

Focus on Philanthropy

How The John Rex Endowment Helped Fund Healthier Places in Wake County

When tackling the issue of access to healthy food and physical activity opportunities for children, policy makers often look to school-focused programs. While those can have significant positive impacts, municipality-level initiatives can play a uniquely effective role. When the John Rex Endowment decided to fund programs to support the healthy weight of children in Wake County in 2014, the foundation took the opportunity to focus on improving physical activity and food access through policies and built environment projects at the town or city level.

The Endowment selected six local governments in Wake County to receive \$210,000 each for a three-year grant. Funded projects included a community kitchen in Fuquay-Varina; a new sidewalk network connecting an underserved neighborhood in Garner; pedestrian-friendly improvements in Knightdale; a new farmers market in Morrisville; addressing “play deserts” in Raleigh; and a new farmers market accepting SNAP EBT in Zebulon.

“We decided to approach this at the municipal level by offering a competitive application process for the 12 towns in Wake County, because a lot of those policy changes and physical capital improvements have to happen at that level,” said Gladys Hairston, director of learning, research, and evaluation at the Endowment.

The nonprofit Healthy Places by Design (HPBD) served as the technical assistance provider for these Wake County Healthy Community projects [1]. Phil Bors, technical assistance director for HPBD, noted that the grants provided an opportunity to help cities and towns in Wake County build their capacity to affect public health, typically a county-level endeavor in North Carolina.

“They may or may not have been thinking they were doing public health work, but whether they’re elected officials or department heads, or parks and recreation or transportation, what they do does impact the public’s health,” said Bors. He pointed to the town of Morrisville’s partnership with the

nonprofit farmers market association in the area, and the Zebulon farmers market’s move from the parking lot of a community center to the grounds of the town hall, where it integrated with a summer meal program, connecting local growers and residents in one space.

HPBD also developed a learning network as part of the work of these grants, bringing together staff and partners from each municipality to learn about concepts like health in all policies and the social equity index.

“We helped to set the table to get these folks that might be working on similar concepts to come together and learn from one another, and break down silos,” said Tim Schwantes, senior project officer with HPBD.

The grants also provided an opportunity for the John Rex Endowment to test its flexibility as a funder. Though designed as three-year grants, due to the nature of policy change several projects ended up taking five years. Hairston pointed specifically to Raleigh’s project, which involved creating shared-use agreements for the city’s playgrounds. The parks and recreation department worked with elementary schools in neighborhoods without access to nearby parks or playgrounds and dealt with strict guidelines surrounding access to school property.

“It took some deep conversations with different levels of the Wake County Public School System,” Hairston said.

Those conversations resulted in agreements with two elementary schools that opened their playgrounds to the community during non-school

Electronically published March 7, 2022.

Address correspondence to Kaitlin Ugolik Phillips, North Carolina Medical Journal, 630 Davis Dr, Morrisville, NC 27560 (kaitlin_phillips@nciom.org).

N C Med J. 2022;83(2):124-125. ©2022 by the North Carolina Institute of Medicine and The Duke Endowment. All rights reserved.
0029-2559/2022/83217

hours. In order to identify those two schools, Raleigh's parks and recreation department used the Wake County Social Equity Atlas, an online tool through which the planning department layers together proxies to health data, such as home ownership and education level [2]. This allowed the project developers to determine areas of the city that would most benefit from partnering with a school for playground use.

Only about 73% of North Carolinians live half a mile from a park in any area, one mile from a recreational center in an urban area, or three miles from one in a rural area, according to "Healthy North Carolina 2030," which makes recommendations for reaching a target of 92% [3].

Bors noted that while it is important to have champions for this work—whether a department leader or a mayor—these projects emphasized the extent to which those who don't work in government at all can play a major role.

"We don't want the success of continued support for health to solely be dependent on enthusiastic people in positions of power," said Bors. "Over time, [government staff and partners] build the capacity and the confidence to do this work."

Both the John Rex Endowment and HPBD have continued to prioritize amplifying the voices of community members in the years since the Wake County Healthy Community initiative concluded. Thinking ahead, Hairston, Bors, and Schwantes all said they'd like to continue in that vein.

Every community benefits from access to healthy food and opportunities for physical activity,

but not all communities experience the same influences or have the same needs. A community garden may benefit one community to another it may be inaccessible, requiring real community engagement to determine the most appropriate approach and a power shift to residents.

"If we were to have this funding opportunity again, I would love to have a specific focus on racial equity and accessibility from the standpoint of barriers that have been created—whether a literal, physical barrier or mental, psychological, or emotional barriers—based on race," said Hairston. **NCMJ**

Kaitlin Ugolik Phillips, MS managing editor, North Carolina Medical Journal, Morrisville, North Carolina.

Acknowledgments

Disclosure of interests. K.U.P. is the managing editor of the *NCMJ*. This article was reviewed by the subjects and guest editor Josie Williams, and edited by Editor-in-Chief Peter Morris.

References

1. Healthy Places by Design. Local Governments as Health Champions: Wake County Healthy Community Case Stories. Published July 2018. Accessed January 19, 2022. https://healthyplacesbydesign.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Local-Governments-As-Health-Champions_WCHC-Case-Stories_Digital.pdf
2. Social Equity Atlas. Wake County, North Carolina. Accessed January 19, 2022. <https://www.wakegov.com/departments-government/planning-development-inspections/planning/social-equity-atlas>
3. North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services. North Carolina Institute of Medicine. Healthy North Carolina 2030: A Path Toward Health. NCIOM; 2020. Accessed January 19, 2022. <https://nciom.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/HNC-REPORT-FINAL-Spread2.pdf>