



Improving Health by Addressing Barriers to Economic Mobility for Black Women

CINCINNATI, OHIO

The
**BUILD
HEALTH**
Challenge®



Building a Healthier Cincinnati (BHC) is a multi-sector collaboration, co-led by residents and organizations in the Avondale neighborhood of Cincinnati.

BHC aims to dismantle racial and health inequities by mobilizing Black women toward social and economic prosperity in Avondale. Through their work during The BUILD Health Challenge® award, partners deepened resident leadership and coalition building and addressed key barriers to economic mobility for Avondale residents.

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

THE **COMMUNITY**
BUILDERS



COMMUNITY IMPACT



Strengthened resident leadership in shaping health policies and identifying priority needs by scaling the Health Champions program, a model that has now been implemented in cities across the country.



Leveraged new and existing partnerships to develop a certified community health worker model that places trained, professional workers in non-traditional settings, leading to a wider breadth of improved outcomes like reduced recidivism, and adopted as a model for replication in other cities through George Washington University.



Bolstered infrastructure for partners to sustain and scale economic mobility initiatives through a shared data dashboard.



Neighbors Caring for One Another

Near the heart of Cincinnati, Avondale is a close-knit community where people take care of each other.

Support comes from family, friends, and a network of dedicated community leaders working together to lift up their neighbors and make sure needs are met. Tying together the threads of this network is a group of Health Champions, Avondale resident leaders who provide social support and resource connection to their neighbors and advocate for the health of Avondale families.

“Helping families is my passion and my joy – to see them smile knowing I am breaking barriers for them,” said Kathy Hale, a Health Champion in Avondale. Hale recalls working with a new mom who had no transportation and was walking in the rain with her baby to get to appointments in order to restore her food benefits and health insurance. Taking quick action and mobilizing her network of resources in Avondale, Hale helped the new mom get her Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits and insurance in place by providing bus passes along with a new blanket and clothes for her baby. “She is back working and has child care and support from us Health Champions,” said Hale. “I love to see families thriving and having no life problems that are holding them still in one place.”

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— KATHY HALE
Health Champion

Addressing the Root Causes of Disparate Health Outcomes — Starting With an Infrastructure of Collaboration

While Cincinnati is a diverse and growing city, not all residents have been able to share equitably in its prosperity. Health outcomes vary widely from neighborhood to neighborhood. According to the [Cincinnati Health Department](#), Avondale ranks second worst in years of life lost, with 1,439 premature deaths, compared to the healthiest neighborhood in Cincinnati, with just 38 premature deaths. “It’s a neighborhood that has high rates of chronic disease such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease,” said Denisha Porter, executive director of All-In Cincinnati, who grew up in Avondale. “It is a great neighborhood to concentrate all of our resources and expertise.”

All-In Cincinnati is one of several partners with a long track record of working together to address the upstream drivers of health inequity in Avondale. Together, All-In Cincinnati, The Community Builders (TCB), Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center (CCHMC), the Cincinnati Health Department, and resident leaders like Hale, strengthened their cross-sector collaboration through the Avondale Children Thrive (ACT) initiative, established with support from an earlier award from The BUILD Health Challenge® (BUILD) in 2017.

Through ACT, a network of housing-based Health Champions was created, with participants receiving training, capacity building, and financial support for their work. It also led to the establishment of the Avondale Town Center in 2020, which houses Avondale’s first grocery store after decades of residents needing to travel elsewhere for healthy food. ACT also engaged Cincinnati recreation centers to establish breastfeeding-friendly policies and effectively passed a city-wide policy to raise the minimum age for purchasing tobacco to 21. These significant strides also laid the groundwork for continued collaboration and a new BUILD award in 2023.

“We are all invested in our friends — the Health Champions — who are doing incredible work. They are the connective tissue between all of our organizations.”

— **DR. JODI CUNNINGHAM**
The Community Builders

“The people of Avondale are what make this work fantastic and actually what makes the work go,” said Dr. Jodi Cunningham, director of community life, health, and housing with TCB. “They co-own and weigh in on everything we do. We are all invested in our friends — the Health Champions — who are doing incredible work. They are the connective tissue between all of our organizations.”





“Real change happens when residents have the opportunity to speak directly with decision-makers about their lived experiences, challenges, and needs. Uplifting community voices helps create policies and systems that better reflect and support the people most impacted.”

