



CASE STUDY:

North Memphis Volunteers, Organizing, Inspiring, Cultivating, and Education (V.O.I.C.E.) Coalition

Center for Community Health and Evaluation

The Strong, Prosperous, and Resilient Communities Challenge – or SPARCC – invested in and amplified local efforts in regions of the United States to ensure that major new investments in the places we live, work, and play lead to equitable and healthy opportunities for all. Over six years starting in 2017, SPARCC addressed barriers experienced by communities of color, especially low-income, by advancing a community-driven development model that prioritizes racial equity, health, and climate resilience. At the heart of SPARCC were local, multi-sector collaboratives or “tables” that worked in partnership with SPARCC’s national implementation team and funders. As illustrated in the theory of change (see image on page 2), SPARCC expanded cross-sector collaboration to advance racial equity and contribute to systems changes in community development.



In North Memphis, a confluence of city planning efforts and public and private funding flowing to the area threatened to spur gentrification and displacement in several Black communities. Substandard housing conditions, industrial pollution, and a history of disinvestment contributed to disparities in health and wellbeing for North Memphis residents. This case study provides an example of how SPARCC came to life in the Memphis context, including SPARCC’s contribution to changes in local community development systems, collaborative infrastructure and relationships, policy and practices, and capital investment strategies. While it highlights key examples of work and its connection to local systems changes, it is not a comprehensive or exhaustive account of all the work that occurred in Memphis during SPARCC.

North Memphis Volunteers, Organizing, Inspiring, Cultivating, and Education (V.O.I.C.E.) Coalition



SPARCC COLLABORATIVE TABLE: NORTH MEMPHIS V.O.I.C.E. COALITION

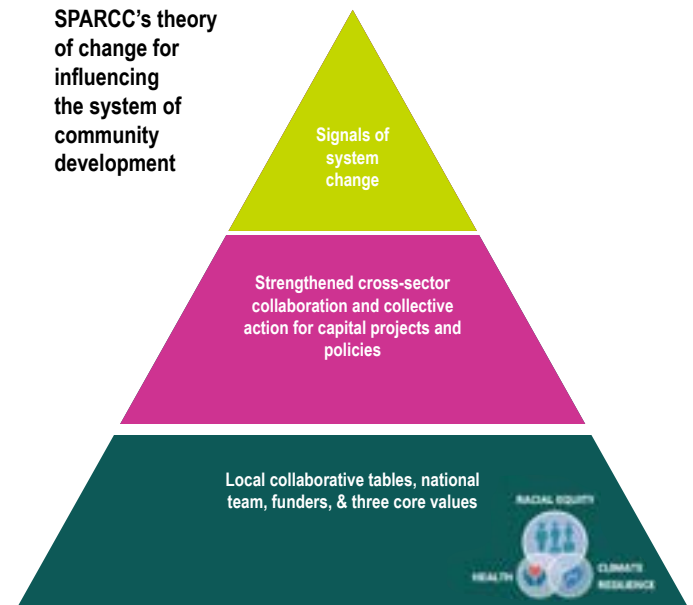
The foundation of the SPARCC theory of change were local collaboratives called “tables” that provided the infrastructure for multi-sector partnership to advance SPARCC’s goals. Tables received operating funding from SPARCC to support collaboration and partnership development. In 2017, SPARCC supported the formation of a multi-sector collaborative in North Memphis.

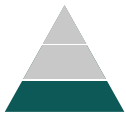
Structure: The Neighborhood Collaborative for Resilience was formed in 2017 and led by Building Memphis. After leadership transitioned to the Center for Transforming Communities, and a rebranding effort in 2020, they became the North Memphis V.O.I.C.E. Coalition. The collaborative is comprised of North Memphis residents, community-based organizations, and institutional partners. Additionally, after adding a new focus on community organizing and grassroots resident engagement in 2020, they added youth ambassadors to the collaborative. Workgroups support five different workstreams: climate and environment, health, arts and culture, growth and economics, and education. The table also recruited issue-focused champions to support the workgroups and provide technical assistance.

