



# Building Economic Power to Improve Community Health

**MUSKEGON HEIGHTS, MICHIGAN**

The  
**BUILD  
HEALTH**  
Challenge®



## The West Michigan Blueprint Project launched a community hub for entrepreneurs, small businesses, and community organizations in Muskegon Heights.

The hub offers workspace, business classes, financial health services, job placement support, and consultations with community health workers — all rooted in a mission to break down historical systemic barriers and increase opportunities and well-being for business owners and entrepreneurs of color. Led by Access Health in partnership with Priority Health, Trinity Health, and a resident advisory board whose members live and work in the Heights every day, the Blueprint Project is turning community pride into community power.

## IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



Muskegon Heights Business Association

Muskegon Heights Neighborhood  
Association Council



## COMMUNITY IMPACT



Launched the “Blueprint to Business” program, a five-part leadership development series for entrepreneurs, designed with community feedback that earned a nomination for Innovator of the Year from the Grand Valley State University Innovation Hub.



Leveraged partnerships with 36+ organizations and groups through the hub, including Habitat for Humanity, the Urban League, the NAACP, the Veterans Administration, and grassroots organizations fighting homelessness, to connect residents with a full range of services and supports.



Supported 20+ Muskegon Heights entrepreneurs through education, pop-up shops, and direct mentorship.



Partnered with Priority Health to provide on-site community health worker services, financial literacy programming, and other health initiatives for entrepreneurs and community members.



## Fierce Pride and Deep Connections

**Muskegon Heights, Michigan, is a tight-knit community of 12,000 residents where everyone knows their neighbors. It's a community with deep roots, fierce pride, and a long history of neighbors showing up for each other.** The West Michigan Blueprint Project ("the Blueprint Project") strengthened the powerful connective fibers in the Muskegon Heights community by establishing a community hub that builds economic power for its residents. The project's vision statement says it plainly: "Our vision is to empower underserved entrepreneurs and aspiring professionals by opening doors to equitable prosperity." The partners in Muskegon Heights are all trusted members of their community with a passion for helping people and each other.

Those who work in Muskegon Heights describe a community defined by deep mutual care and connection. "I am there every single day, and I feel safe, and I feel love," said Hillery Ross, community program manager at the nonprofit Access Health, which runs the Blueprint Project. "If my car broke down on the side of the road, 10 people would be there to help me. The neighbors, the neighborhoods — they all love each other." Ross grew up in the Heights and is also a practicing doula in the community, spending her career building leadership in the community she calls home. Reginald Day of Priority Health echoed that sentiment, describing residents as passionate underdogs who, given the right resources, have an influence that extends far beyond their borders. Ricarlo Williams-Winston, another Access Health staffer who left a sales career to do community work, says you can't run an errand in Muskegon

Heights without bumping into someone you know. In Muskegon Heights, the strength of the community is how connected everyone is.

The Blueprint Project is a collaboration between Access Health and healthcare providers, including Priority Health. It was founded in response to issues identified in the Livability Lab, Access Health's annual community listening project that surveys 1,000 residents in Muskegon County and mobilizes action teams to address the survey findings. The Livability Lab is an important community asset in Muskegon: an infrastructure that not only uplifts community voices and provides current data on how the community is doing, but goes a step further by activating stakeholders to address the identified community challenges.

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— **HILLERY ROSS**  
Access Health

## A Community That Knows What It Needs

In Muskegon Heights, there are well-known systemic barriers that the Blueprint Project was built to address: food deserts, environmental pollution from former factory sites, lack of affordable housing, transportation inequities, and socioeconomic disadvantages across generations. One of the Livability Lab's findings was that people in Muskegon Heights live, on average, 11 years less than in a neighboring town, Norton Shores, which is less than a mile away. One of the goals outlined by the Livability Lab included employment opportunities and finances. The partners identified root causes that impede employment and wealth-building, such as jobs with insufficient income or benefits, transportation that hinders stable employment, and limited income opportunities. In Muskegon Heights, 73% of single adults or working families do not earn enough money to make ends meet, compared to 44% in Muskegon County as a whole. Creating new job opportunities, supporting entrepreneurs, and nurturing small businesses are potential ways to help address this challenge in Muskegon Heights.

Both the Blueprint Project and Livability Lab recognized that barriers are also targets: things the community has named as important to them and is ready to organize around. For the Blueprint Project, the Livability Lab survey data helped them see how their city differs from surrounding areas to better identify strengths, as well as areas of opportunity and need. The most recent Livability Lab survey reflected a community struggling amidst rising cost of living: food, shelter, and transportation are increasingly unaffordable. "Most of us are one paycheck from a disaster," one resident said on the survey. "We are stuck in a gray area of constant stress and struggling, which isn't healthy living," said another.