— **TIFFANY WHITE**
Cincinnati Health Department

Leaning on localized data to better understand the root causes of disparate health outcomes in Avondale compared to neighboring communities, partners looked to the [“All-In Cincinnati: Equity is the Path to Inclusive Prosperity”](#) report written by PolicyLink, which revealed that Black women are more likely to experience “working poverty,” meaning they work full-time yet still struggle to achieve financial stability. “Black women are the most vulnerable population in Cincinnati relating to health, housing, education, economic mobility, and injustice,” said Porter. “The idea was to use targeted universalism: if you help the most vulnerable population, you lift the experience for all populations. And so that’s where we started our work.”

It became clear that, to address the root causes of disparate health outcomes among residents in Avondale, elevating resident leaders would be essential. “Sometimes the people shaping policies and systems are not fully empathetic to the upstream issues that contribute to higher rates of chronic disease and lower life expectancies in communities like Avondale,” said Tiffany White, health programs manager at

the Cincinnati Health Department. “Real change happens when residents have the opportunity to speak directly with decision-makers about their lived experiences, challenges, and needs. Uplifting community voices helps create policies and systems that better reflect and support the people most impacted.”

Partners and residents developed a shared vision that would guide their work, grounded in [All-In Cincinnati’s policy agenda](#): to dismantle racial and health inequities by mobilizing Black women toward social and economic prosperity in Avondale. Through this work, titled Building a Healthier Cincinnati (BHC), their goals were two-fold: to deepen resident leadership and coalition building through community health worker training, certification, and opportunities for residents to co-lead policy change initiatives alongside partner organizations, and also to create a healthcare career pipeline to position Black women for greater economic mobility.

Elevating Resident Leaders, Embedded in Their Community

The impacts of the Health Champions had quickly become evident in Avondale during and after the ACT initiative, and Health Champions connect residents with more resources that are closer to home: The Avondale Town Center has flourished into a health oasis, housing Black-owned Altev Pharmacy, a federally-qualified healthcare center, and multiple additional Black-owned businesses. More recently, the Urban League of Southwestern Ohio's Hollomon Center for Social Justice — which fosters collaboration between community members and policymakers in advocacy efforts — was opened in the Avondale Town Center. After identifying the need for this resource in Avondale, BHC partners were able to leverage the BUILD award to receive a matching investment from CCHMC to support the establishment of the Center.

To strengthen the capacities and expertise of new and existing Health Champions, partners organized trainings on digital skills, financial literacy, motivational interviewing, car seat safety, lactation, the American College of Surgeons Stop the Bleed program for emergency first aid, trauma-informed care, and other skills used in their work. Health Champions also strengthened their leadership in Avondale through outreach, participating in events such as MLK Day celebrations, Avondale Day, Cincinnati's National Day of Racial Healing (organized by All-In Cincinnati), and many other new and well-established community events.

The Health Champions' efforts have been so successful that TCB, an affordable housing organization serving the Midwest and eastern regions of the country, has scaled the Health Champions model to its other housing communities in Detroit, Boston, Baltimore, and Chicago, and has trained over 50 Health Champions collectively.

With their sights set on systems change, partners in Avondale wanted to go a step further to integrate resident voices into their policy work. They saw the potential for Health Champions, community health workers, and residents in TCB housing to lead in a new way. "We wanted to push equity beyond participation and into shared ownership, not only bringing resident leaders to the table as



co-creators, but also ensuring the women and families they support had a voice in shaping the work, the decisions, and the future of the initiative," said Cunningham.

In January 2024, the BHC Resident Advisory Committee began meeting regularly to inform the project's direction and strategy. Since then, resident leaders have provided feedback on policies to uplift Avondale residents and helped prioritize social services and resources needed in the community. Notably, the Committee identified a critical need for community health workers in settings beyond hospitals to better reach and serve residents.

The Committee also recommended ways to include resident voices in decision-making in Avondale. One example of this is evident in the work of the [Live-Work-Play Cincinnati Coalition](#), a multi-sector collaboration led by the Cincinnati Health Department and BHC partners. Through this collaboration, BHC Resident Advisory Committee members, Health Champions, community health workers, and other resident leaders have co-developed Live-Work-Play's new strategic plan, and also continue to serve on subcommittees that guide the collaboration's work.

The experience of participating in the BHC Resident Advisory Committee led to several residents taking on new leadership roles in and beyond Avondale, including one member who was elected as secretary of the Ohio Association of Community Health Workers — a testament to the leadership of the group.

