

A HEALTHY FOOD BUSINESS BRINGS DELICIOUS, AFFORDABLE FOOD AND WORKFORCE OPPORTUNITY TO SUPPORT RESIDENTS' WELL-BEING

Healthy Highland & RAMS Kitchen in Gastonia, NC



POWERED BY

The **BUILD HEALTH** Challenge®

BOLD
A health center, hospital, county government agency, and neighborhood association partner in a business venture that addresses obesity rates, inequitable food access, and issues identified by the community



UPSTREAM

Create employment (with living wages and benefits), increase affordable access to healthy food, and spur economic development through a fresh food enterprise



INTEGRATED

Launch a meal prescription program for patients of Kintegra Health and provide vouchers for free meals to health center staff for distribution to patients



LOCAL

Utilize the Community Centered Health approach that holds the community's voice as the central and strongest one in planning, decision-making, monitoring, etc.



DATA-DRIVEN

RAMS Kitchen staff study sales data and collect qualitative data from customers to understand trends and impact of the Kitchen

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



COMMUNITY IMPACT



RAMS Kitchen staff have lost a total of 144 pounds since May 2021



The number of items sold by RAMS Kitchen doubled in 5 months after its launch



Staff are working full-time and receiving insurance and benefits

RAMS Kitchen is the only restaurant like it in our county. There are very few healthy food options in [Gaston] County as a whole.
—Brandie Meeks, RAMS Kitchen

INTRODUCTION

Since its launch in spring 2021, RAMS Kitchen has inspired many in the community—including its staff—to lose weight, learn about health-supportive nutrition, and better manage chronic health conditions exacerbated by obesity. Customers share that managing their blood pressure and A1C (a measure of average blood sugar levels over the previous three months)¹ has become easier. Even more importantly, they report better understanding of how to make healthier choices when not eating RAMS Kitchen food, such as appropriate portion sizes.

The name RAMS Kitchen both honors the local high school and its mascot, and also stands for Really Amazing Meals with Soul. RAMS Kitchen is not just a source of community pride. It is also a source of living-wage employment and economic development in Highland. Employing only Highland residents and driven by community members' voices, RAMS Kitchen is a culmination of the community

engagement, ownership, and power building sought by the Healthy Highland collaborative for several years. This success story—and many others like it—is the result of a collaborative, community-driven partnership between Highland Neighborhood Association, HealthNet Gaston, CaroMont Health, Gaston County Department of Health and Human Services, Kintegra Health, and the City of Gastonia. Together, under the auspices of Healthy Highland, these organizations are working to increase access to healthy and affordable food and well-paying jobs with benefits, as well as to build community power in order to reduce obesity and its associated health concerns. Ultimately, all of these strategies help create better health outcomes.

This collaborative effort is one of 18 such community-driven partnerships currently supported by an innovative funding collaborative and award program, The BUILD Health Challenge® (BUILD), that is contributing to the creation of new norms in the United States. BUILD is putting multi-sector, community-driven partnerships at the center of health to reduce health disparities caused by system-based or social inequities. An intentional commitment to advancing equitable systems-level changes in their communities distinguishes BUILD partners from many other health-focused



efforts. Over the course of BUILD's three cohorts, both the collaborating funders and the 55 participating communities have evolved in their understanding and pursuit of health equity. At the heart of this story is health equity—both its absence and its indispensable role in reducing health disparities caused by social inequity.

BACKGROUND

Located just west of Charlotte, North Carolina, Gastonia was once home to a thriving textile industry, and later to a large company producing porta-johns. When Gastonia's economy became hard-hit by losses in these industries in recent decades, many people with

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/managing/managing-blood-sugar/a1c.html>

resources left for Charlotte, which was growing dramatically. Today, Gastonia’s population is just over 77,000, with about 5,000 residents located in the Highland neighborhood. Built in the 1930s as “the place where Black folks could live,” Highland is still majority African American. As in many segregated and marginalized areas, the neighborhood is bisected by a highway, making some areas unsafe for walking. Highland is also a “food desert,” requiring residents to take a two-hour round trip bus ride to get to a grocery store. Historically, Highland has served as the location for undesirable development, including a wastewater treatment plant, jail, and courthouse. The neighborhood also contains many older, abandoned buildings that formerly housed light manufacturing businesses and warehouses.