Despite the challenges highlighted, the Lab also demonstrated that Muskegon Heights has many strengths. A little over half of the residents who took the Community Life Survey, done alongside the Livability Lab survey, rated their physical health as good or very good. Residents also named many elements of their community they value:



doctor's offices, affordable education at Baker College, the faith community, neighborhood associations, local farmers markets, and health insurance. Residents shared visions for the future, such as getting healthy, obtaining their own housing, or getting more stable employment.

After a data book was published that shared priorities from the surveys, residents and stakeholders came together for a kick-off event, and they had 100 days to put together an initiative to address an issue they chose to take on. The most recent Lab formed 11 action teams in a variety of areas: creating a shelter for unhoused kids, developing an urban gardening curriculum, and providing single moms with more support, among others.

The Blueprint Project was formed to focus on one of the top findings from the Livability Lab: economic stability. "In Muskegon Heights, economic stability was one of the things we found we needed — and still is," said Williams-Winston. Residents wanted to be able to provide for their families, lead stable lives, and have better jobs and skills. They wanted something to pass down to their children.

## Blueprint Project, A Community Hub for Economic Empowerment

With support from The BUILD Health Challenge® (BUILD), Access Health, Priority Health, Trinity Health, and a resident advisory board began working together to create the Blueprint Project in 2023. After a planning process to design the project, they decided a community center was necessary to provide a physical site for training, access to opportunities, and a place to make connections. They launched the first location of their physical community hub, calling it the Economic Opportunity Initiative — a name that made sense on paper but didn't land well with the community it was meant to serve. Rather than push through with a name community members didn't like, the team did what they always do: ask for input. Through a resident-centered process, they landed on a new name: the West Michigan Blueprint Project. Inquiries from local entrepreneurs picked up immediately, and a new website followed, giving residents a way to reserve space at the site.

In 2024, the project moved the hub into a larger, more functional space better suited to the community's growing needs. Williams-Winston and Ross joined Access Health around the same time, bringing new energy and momentum. It was, by the team's account, the point when things really took off.

*"We've built a space where we are trying to build economic growth, and we are also starting to bring in health elements. Health — and economic health — contributes to economic stability."*

— HILLERY ROSS  
Access Health

Community-led from the start, the project has treated listening as an ongoing practice, expanding its programming as needs evolved. What started as an economic opportunity initiative grew into something harder to put in a box — and the team leaned into that. "Switching to a holistic approach and looking at the whole individual, as opposed to just the business they're trying to start, was one of the most beneficial switches we made," explained Williams-Winston. The project's website today reflects that expansion: with entrepreneurship support and business classes, it now leads with the recognition that promoting economic health also includes supporting physical health. Community health workers are on-site for residents, and financial literacy is a cornerstone of the Blueprint Project. Programming continues to expand to include food access, community safety, maternal health, support for veterans, and more.

The hub has become a space for local community groups like the NAACP, the Optimist Club, a homelessness advocacy group, How YOU Birth Doulas, and a group of older women who wanted a place to share their opinions and help inform younger generations. "We've built a space where we are trying to build economic growth, and we are also starting to bring in health elements," said Ross. "Health — and economic health — contributes to economic stability."

From community groups to book fairs to pop-up shops for entrepreneurs, the hub also hosts weekly coffee hours for residents to connect and access economic and wellness resources. Coffee hours have been an important driver of building relationships because there are no "third spaces" in the Heights; there are no existing coffee shops to hang out in, no other places to chat with friends, or to host a community meeting.

Coffee hours are an example of a low-barrier and peer-led initiative that has become one of the most productive connective tissues in the community. A new partnership with the Veterans Administration was forged after a representative saw a newsletter and walked in for coffee. Three women doing community work across the county found the hub and now call it their meeting spot. These kinds of connections come from the people of Muskegon Heights having a place to gather, think about the future, and work to address some of the challenges identified in the community. When the government interrupted SNAP benefits and 2,000 emergency food boxes sat, unmoved across the state, Williams-Winston called 20 veterans in a single day himself. The hub's community health worker reached dozens more. Together, the Blueprint Project was able to distribute 340 boxes by leveraging the connections they had forged.

## Community Leaders Driving Community Programming

**The Community Investment Group (CIG), a resident advisory board, is one of the key drivers behind the strategy at the Blueprint Project, whose members also show up for day-to-day assistance and engagement.** Started in 2023 as a loose group of passionate residents, they spent some time identifying how they wanted to interact with the project. After participating in leadership training, the CIG became a high-functioning advisory board, with five community members who live and work in the Heights. Together, they set programming priorities, led outreach, and even helped staff the hub itself. At one point, they considered becoming a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization. But after considering the structure and requirements of nonprofit organizations, they decided they could most strategically provide input and guide programming by formalizing their roles as an advisory board instead. “We’re not telling the community what it needs,” said Ross. “The community is telling us what it needs through that advisory board. They all work and live in the community. They’re here every day.”