Community Health Workers Fill Critical Gaps in Access to Resources

Partners launched the healthcare career pipeline program to build a workforce that could bring a deep understanding of the needs and resources within Avondale as certified community health workers. Enrollees in the program receive training, mentoring, and comprehensive support services to help them complete the program, obtain certification, and secure employment.



While several residents completed the program, organizing partners struggled to find and retain their ideal number of enrollees — and sought to understand why. “Building the workforce is challenging: a lot of residents in the program were caretakers of young children, many of them in single-headed households, Cunningham said. “What we heard was that working in a place like healthcare — having a strict schedule and not being able to find part-time work — made it really challenging for them to be caregivers to their children.” A changing political climate and resulting funding cuts and hiring freezes in healthcare also posed major challenges to the program’s success, as it became more difficult than anticipated to place community health workers into jobs.

While the healthcare career pipeline program is no longer a core focus of the BHC project, community health workers in non-traditional settings continue to play an important role in supporting Avondale residents. The BHC Resident Advisory Committee’s recommendation to place community health workers in settings beyond hospitals sparked a key turning point in the program’s direction. Though community health workers typically work in healthcare settings, partners worked both collaboratively and with other Cincinnati agencies to place community health workers where they could reach residents in new ways: in housing developments and judges’ offices. “We are the first organization within the Health Care Access Now (HCAN) Pathways Hub to have a community health worker inside of a housing organization,” said Eboné Kelley, a community health worker with TCB and resident in TCB housing. “I have a caseload of 21 where I help them manage appointments, stabilize their housing, and make them aware of how important their health is. And that they don’t have to go out of their neighborhood to use their resources, but they can use them inside of their neighborhood.”

Kelley has been both a provider and a recipient of support through BHC. Kelley started her own journey as an Avondale resident by working with a Health Champion. With encouragement from her Health Champion, Kelley became a Health Champion in her own right and later completed training to become a certified community health worker. Continuing to grow in her new career direction, Eboné was hired by TCB. “I realized it was exactly the career I was looking for,” shared Kelley. “It allowed me to continue helping people, supporting families, and contributing to the next generation becoming their best selves. I am still a TCB resident, have been working with TCB for four years, and have served as a community health worker for three years.”

TCB and All-In Cincinnati partnered with HCAN, a local organization that trains and hires community health workers, to adopt an evidence-based service delivery model through which community health workers’ services are reimbursable through Medicaid. Securing Medicaid reimbursement was an important milestone in establishing the sustainability of training and employing community health workers.

This approach revealed a blueprint for broader systemic change by demonstrating how placing community health workers in non-traditional settings can strengthen community support systems, improve stability for vulnerable populations, and create more coordinated pathways to care and opportunity. Through the George Washington University Institute for Socioeconomic Opportunity, this approach, led by Porter with support from collaborating partners, is being evaluated as a potential strategy for implementation in communities with similar needs across the country.

A Pivot to Tackle Barriers to Economic Mobility

With new insights gained through the challenges that emerged in the healthcare career pipeline program, partners and residents leading the BHC project pivoted to focus where their efforts could directly address the economic barriers Black women face in Avondale.



“As residents helped us better understand the barriers Black women in Avondale were navigating, our partnership evolved alongside those insights,” said Cunningham.

“Together, we shifted toward strengthening economic mobility strategies that residents identified as both meaningful and achievable, including financial self-sufficiency coaching, credit building, and new pathways to homeownership. The pivot wasn’t away from the work, but it was a deeper investment in the priorities residents told us mattered most for their families and futures.”

A core component of the Family Self-Sufficiency program is an escrow structuring approach that allows residents to direct increases in their salary to a savings account for a down payment for a home or car, or educational attainment, instead of paying increased rent as they would otherwise be required to pay by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s federal housing regulations.

To date, the TCB economic mobility program has supported more than 100 residents in TCB housing and fostered new partnerships with local agencies to offer health, wellness, and workforce development programs that support housing stability and economic mobility.

Kelley knows firsthand how the shift in focus has impacted residents: “I am in the program myself, so it’s helping me to stabilize my housing and also to better my future as far as homeownership,” she said. “We have a financial coach who meets with residents one-on-one, once a month, to see what the barriers are and how she can help.”



Strong Relationships Have Paved the Way for Continued Collaboration

As they look ahead, the organizations and residents who made the BHC project possible expect to continue advancing economic mobility in Avondale, thanks to additional funding they have unlocked and the strong relationships they've forged. Notably, TCB has fundraised an additional \$1.8 million to sustain the Health Champions initiative over the past eight years. And as opportunities continue to arise, collaborating will be “easy,” partners shared, since they “have each other on speed dial” and are already working together every day.

