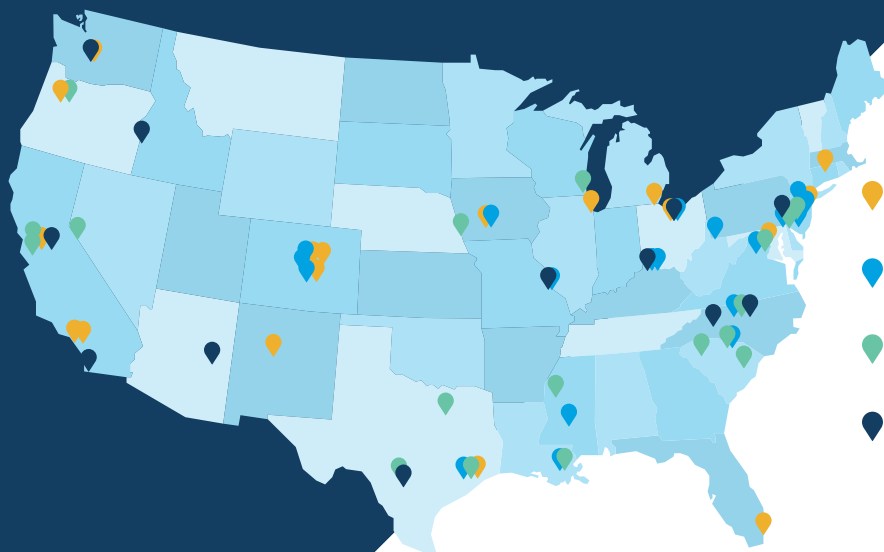
Data-Driven

Use varied forms of data from both clinical and community sources as tools to identify key needs, measure meaningful change, and facilitate transparency amongst stakeholders in order to generate actionable insights.



BUILD's fourth cohort (2023-2026) was made possible with generous support from:

BlueCross and BlueShield of North Carolina Foundation
Blue Shield of California Foundation
The de Beaumont Foundation
The Episcopal Health Foundation
The Kresge Foundation
The Leonard Parker Pool Institute for Health
Methodist Healthcare Ministries of South Texas, Inc.
Missouri Foundation for Health
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
Trinity Health
Vitalyst Health Foundation
The W.K. Kellogg Foundation



BUILD 1.0
2015-2017

BUILD 2.0
2017-2019

BUILD 3.0
2019-2022

BUILD 4.0
2023-2026