

Working Together to Improve Community-Level Health: The Evolution of the New York City Food & Fitness Partnership

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The New York City Food & Fitness Partnership case study discusses how the scope and abundance of diverse community stakeholders can create difficulties when addressing and conducting work in a large city landscape. We describe our 9-year journey, from initial city-wide planning, to early challenges, to rebirth as a Central Brooklyn-focused effort led by a community development corporation. We describe difficult and transparent conversations, and the various leadership changes and organizational transitions that have helped the partnership embrace equity frameworks. We illustrate how these principles have been demonstrated in their efforts to be community driven, ensuring that intended beneficiaries would be involved in every stage of decision making.

Keywords: *community organization; health research; partnerships/coalitions; health equity; racial equity; food environment; active living/built environment; local policy change*

► INTRODUCTION

This article describes the evolution of a successful community-based partnership working to change food systems and the built environment within Central Brooklyn's predominantly low-income, African American and Latino communities. The article sheds light on the intricacies of race, privilege, power, and place within the context of building collective impact and demonstrates the importance of galvanizing support on shared issues and easy wins to reinvent and rebuild consensus. It is told from the perspective of a senior nonprofit executive

intimately involved in the partnership and is further informed by the observations of various stakeholders engaged in different iterations of The Partnership as they gathered together to reflect on their experience.

As funding for the NYC Food & Fitness Partnership (NYCFFP, The Partnership) approached its sunset in April 2016, its current host, Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, convened a cross-section of stakeholders involved in the various stages of The Partnership to discuss shared trials, lessons learned, and the process of rebuilding. The session was facilitated by an organizational development consultant with the goal of reflecting on NYCFFP's decade-long evolution, from its initial excitement and citywide planning, to its early challenges, to its rebirth as a Central Brooklyn-focused effort led by a community development corporation. While the NYCFFP continues to morph and adapt, it remains a study in unprecedented collaboration that has made significant strides in enhancing access to healthy foods and opportunities for physical activity while laying the framework for replication nationwide.

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► **COMMUNITY SNAPSHOT**

Central Brooklyn is a food desert, ranked sixth nationally for food hardship. Although the largest borough, there is currently no food aggregator or hub in Brooklyn, vastly limiting healthy food options. Eight in 10 food stores are bodegas with limited healthy options. One in four children live in food insecure homes. Obesity and related disease are at epidemic levels with 6 in 10 adults and 4 in 10 children overweight, 35% diagnosed with high blood pressure (26% citywide), and 15% diagnosed with diabetes (10% citywide), according to the Dragan, King, Hinterland, and Gwynn (2015). In the face of these challenges, a diverse collective of public and private community stakeholders, each with individual agendas and varying levels of voice and access to limited resources, set out to impact community level health outcomes through increased access to healthy, locally sourced foods and changes to the built environment.

► **BIRTH OF A PARTNERSHIP**

The NYCFFP began in 2009 as one of a number of collaboratives nationwide funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) to address health disparities in low-income and communities of color (Lachance, Carpenter, Emery, & Luluquisen, 2014). In NYC, this represented an ambitious undertaking to create systemic change in the food and fitness environments while bringing together diverse stakeholders. Three hundred organizations were part of early discussions on how to launch an unprecedented collaborative representing diverse, high profile stakeholders including the newly formed Mayor's Office of Food Policy, the NYC Department of Health, and Food Change amid lots of excitement at the prospect of creating local systems change. The NYCFFP later moved to three lead partners: a food rescue and distribution organization, an advocacy organization committed to safe and healthy transportation alternatives, and a community-based food justice organization. Priorities were identified as school food, community food, and active living, with the South Bronx, East and Central Harlem, and Central Brooklyn prioritized. With this broad and fairly undefined agenda, the NYCFFP set out to create community-level change.

Over time, the WKKF came to increasingly adopt a racial and economic equity lens across its priorities, recognizing that many low-income and communities of color were at a significant disadvantage in accessing fresh foods and opportunities for active living. Emphasis gradually moved away from process to sustainable projects, with a mini-grants program funding organizations working to improve access to healthy foods and physical activity.

The scope of the NYCFFP, as well as the number of organizations of various sizes participating, led to a wariness among members around whose voices would be heard and what would be accomplished. In December 2011, after a 2-year planning process and an early phase of implementation, the NYCFFP refocused efforts on Central Brooklyn. This direction was motivated by a variety of factors. The complexity of attaining citywide systems change in a city as large and with as many stakeholders as New York had been underestimated. Neighborhoods like the Bronx were already experiencing traction with other funding in place and promising pilots at work. Home to the nation's largest African American population, Central Brooklyn stood out as a community with some of the highest health, education, and economic disparities across the five boroughs. Roughly a third of the population live below the poverty level, more than 15% are unemployed, and rates of obesity and related chronic disease exceed state and local averages. Moreover, the Central Brooklyn District Public Health Office was already in place and poised for partnership. New to the partnership was Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation (Restoration), neighborhood anchor with programming spanning financial empowerment, workforce development, social supports, education, health, and the arts. As a comprehensive community development corporation, Restoration focuses on revitalizing the area in which they are located, focusing on neighborhoods that have experienced significant disinvestment.