When integration happened, and people had more choices, much of Highland was abandoned by people of resources. Businesses dried up, and it was considered “successful” if you left.

—Donyel Barber, Kintegra Health and Gastonia City Council



Highland residents experience more economic challenges than those in neighboring areas and in Gaston County more broadly.² Over 65 percent of Highland neighbors have incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level (compared to 40 percent in the county overall and 28 percent in a nearby wealthy neighborhood). Over 38 percent have incomes below 100 percent of the federal policy level (over twice that of the county overall). Black Highland residents experience an even higher level of poverty, with nearly half having incomes below 100 percent of the federal poverty level. The unemployment

rate (19.8 percent) is more than double that of the county overall (8.3 percent). Educational attainment for Highlanders is also lower than in neighboring areas, making economic mobility a significant issue. About 30 percent of people over 25 have completed high school or received their GED; and just under 16 percent have a bachelor’s degree or higher education.³

In terms of chronic health conditions affecting Highland residents, just over 6 percent have diabetes and over 15 percent have hypertension.⁴ Residents consider chronic obesity one of their biggest challenges, along

² *Highland Shows UP, Speaks UP, Steps UP Aligning Systems for Health: Community-led Collaboration Advancing Health Equity*, www.caresharehealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/HealthierHighlandEvaluationReport_Full_Final.pdf

³ Highland is located in the Census tracts 319 and 320. All U.S. Census data is from the American Fact Finder, American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates 2013-2017 at <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/advanced>

⁴ 2019 data sourced from Kintegra Health and reported in *Highland Shows UP, Speaks UP, Steps UP Aligning Systems for Health: Community-led Collaboration Advancing Health Equity*, www.caresharehealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/HealthierHighlandEvaluationReport_Full_Final.pdf

with lack of access to health insurance other than Medicaid/Medicare.

“Despite all of that,” shared Brandie Meeks, “the folks here are incredible to work with and have hope.” Highland is a tight-knit and proud neighborhood, where people get involved to help each other thrive.

This work has been successful because it is genuinely community led and community driven. The voice of the community is the only voice in deciding on the problem to be addressed—the upstream causes of the problem and the solutions to the problem. Community partners serve in supporting roles to bring needed resources and expertise if asked.
—Donna Elliott, Kintegra Health

APPROACH

In 2015, a collaboration between the City of Gastonia, Kintegra Health (then called Gaston Family Health Services), and Gaston County Department of Health and Human Services—together called Healthy Highland—formed the Highland Neighborhood Association (HNA) to advance health equity and healthier outcomes for Gastonia residents. Committed to

reducing obesity and associated conditions in the neighborhood, the HNA knew that racism, lack of economic opportunities, lack of education and income, no access to healthy food, and neighborhood infrastructure that is not conducive to leading active lifestyles were upstream causes of obesity for Highland neighbors. Starting with a Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation grant and the support of collaborative partners, HNA developed health initiatives to address a range of needs—such as access to fresh food, parks, and recreation—but which always centered community engagement and ownership.

The BUILD award was sought specifically to support Healthy Highland’s work to:

- Offer health and nutrition education to students and families
- Connect health care providers with the neighborhood in meaningful ways that promote and support good health outside office visits
- Help residents learn to advocate for and sustain change, and
- Create a neighborhood enterprise to bring fresh and healthy food, employment opportunities, and additional economic development to Highland.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & OWNERSHIP

In addition to developing ways for Highland neighbors to become healthier and more active, HNA was founded to put them in control of these activities and direct the community investments by Healthy Highland partners. Goals around growing community voices and cultivating greater local leadership were just as important as shifts in health indicators. “It couldn’t be about each of the agencies’ agendas but about the community,” emphasized Donna Elliott, who was involved as Kintegra Health staff from the beginning.