The depth of that commitment shows up in the lives of individual advisory board members. One advisory board member, Mark-Quieasts Cook (known as “Cook”), runs a youth-focused organization and licensed childcare center called Pathfinders. He can frequently be found cooking meals at Supper House, a cooperative of 30 churches that provides a hot meal to those in need. Cook once drove three hours back from Detroit on his day off to open the hub for a financial literacy class when Blueprint Project staff fell ill. Another member from Americorps, Lanesha Spencer, works with Read Muskegon and is now one of the most visible emerging leaders in the Heights. “Watching her grow has been amazing — from not being quite sure of what she wanted to do to being like, ‘No, this is what we need to do for the community,’” described Williams-Winston.

From the start, the Blueprint Project set out to help improve the economic opportunities for residents of Muskegon Heights. They developed the “Blueprint to Business,” a community-designed entrepreneurship curriculum that serves as a cornerstone of the project. It is a five-part series, built from a listening session with local entrepreneurs who were asked what they needed. The Hub staff brings in a variety of peer mentors, such as a local marketing professional, a small business organization, and a funding

specialist, and tailors classes to the needs of entrepreneurs in each cohort. The training series led to a nomination by the Grand Valley State University Innovation Hub for Innovator of the Year. Sometimes, cohorts are made up of food entrepreneurs; other times, folks are starting up a retail business. They’ve helped a hotdog vendor establish a new menu and online sales system, a woman who sells acai bowls, a sea moss and catering entrepreneur, and a cookie business — all launched out of the hub. Past participants return as peer mentors to coffee hours to share what they’ve learned with others. The community teaches itself. They have already worked with 20 entrepreneurs and expect to see that number continue to grow.

Other examples of resident-generated innovation include the “Big Mama Class.” Williams-Winston hosted a listening session with older women in the Heights who wanted a place to pass on knowledge to young folks. They are now planning a home economics class taught by local elders, which covers how to stretch a budget and how to build family stability. These residents are using their lived experiences to educate the next generation. Programming at the Blueprint Project is asset-based programming in its purest form — finding the community’s own wisdom and passing it forward. By teaching residents foundational financial and entrepreneurship skills, people can unlock new employment opportunities, increase savings, and lay the groundwork for future economic growth. Whether it’s an entrepreneur launching a cookie business or an elder teaching financial skills, the Blueprint Project approaches economic growth in its community by investing in the knowledge, skills, and people who live there.





## A Place Where Partnership Happens in Real Time

**The Blueprint Project's most promising partnerships have emerged from everyday conversations, when two people are in the same room at the same time.**

During an interview about the Blueprint Project, Day mentioned that they had recently launched a maternal health pilot in Detroit to target low birth weight and increase prenatal care engagements. They were looking for a new place to expand; Muskegon Heights was near the top of that list.

That's when Ross excitedly mentioned that she had co-founded How YOU Birth Doulas, a doula collective in Muskegon Heights that started with two members and now has grown to 34. The doulas meet at the hub monthly, where they are learning how to credential with health plans so they can get paid for their work improving outcomes for pregnant mothers and babies in Muskegon Heights. Day's response was immediate: "Let's talk! All of this is happening in real time."

This kind of emerging partnership is what the Blueprint Project makes possible. The hub is a space where those conversations and collaborations happen, a place that moves and responds to its community members in real time.

The Blueprint Project is also an example of how a health plan and a community initiative can work together to achieve mutual goals for the health of the community. Priority Health is a funder and trusted partner that also lends legitimacy to the work. By participating in monthly meetings, fiscally sponsoring programming, and employing a community health worker on-site, health is recognized as an important piece of economic opportunity and growth, and vice versa. Simply put: you need to be healthy and well to find and sustain employment or grow a business. When Priority Health's name appears on a banner at a hub event, residents recognize it as their healthcare provider, and it lends significance to the work and a sense that Priority Health is invested in their future. "To see them giving back to the community — it lets people know that these are people that are not just trying to take our money," said Ross. "They're putting back into the community. They are investing in me as a person." In return, Priority Health has a Muskegon Heights-based community partner with whom they can engage collaboratively on shared health goals.

# A Blueprint for Opening Doors to Economic Opportunity and Health

The West Michigan Blueprint Project started as a community-led initiative to make positive changes for residents and build economic health and stability. From its first site in 2023 to a growing civic hub in the heart of Muskegon Heights, the project has followed the community's lead at every turn: changing its name when the original didn't resonate, expanding its programming when residents named needs beyond economics, and establishing structures for shared leadership.

The work ahead for the Blueprint Project includes new business cohorts, a potential maternal health collaboration, a financial literacy series, and more partnerships and programming on the horizon. With the hub, the foundation is strong: from the five CIG members who show up consistently, to the entrepreneurs who launched businesses there, to the neighbors who find each other over free coffee. As Day put it: "We're building something, and it's going to be based on what the community needs. It's going to be meaningful. It's going to be relevant."



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— REGINALD DAY  
Priority Health



**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.

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