Beyond Avondale, BHC partners look to the BUILD National Network, as coalitions working in other cities across the country share their learnings, spread effective models, and help troubleshoot challenges. “I really appreciate that the BUILD network is so large,” said White. “They do a really great job at forming connections with folks that have already tried to figure out a specific problem, or have the same problem, so then you can figure it out together. They do a really good job of networking across America.”

BHC partners and residents are equipped with a powerful tool to guide their continued collaboration: an interactive data dashboard available to both residents and organizations. “Together, we defined the metrics, shaped the interactive experience, and continuously incorporated feedback to ensure the dashboard reflects what matters most and tells Avondale’s story and the progress the community is driving,” said Aubrey Culp, PhD, project manager with CCHMC.

The dashboard not only serves as an encapsulation of partners’ and residents’ collaboration to date, but also as a living resource that will continue to guide their work as Avondale’s resources grow, needs continue to evolve, and new data becomes available.

“I talked about the dashboard in a resident focus group,” said Kelley. “It made me proud as a leader and also a resident of Avondale. It has raised awareness of what’s going on — we do have community health workers out here. We do have leaders out here who care about us. So we should do something.”

“[The data dashboard] made me proud as a leader and also a resident of Avondale. We do have community health workers out here. We do have leaders out here who care about us. So we should do something.”

— **EBONE KELLEY**

The Community Builders



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.



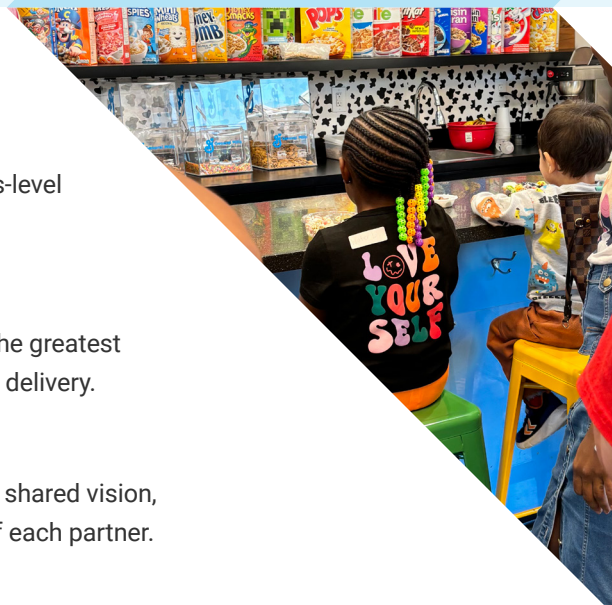
Local

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



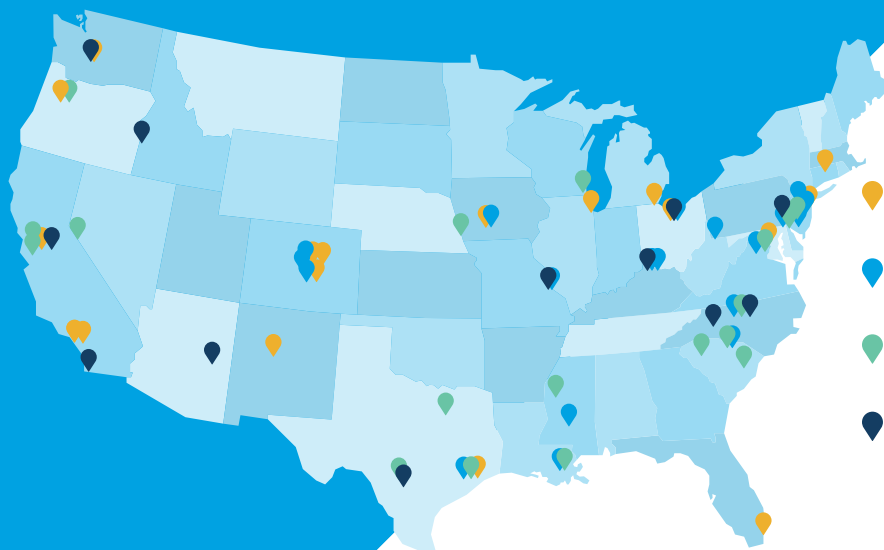
Data-Driven

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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BUILD 1.0
2015-2017

BUILD 2.0
2017-2019

BUILD 3.0
2019-2022

BUILD 4.0
2023-2026