Target geography: North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition is a multi-neighborhood collaborative, spanning over 20 neighborhoods in North Memphis.

Priorities: North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition aims to cultivate self-defined “neighborhood democracies,” where residents have power to influence the decisions that affect their community. Their collaborative work focuses on justice and safety, health and wellness, the arts, building a restorative economy and education. Amplifying resident voices and letting them tell their own stories is integrated throughout all their work. They are working to create an alternative model of city planning and community development that better connects and values neighborhood roots and culture.

SPARCC’s theory of change for influencing the system of community development





NEW PARTNERS CREATED COLLABORATIVE INFRASTRUCTURE TO INFLUENCE SYSTEMS CHANGES IN HOW COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT OCCURS, DRIVEN BY PRIORITY OF RESIDENTS

The SPARCC theory of change suggests that local tables contribute to systems change by developing and strengthening relationships and collaborative infrastructure. With the aim of creating both an annual snapshot of collaboration within the tables and understanding change over time, the SPARCC evaluation administered an annual survey with all table members. This survey consisted of scaled questions addressing the six essential elements of collaboration [see image]. Perceptions of concrete accomplishments and collaborative effectiveness were determined by taking the average of several individual item ratings within each of the six elements in the collaboration model.

North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition used SPARCC resources to establish and strengthen its collaborative infrastructure, including engaging new partners, building a leadership team, conducting a strategic planning process, refining governance structures, clarifying member expectations, and fostering trusting relationships. North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition used a grassroots approach to establish a community-centered table structure. For example, to fairly compensate and incentivize residential leadership, two chairs (per workgroup) were allocated an annual \$10,000 individual stipend and \$25,000 for groups to develop a collective workplan. Additionally, North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition developed a system of having community-elected residents convene to review and approve the workplans with the intention of focusing on community-generated priorities.

Essential elements of collaboration





ESSENTIAL PEOPLE

North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition built a collaborative table inclusive of a variety of essential stakeholders

- North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition formed in 2017 without many existing relationships or a strong collaboration among partners. Rather, partners had a history of being pitted against each other and competing for limited resources. Because of this, trust among partners was a particular challenge and the group worked iteratively to engage the right fiscal sponsor organization and staff to lead the collaborative. The best individuals for this role were trusted by North Memphis communities and had experience effectively building bridges to and managing relationships with key institutional partners (e.g., the City of Memphis, local health systems, community development organizations).
- North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition brought together many partners who had not worked together before. This included small community-based organizations, city agencies, local philanthropy, residents, and community organizers. For some time, coalition leaders struggled to bridge the gap between community members and institutional partners. A key accomplishment of North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition was recruiting community member leaders with both the needed skills and commitment to further the interests of the community. They learned the importance of bringing in both community residents and institutional partners to support processes that put residents in the drivers' seat of defining strategy.
- The focus on resident involvement and leadership shifted naturally in 2020 with the change in the coalition's leadership. Building Memphis, which is designed to support community development corporations' investment, was replaced by the Center for Transforming Communities, which focused on power and capacity building support for residents. Beginning in 2020, North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition aspired to increase the participation and leadership of North Memphis community residents (including youth) at the table. North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition wanted community residents to determine their own priorities for their neighborhoods, collectively own the assets, challenges, and solutions in the area, and ensure equity considerations were layered throughout coalition processes and approaches. Integrating community voice into their work was a priority and was accomplished by promoting resident leadership, ensuring representation of BIPOC and bilingual champions, and lifting residents' stories and voices.





ACTIVE COLLABORATION

North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition successfully built trust among their members by establishing shared decision making and collaborative policies and practices. They were intentional about how their collaborative worked together and setting an example for working together that their communities could emulate. For example, North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition considered learning to share power as the center of equity work. SPARCC supported them in challenging the status quo, showing what it means for community members to be a viable part of the process in a disinvested community.