► **AT A CROSSROADS**

A new Steering Committee reconvened with a focus on Central Brooklyn. As part of the process, members had to redefine their individual roles and collective agenda. The committee was fractious and contentious from the onset. Partners represented both large and small organizations, residents, and food activists with varying levels of power and access to limited resources. While all players were genuinely passionate, thoughtful, and knowledgeable about their individual work, many came to the table as advocates for their respective organizations and projects, rather than as collaborators working toward a cohesive goal. That the Partnership had come to financially support numerous projects and was now viewed as a funder only exacerbated this, as members struggled to secure or have a say in limited funds. With no singular vision, partners could not agree on strategic direction and use of funds. By the summer of 2012, the Partnership had reached an impasse.

Compounding economic tensions were issues of race. While the lead convener—a food rescue and distribution organization with a citywide reach, maintained a staff

person focused on Bedford Stuyvesant, it was still seen as a White-led organization not representative of the community of color it was trying to reach. Having a citywide organization at the helm also exasperated tensions with many fledgling organizations and individual activists fearful of being lost in the shuffle. This lack of trust thwarted the possibility of collective action. The Partnership's director, who had the difficult task of navigating oftentimes tumultuous dynamics and a lack of consensus, soon resigned. As problems eventually came to a head, it became clear that the Partnership would either have to disband and return funding to the WKKF, or it would need to revamp its leadership structure. In effort to avoid the former, the lead convener opted to pull out of the Partnership and let another organization take the helm.

► PARTNERSHIP REIMAGINED

Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation agreed to assume leadership of the NYCFFP in the summer of 2012. Unlike the Partnership's past lead convener, which was a citywide organization, Restoration was a minority-led organization with a strong history of grassroots activism, extensive ties to the community, and a then 45-year track record as a coalition builder and direct service provider working to holistically improve the quality of life in Central Brooklyn. This went a long way toward helping to alleviate mistrust among residents and stakeholders who viewed Restoration as a neutral convener. Still, Restoration had historically taken a broader approach to health, launching the community's first health center, attracting its first full service supermarket, and matching residents with jobs that paid living wages. Leading the Partnership would draw a different set of players to the table and require a laser-focus on food and fitness equity.

At the same time Restoration was well-poised to leverage resources and relationships to further the Partnership. Restoration had just received funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to serve as the Brooklyn lead for the Partnership for a Healthier NYC. The Partnership's goals were similar to the Food & Fitness Partnership, although larger in scope to also include efforts to reduce alcohol and tobacco consumption, and geographically broader, extending beyond Central Brooklyn to encompass the entire borough.

What ensued over the course of the next few years was a reimagining and rebuilding of the NYCFFP. Restoration embarked on uncharted territory to help galvanize members behind a new vision. Past members of the Steering Committee were invited to participate in leadership training with a goal of letting go of conflicts and finding common ground. This ultimately helped members to resolve issues that would have previously

escalated. A new foundation began to emerge, with a shared framework that integrated regular meetings and ongoing communication.

Simultaneously, Restoration engaged an outside organization with a national reputation for capacity building in the area of food systems. With their help, Restoration hosted a series of five community listening sessions, to hear firsthand from residents of Brownsville, East New York, and Bedford Stuyvesant. At the same time, a community-wide survey was conducted that canvassed more than 700 residents. The process unearthed what residents felt were the greatest impediments to healthy eating and active living, namely cost and safety. Finally, Restoration also conducted a preliminary environmental scan of assets in Central Brooklyn. As a result, more than 100 organizations were identified that were directly working in healthy food and/or fitness domain areas. These were mapped geographically and programmatically, and the aligned funding reviewed to determine how the new Partnership might best leverage these resources for greatest impact within the prioritized Central Brooklyn neighborhoods. Last, community stakeholders and past Partnership members were interviewed, creating a blueprint for what the new partnership should look like.