It took cooperation among those who had the decision-making power ... they had to agree that allowing community members to “drive the bus” was the priority.
—Donyel Barber, Kintegra Health and Gastonia City Council

Trust between the collaborative and Highland neighbors needed to be built before community engagement and planning launched in earnest. Gastonia health care systems and government agencies were not historically well-connected to community needs and aspirations, so Healthy Highland initiated a series of deep dive conversations facilitated by a local, trusted consultant. Community focus groups yielded specific strategies to increase broader community engagement. A second convening of community members with Healthy Highland partner agencies revealed what might be possible to accomplish together if everyone agreed to keep residents at the center of all future activity and decision-making. “What made a big difference,” said Donyel Barber, “was the partners being authentic in taking action to show that community members were in control. They asked, now that we have 40 people at the table, how do we get 400 community members heard?” In addition, community participants were

ADVANCING HEALTH EQUITY: Healthy Highland is addressing the upstream causes of obesity in Gastonia, North Carolina: structural racism; inequitable food access; lack of power to change community conditions; lack of access to living wages and benefits; and lack of resources to sustain community change. All of Healthy Highland’s work centers equity and power building, with the voice of the neighborhood as the driving force behind all decisions. The power to create change and advocate is held solely by the neighbors.

compensated for their time spent in these and all planning activities.

Over time, Highland neighbors saw partners continually showing up, learning about their history, listening to their interests and needs, and working to invest in what they asked for.⁵ For example, City Community Development Director Vincent Wong, who had not previously been in relationship with the community, “came in, said he had \$1 million to spend in the community, asked residents what they needed, and spent it as they requested—a bathroom in the public park, better sidewalks, etc.,” shared Elliott. And as residents became more engaged with local government, they began participating in leadership and organizational development training opportunities (often supported by Healthy Highland partners), attending City Council meetings, and working to get representatives on local government committees.



The residents that live in that neighborhood every day know it best, so put your ego aside and say, “How can I help?”
—Vincent Wong, City of Gastonia

⁵ *Highland Shows UP, Speaks UP, Steps UP Aligning Systems for Health: Community-led Collaboration Advancing Health Equity*, www.caresharehealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/HealthierHighlandEvaluationReport_Full_Final.pdf

Healthy Highland’s commitment to centering community power could also be seen in how the Community Coordinator was identified and selected. Barber, born and raised in Highland, was on the Kintegra Health board at the time and the organization’s medical director nominated her for the job. But community members—not Kintegra or other collaborative partners—interviewed and selected Barber to convene, develop, and lead them. In this way, the groups with more positional power stepped back while residents and local leaders, including Barber, stepped into decision-making roles.

RAMS KITCHEN

The spark of the idea for a neighborhood healthy food enterprise came when Donna Elliott saw a news profile of Everytable, a for-profit California business that delivers healthy, prepared meals priced according to the income profile of neighborhoods served.⁶ Brandie and Anthony Meeks and three members of HNA who were working in the school system then developed this spark into the full-fledged concept for the RAMS Kitchen. “A lot of folks in the community grew up not eating vegetables, or eating them unhealthy,” said Brandie Meeks, “but we knew we could bring comfort food to a new level with healthy substitutions and convenience.”

⁶ <https://www.everytable.com/about>



Donyel Barber vetted the RAMS Kitchen concept with the community, who agreed, and Meeks, after participating in community engagement training, worked with neighbors to choose the venture’s name. A college student who grew up in Highland prepared four logos and the neighbors and Healthy Highland partners voted for the one they liked best.

HNA members found that a local church, Third Street Presbyterian, was not really using its catering-grade kitchen and proposed the idea of locating RAMS Kitchen there. After church leadership agreed, Kintegra Health’s maintenance department contributed the labor and materials for a kitchen upgrade. Kintegra Health will



continue providing maintenance services on an ongoing basis at a reduced rate. In addition, its purchasing department is assisting with contracts for needs such as hand soap and towels, cleaning supplies, gloves, and bathroom supplies, allowing RAMS Kitchen to take advantage of the much-larger Kintegra Health’s preferred pricing structure for these items.