- **Community engagement extended beyond getting community residents involved to building trust and strengthening relationships.** Since North Memphis racial and ethnic groups have historically been in competition for political power and resources, the North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition needed to navigate these dynamics. This was not without challenges. The North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition leadership found ways to persevere even when they were disappointed, reflecting that this is a necessary part of the work. As one member said, *“We had many moments of turns and misses and learnings from the work, and I think for me the process was one of those highlights. No matter the challenges and the pain that you might have received from bumping your head against things, that’s part of community work.”*
- **To manage tensions and bring people together, the North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition used art, poetry, music, and storytelling to build the community, lift their collective voice, and reclaim their narrative.** This included culture work, like the creation of a video titled “One Minute Memphis Stories,” which featured community members telling their stories. The coalition also performed an original song to show support for the community at the start of the COVID-19 lockdowns.
- **North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition used a consensus decision-making process** and found that it required them to reject what they had been taught about how to do this work, including how long it should take to decide something, or that getting to results on a specific timeline is more important than inclusivity. As one member said, *“The process is the product. Treating each other with tenderness, love, and dignity is part of the process. There will be mistakes and things will take longer than we could have thought, but we make room for that, we make space for the unknown.”*
- **North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition built organizational policies and procedures from scratch and were open to shifting as they learned what worked best.** As one member said, this involved asking themselves questions like, *“How do you recruit folks? How do you screen people for roles? Once they get there, what’s most important to train them on? We learned about personalities, when it was best to meet, how to shift the work to make sure that we get buy in, and at the same time how do we get movement too.”*

“Our work allows for an individual to explain what their role is in the context of unity, and part of restorative economics. It is about how people share power. It’s not just about dismantling. There’s also the act of how we are rebuilding. In the process of rebuilding, we are learning how to do consensus building, how we share power - like a land trust teaches how we share land. All of these things are literally new ways of re-imagining society. In this case we are also talking about the context of dismantling the system, we are now building a new system that builds a neighborhood economy.”



NORTH MEMPHIS V.O.I.C.E COALITION CONTRIBUTED TO POLICY AND PRACTICE CHANGES THAT ADVANCE HEALTH IN NORTH MEMPHIS

SPARCC's aim was systems change. This included changing practices, policies, and investments in the built environment to be more equitable, so communities are healthier, more climate-resilient, and opportunity-rich places for all. The SPARCC theory of change posited that strengthened local and national collaboration would result in capacity outcomes and ultimately lead to systems changes in community development policies and practices. North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition's policy and practice change work focused on establishing capacity and foundational elements that can be built on to achieve more formal policy and practice changes. They brought together North Memphis residents with institutional partners to collaborate on issues related to racial equity, health, and climate. They reported notable progress in the areas of racial and health equity, the arts, healthy environments, and elevating Black joy.

"The seed funding and infrastructure building and power building that SPARCC was able to produce for us meant that an organization [CTC] that is principally a Black organization has been able to surface in a market that had no representation... we are now a key stakeholder in the Memphis market."

-Table Member

Guided by a dedication to meaningfully engage their community, North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition employed a variety of techniques tailored to their community context.