Recognizing the importance of having the right people at the table, Restoration focused on individuals and organizations representing key Central Brooklyn communities who were already doing the work and aligned with the Partnership's mission. As new members were sought, Restoration made clear that local systems change was the Partnership's goal and that members should not view the Partnership as merely a funding source. Rather, individual organizations and pilots would only be supported within the context of the broader vision. Various partners were invited back to the table such as the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and key community stakeholders such as the Brooklyn Rescue Mission Urban Harvest Center, a community-based organization working for food justice; Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation, a neighborhood-led organization focused on education, economic success, housing, and leadership development; and Make the Road New York, an organization focused on building the power of Latino and working-class citizens to transform their communities.

Restoration next set out to ensure that the Partnership had the right leadership in place and embarked on an executive search. The organization ultimately hired a seasoned food activist with a strong racial equity and food justice background hailing from Chicago. Despite initial concerns about bringing in an "outsider," Restoration took a calculated risk that a neutral party

would drive consensus toward collective goals and help dissipate issues of neighborhood and organizational turf. The new director brought an objective lens to the Partnership's work in Brooklyn and was quickly able to immerse herself in the local environment while leveraging new networks and fresh perspectives. In addition, the WKKF provided a host of consultants to support the initiative including an organizational development specialist who helped to unite partners behind a shared vision and core values. The consultant was particularly helpful because he had worked with the collaborative in previous iterations, had a relationship with individual members, and had experience working with other collaboratives around the country. The WKKF made a substantial number of other technical assistance providers available, including a food systems expert from the Wallace Center, national racial equity expert PolicyLink, and a program development support expert.

► PROMISING PILOTS

The Partnership started to gel, with a shared vision to make Central Brooklyn the model for health with safe streets and ample opportunities for active living and an empowered community that determines and participates in an accessible, equitable, and affordable food system for all residents. Through community and public partnerships, it set out to significantly increase the amount of affordable healthful food and active living options available.

With regard to food work, the Partnership made a strategic decision to focus on children in order to set a trajectory that would affect the way an entire generation lives. Early care was also viewed as a space that would generate widespread agreement among stakeholders while capitalizing on heightened interest in cradle-to-career programming emerging from President Obama's Promise Zone Initiative. The Partnership opted to focus on head start centers, rather than the public school system, given their autonomy over their respective budgets. It would also expand the field of potential partners to organizations operating day care centers and other educational programming. For example, New York Cares volunteered to build school/community gardens and operate educational programs. Northeast Brooklyn Housing Development Corporation and Cornell Cooperative Extension helped mount healthy cooking demonstrations. Cypress Hills Community Development Corporation actually managed early care centers affecting hundreds of preschoolers and their families.

The Partnership focused on Farm to Institution sourcing in early care sites and expanded to include the

launch of farm share programming at select early care sites, giving staff and caregivers the opportunity to purchase affordable, healthy produce for the home. Intergenerational programming such as healthy cooking demonstrations, educational programming built around classroom planters and community gardens, and guided trips to farmers markets also worked to reinforce behavioral change and encourage healthy choices.

The Partnership also explored high visibility opportunities with potential to generate early successes. A retail initiative with a large supermarket was launched to change messaging and the display of healthy foods. These changes were made public at a major community event hosted by Restoration in its outdoor plaza, which attracted several hundred residents and included a film screening of *Soul Food Junkies*, a question and answer panel with filmmaker Byron Hurt, exercise programming, cooking demonstrations, and healthy supermarket tours. Moreover, Partnership members joined forces with the community and national nonprofit Kaboom to build a playground in 1 day. The new playground was located within a low-income housing development that would serve thousands of children.

► THE PARTNERSHIP'S LEGACY

It was not long before Partnership's efforts began to coalesce. In just 3 years, The Farm to Early Care Initiative expanded to reach close to 1,500 preschoolers across 30 early care sites, representing food aggregator Corbin Hill's first foray into Brooklyn. This work received NBC Universal Foundation's top award for innovation in 2017, as part of its highly competitive Tri-State 21st Century Solutions Challenge. Not only has this initiative shown strong potential for scale and replication within home-care settings, senior centers and hospitals, it has created new jobs as well as new business opportunities for local farmers and vendors.

Today the Partnership has been sustained beyond funding of the Food & Fitness Initiative. It continues to morph, learn, reinvent, and adapt. It has since merged with the Partnership for a Healthier Brooklyn, expanding its reach further with plans for long-term sustainability. Many of the initial pilots launched by the Partnership under the collective goal of local systems change continue to live on within organizations and communities, with more efforts geared toward promoting healthy food and physical activity than ever before in Brooklyn. Indeed, many ideas first incubated through the Partnership Steering Committee today flourish. A food policy institute at the City University of New York, a concept first originated at one of the

early Food & Fitness meetings, today stands as a leading thought leader supporting systems change work in the areas of food and health. Moreover, much of the work of The Brooklyn Rescue Mission, from its early community gardens to local farmers markets, continues today.