All of the RAMS Kitchen staff—technically employed by Kintegra Health and receiving all associated benefits and services—are Highland residents with professional experience in the food service industry. The team together designed the business based on their own lived experience and relationships with the neighborhood.

“The enthusiasm in the community around the hiring of the RAMS team members has been incredible! They are beloved and the community trusts them to make good decisions around how RAMS will meet their needs,” noted Elliott. The RAMS Kitchen team developed a pilot menu that would appeal to their neighbors and came up with many fun ideas that would meet families’ particular needs, like snack packs (similar to Lunchables) for kids.

This is not just about providing healthier foods but also education about what can be truly satisfying while reaching health goals, whether losing weight or getting off diabetes meds.—Donyel Barber, Kintegra Health and Gastonia City Council

In order to get feedback on menu items, RAMS Kitchen staff brought lunch (and a survey) to Kintegra Health staff so they could learn what was a hit and what was a miss. Subsequent community tastings and feedback sessions helped RAMS Kitchen further refine its offerings before its official launch at the Third Street Presbyterian location in May 2021. Even before that, RAMS Kitchen began catering for Kintegra Health’s vaccine and testing teams and the County’s vaccination team. They also became the “caterer of choice” for Goodwill.

Once RAMS Kitchen launched, Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation provided funding for RAMS Kitchen to provide a free meal, a coupon for another free meal, and a bag of local produce with recipe ideas to every household in Highland. This funding also allowed RAMS Kitchen to distribute coupons for free meals at Mt. Zion Restoration Church’s weekly food giveaway. These strategies not only started getting healthy, local foods into the hands of the community but also promoted RAMS Kitchen to its target audience—neighbors looking after their health while accessing affordable options.

Starting with a food trailer that was towed to the farmer’s market, Social Services office, and hospital, and continuing with the launch of a full-fledged food truck in early 2022, RAMS Kitchen has become a traveling restaurant. “The hope is that the food truck will provide nutrition to neighbors in the first part of the day and the Kitchen will be their dinner provider,” described Meeks.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

While a global pandemic is not something to be thankful for, “COVID turned out to be a plus for our project ... it normalized grab-and-go food [since no one was dining inside], and gave us time to work with partners to fully equip the church kitchen

and hire staff,” said Donyel Barber. “This was not a prevalent way to get food in our community before COVID,” added Donna Elliott, “but it was the way RAMS Kitchen started, so it worked out well.”

We’re very visual people, so if folks are asked to eat healthy and they come in and see what healthy food looks like, then it seems much more possible to them.—Brandie Meeks, RAMS Kitchen

Highland residents also needed other types of food assistance as a result of reduced or lost employment, so Healthy Highland worked to support many food distribution partners in the community. Examples include the county library, which was distributing free meals along with learning kits for parents to engage their children. Food giveaways were expanded when Mt. Zion Restoration Church received Rapid Response funds to purchase a refrigerated truck that could reach more people with its weekly food distribution. That distribution was supported by Dole Foods, which provided about 900 fresh salad kits per week, brought from Dole to the church by HNA members. Over 135,000 people have been served by this outreach since April 2020.

To support education about and uptake of COVID vaccines by the community, HNA also was a hub for sharing reliable, accurate information with Highland neighbors. In 2021, HNA hosted a virtual vaccine information session with Dr. Crystal Bowe, an African American physician with Caromonth Health, who is known and trusted in the community. Kintegra Health also offered mobile COVID testing to accommodate the transportation and work challenges of residents.

OUTCOMES

RAMS Kitchen customers are regularly surveyed about their reactions to the food they are served. Some of the feedback the staff receives includes; “Not too salty or greasy, plus great taste;” “different, good variety, affordable;” and “I like the peanut butter balls!” Tellingly, all of the food inspectors in the area eat at RAMS Kitchen.