- **North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition used community organizers to engage the North Memphis community.** Nine community "connectors" or organizers were recruited and chosen for their lived experience to focus on organizing residents in neighborhoods in North Memphis. One additional connector has focused on tenant protections across the neighborhoods. Connectors outreached to community members, put together neighborhood clean-ups, and held a resource fair.
- **To attract hard-to-reach populations and ensure residential engagement, North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition met people "where they were,"** including culturally relevant and contextualized engagement. For example, North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition hosted community meetings outside traditional business hours to accommodate varying work schedules. They also found ways to make issues around air quality and lead pollution relevant and concrete for their community leaders by focusing on their impacts to a familiar and treasured neighborhood landmark.
- **When the pandemic made traditional organizing activities unsafe, North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition got creative.** North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition systematically assessed the skills, capacities, and interests of the community to direct their efforts. Instead of going door-to-door and leading in-person meetings, engagement went virtual. Connectors adapted and began calling residents. Neighbors worked together and created phone trees to do outreach, assess needs, and determined how to support each other. Through this work, the coalition was able to respond effectively and connect the community to resources to address issues like food insecurity and internet connectivity.
- **Honoring the power of stories.** A storytelling workgroup formed in 2022 to create a repository of narratives and uplifting stories of the North Memphis community. These interviews reinforced the importance of individuals telling their own stories and helped North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition measure the impact of their community work. As one member shared, *"The interviews enabled us to use a grassroots approach with residents. The impact of the interviews created joy, smiles, healing, pride and most of all love for self and love for their neighborhood."*



North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition worked to improve the health of local parks, neighborhoods, and homes.

- **North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition took on a parks project** designed to clean and evaluate soil health, demonstrate strategic approaches to transform blight into community assets, and increase green space in North Memphis. In 2022, CTC funded 6 grantees who engaged over 37 community member volunteers to support garden work and implementation. Their environmental work also included organizing community input on a city council decision around a new proposed gas station given concerns about potential pollution and traffic.
- **The Master Home Environmentalist (MHE) program has made many homes healthier in North Memphis.** With leadership from North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition member, Le Bonheur Children’s Hospital, and the Green and Healthy Homes Initiative, the MHE program conducts healthy home inspections. They created a standard way to conduct home inspections, systematically collected data on home conditions, and worked with an attorney to translate experiences into legislation and regulation.
- **North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition advanced work specifically focused on health in many forms.**
 - ◇ **Local wellness events for community members.** After identifying goals around mental health, nutrition and overall wellness, the Health Equity work group organized events that incorporated art therapy, music, yoga, cultural dance, food demonstrations and produce giveaways.
 - ◇ **Federal healthcare systems.** They were part of developing and supporting the creation of the Federal Health Equity for All Coalition and a Federal Health Equity Framework. They supported pilot language for health equity funding to advance community health equity and health centers.
 - ◇ **Black joy.** In December 2021, North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition conducted a campaign highlighting 12 aspects of Black joy, showing how love could be measured by organizations as an impact of their work. They disseminated stories to show how their communities were exemplifying self-love, love for others, love fused with power and love as a community practice.
 - ◇ Supported by SPARCC, North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition leadership participated in a **racial equity-centered results-based accountability process**. This was set up as a train-the-trainer model to build capacity within North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition leadership to facilitate discussions with neighborhood representatives on the root causes of racial inequities and the social determinants of health. Through this process, the group identified a “result” they wanted to achieve, the root causes for the inequities, and the indicators to measure progress towards it. CTC was instrumental in introducing and developing the skills of North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition leaders to conduct root cause analysis and is committed to expanding the use of the methodology. Thus, when Memphis, through Seeding Success and funded by Blue Meridian Partners, embarked on a new initiative called More For Memphis, CTC Leadership advocated for the incorporation of a racial equity-centered results based accountability process in the development of policy solutions. Seven members of the various More For Memphis Workgroups have been trained and are facilitating the process.



North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition worked to address the economic needs of residents.

- **North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition is an example of what artist leadership looks like.** Their collaborative leader is an artist and has embedded arts into the way they work together. In 2018, they created a fellowship of about 40 artists who meet regularly to use art to understand what's happening in their communities. They provided some funding support to a subset of these artists to develop communication, community engagement, and development skills to further their work.

"In one of our communities there are specific companies there, and as a result there are trends in health among local families. We bring in a cultural lens and cultivate stories, and neighbors begin to connect the dots."