As the backbone organization for the Partnership, Restoration has been able to deepen relationships and leverage new funding including first-time multiyear grants from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Partnerships live on through programs throughout the city, sustaining and expanding efforts from food justice to bike share. Together these are building the collective impact of the Partnership through the year 2020. Specific objectives include increasing Farm to Institution sourcing among senior centers and health care facilities, increasing individual demand through farm share programming and farmers markets, and enhancing Central Brooklyn's infrastructure for sourcing, aggregating, storing, and distributing local, fresh food. Discussions of a food hub in Brooklyn, NYC's most populous borough, have also gained traction and two established distributors, Corbin Hill and Common Market, are currently working to bring fresh food to families and institutions in Central Brooklyn.

Experience gleaned from the Partnership has also been carried over into active living efforts, with a focus on promoting bike share. On the heels of Citi Bike's rapid expansion in Bedford Stuyvesant in 2015, Restoration joined forces with stakeholders across the community including the NYC Department of Transportation, NYC Department of Health, Citi Bike Operator Motivate, two local hospitals, and a local development organization, among others, to promote rider equity. Despite initial resistance from long-standing residents, many of whom viewed bike share as a harbinger of gentrification, Citi Bike membership in Bedford Stuyvesant grew 215% since Restoration and its partners began their work in June 2015.

Most noteworthy about the Better Bike Share Partnership is that the backbone is a community anchor and historically minority-run organization, Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation. Well beyond the conversation of ridership, Restoration addresses the deeper issues of equity and how the system impacts and benefits communities of color from providing a pipeline of jobs to residents and enhancing mobility in transit deserts, to connecting low- and moderate-income residents of color with Bike Share's many health and savings benefits. Toward this end, efforts include ensuring bike share's affordability and promoting safety through added bike lanes and/or protection from unfair policing practices.

There are more groups in the landscape, and there is deepening appreciation that collaboration, from the ground up, can be a catalyst for real change. New funding initiatives including the Governor's Vital Brooklyn have prioritized the health of neighborhoods in Central Brooklyn—for example, planning for a local food hub is underway! So, progress is here, and momentum continues to build as ideas planted in conversations as early seeds are now coming to fruition.

► LESSONS LEARNED

Perhaps the greatest lesson gleaned from the NYCFFP has been not only the need for a deeper focus on equity, but the role of the leadership organization in ensuring that happens in an authentic way while addressing community dynamics like power, race, income, and health. Years ago, when the partnership began conversations around race, income, and power, they found these discussions to be difficult and uncomfortable. While conversations around race and income are at a new high and there is a deepening understanding of equity, more work needs to be done.

Transitioning leadership from a citywide entity to a locally based grassroots organization with a long-standing history of addressing economic inequities has helped the coalition achieve a true equity lens. Furthermore, this work has also deepened Restoration's own understanding of collaboration and equity. The Partnership remains committed to ensuring that efforts be community-driven and that intended beneficiaries are involved in every stage of decision making, even when that means having honest and oftentimes difficult conversations. This reflects a transformation in program delivery and dialogue with equity at the heart, changing the vernacular and perception of how a collaborative should work and what defines its success.

► CONTINUED CHALLENGES

The Partnership's work lives on in individual organizations and collaborative efforts throughout Brooklyn and beyond. A primary challenge is how to sustain the Partnership's work with the ebbs and flows of funding. Sustaining interest, momentum and commitment among organizations and individuals in this context is sometimes difficult in the face of the real challenge of feeding themselves and their organizations. Restoration has successfully leveraged efforts to attract new multiyear funding, but this is an ongoing process and one that each partner must work at continuously.

In an environment of shifting sands caused by changing political administrations and funding cycles,

often resulting in changes in organizational staff and leadership, the partnership must maintain consistency in decision making and programming. To be successful at achieving community-level change, the Partnership needs to outlive organizational staff and leadership.

There is a strong need for disruptive strategies that advance policies that promote health and economic well-being. Given this need, an important challenge is the balancing act of sustaining the voice of community organizations and communities with inequities while working within the context of established power structures such as city, state, and federal agencies and organizations to achieve policy, systems, and environmental change for greatest population benefits. Restoration, as the Partnership's leader, is charged with walking the fine line of further developing the capacity to effectively work toward and advocate for community

and systems wide changes while maintaining its role as convener of, and giving voice to, our partners.

Last, as a Partnership, we must continue to regularly revisit and reevaluate the effectiveness of our interim strategies, such as farm to early care or bike share equity, to ensure continued progress toward our larger systems level priorities of transforming the food systems and built environment of Central Brooklyn.

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