RAMS Kitchen staff hear from customers that they are getting off medications and getting healthier. Customers are also spreading the word so widely that RAMS Kitchen is getting requests every day for the food truck to visit many different workplaces and locations, some as far as 20 miles away. As Brandie Meeks observed, “Folks are coming from other communities to learn how we’re doing it. There are so many places where this service is needed.”



WORD CLOUD CREATED FROM CUSTOMERS' RESPONSES TO RAMS KITCHEN SURVEY ABOUT THE FOOD AND MENU

The RAMS Kitchen staff—all Highland residents—is continuing to expand. They receive full-time salaries with insurance and benefits, not previously available to them as part-time school system employees. Discussions with CaroMont Health about developing a career pipeline

between RAMS Kitchen and the hospital have moved the health system to consider raising pay for all food service employees. This would greatly improve not only the individual employees' financial situations, but also create more positive community conditions. Another way that “money is

staying in the community,” noted Donyel Barber, is they’ve “introduced RAMS to the farmers market community and will start partnering with farmers to get produce.”

Two key members of the collaborative—HNA President Charles Odom and Community Centered Health Manager Donyel Barber—were elected to the Gastonia City Council, giving Healthy Highland unprecedented access to the City of Gastonia’s political system. Highland now has three seats (the re-elected Mayor of Gastonia is also a Highland resident) at a table where it has historically had zero seats or only one seat. Barber is also serving on the de Beaumont Foundation’s (the organizational home of BUILD) Advisory Committee for its Healing Through Policy initiative, which is focused explicitly on how racial equity can be advanced through supportive policy.

THE FUTURE

While Healthy Highland and RAMS Kitchen will continue to seek funding for the enterprise, the community partners are also working out how RAMS Kitchen might become self-sustaining. They have several ideas for expanding this healthy venture, including two more food trucks to reach Charlotte and Mecklenburg. The team is planning to add fresh produce to current

offerings, diversify payment options to include SNAP, increase hours and days of operation, and add satellite locations for additional grab-and-go. They also hope to establish a brick-and-mortar location to enable folks to sit down and enjoy the RAMS Kitchen menu. They are dreaming of a “meal prep” extension of the business to enable folks to cook their own food while learning about ingredients at home. “It might take us time to get there, but mostly because it could take off quickly and we would have to have the staff in place to deal with growth,” noted Brandie Meeks.

The community is in the process of establishing the Highland Neighborhood Association as an independent 501(c)(3) in order to facilitate direct fundraising. This change will also allow HNA to have more decision-making power over the property where RAMS Kitchen manages the youth garden which services the restaurant.

In the meantime, three of the four RAMS Kitchen staff members, including Meeks herself, have been on a successful weight loss journey, learning and changing as they help those in the community do so as well. “We have lost a total of 144 pounds since we got started in 2021,” shared Meeks. Team meetings regularly take place at a nearby track, so they can plan and get exercise at the same time. And word of mouth is expanding both the walking group

and the RAMS Kitchen customer base. Meeks declared, “Everybody is getting healthy together!”



We are talking about “food as medicine” so that health care providers will see the value of utilizing RAMS as part of their clinical interventions and so major payors (Medicare, Medicaid, private insurance) will allow for the cost of these healthy foods to be covered.—Donyel Barber, Kintegra Health and Gastonia City Council



The Build Health Challenge® is contributing to the creation of a new norm in the U.S.— one that puts multi-sector, community-driven partnerships at the center of health in order to reduce health disparities caused by systemic or social inequity.

BUILD is a national program designed to support partnerships between community-based organizations, health departments, hospitals/health systems, health plans, and residents that are working to address important health issues in their community. Each community collaborative addresses root causes of chronic disease (also commonly referred to as the social determinants of health) in their local area by moving resources, attention, and action upstream. To date, BUILD has supported 55 projects across the U.S. over the course of three award cycles.

To learn more about BUILD, visit buildhealthchallenge.org.

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- BlueCross® BlueShield® of South Carolina Foundation (An independent licensee of the Blue Cross Blue Shield Association)
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