- **The economic workgroup organized various successful events in 2022.**

- ◊ A back-to-school uniform drive served more than 60 families with uniforms, including plus sizes.
- ◊ A basketball event and pop-up shop organized local artisans, community organizations, and residents. The CTC Connector shared about the event, *"CTC has not only helped people with hardships, navigating day to day living, and connecting communities. It has also connected people with the value of their inner power, showing that they are the true answer and difference in where they stand, which is North Memphis."*
- ◊ Workshops and certification programs for youth vendors and braiders supported entrepreneurs.



NORTH MEMPHIS V.O.I.C.E COALITION MOVED FORWARD COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT SYSTEMS CHANGES AND CAPITAL PROJECTS TO IMPROVE THEIR COMMUNITY

Along with policy and practice changes, SPARCC was designed to shift the systems of community development. This includes both:

- New capital investment approaches, partnerships, and products; improved capital flow to development that supports racial equity, health, and climate resilience; and options for residents and businesses to remain and thrive
- Observable changes in the built environment that reflect equitable access to opportunity





CAPITAL SYSTEMS CHANGE

Community Land Trusts (CLTs): CLTs are a response to the housing crisis that remove land from the speculative market and offer long-term ground leases to residents and businesses to guarantee permanent affordability and community control. North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition was involved with Memphis CLTs that positioned themselves to increase affordable housing opportunities and stabilize households across disinvested and gentrifying neighborhoods. SPARCC funding went towards incubating new CLTs as part of an ecosystem to support broader infrastructure needs through the “Community Ownership Incubation Lab,” which provided community groups access to technical resources and capacity to replicate efforts and best practices. For example, despite resource and technical capacity challenges, a new CLT, the Binghamton Community Land Trust, overcame substantial hurdles and gained tremendous hands-on knowledge.

Bringing new voices to capital projects: To keep wealth in the community, North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition worked with an emerging developer program to identify developers with ties to the community and to “buy the block back,” thereby keeping ownership of houses within the community. As one member said, *“The ones who are developing communities are not coming from the communities. So, we’re helping to build the capacity of folks that own several properties and show a vested interest in what the development stakes are.”*

North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition also built on the pride North Memphis residents feel about their community to get them excited about being involved in development projects. They organized residents to vision what they would like to see done with abandoned properties, so that when the relevant institutions are ready to act there would be a community action plan to consult.





CAPITAL PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

For the first few years of SPARCC, North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition focused on engaging key partners, establishing their collaborative structure to ensure community influence over their priorities, building the community’s trust in the SPARCC initiative and learning about the capital process. This process contributed to delays in developing a pipeline of capital projects. The nine projects listed below were all funded in the second half of SPARCC and at the time of this writing are in varying stages from planning to complete.



“Access to SPARCC’s capital resources allowed for us to move with integrity. We’re not just saying “oh, we’re getting community members to come together,” because in Memphis, there’s been plans that have been designed time and time again that have never actually made it to implementation which creates a space of despair in the communities. This process allowed people to see the fruit of their labor. That piece of learning is really essential if we’re going to do this well.”

-NMVC member

Project description (SPARCC funding)	How SPARCC contributed
<p>Orange Mound Tower \$375,000 grant</p> <p>Orange Mound Tower is a 10-acre, long-vacant industrial site. The planned commercial real estate development may include 100,000 square feet of commercial space and 120 residential units. The project includes architectural and engineering work that will help inform final construction costs, development phasing, and programming of the space.</p>	<p>Funds used for predevelopment activities, staffing salaries and benefits, and supported professional development.</p>
<p>The Heights Community Development Corporation projects \$226,685 over two grants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Heights Line is a 1.75-mile multi-use path and linear park located in the median of National Street, a critical link in the transportation system in Memphis. This is a neighborhood led project to redesign National Street to be safer, more attractive, and more functional. Highland Heights dry cleaners remediation and revitalization: An empty laundromat poses environmental contamination threat to the neighborhood. Following residents’ desire for the renovation of vacant commercial spaces, environmental contamination will be addressed, and the site will be repurposed to support neighborhood-based entrepreneurial activities, including below-market commercial space and business incubation. 	<p>Funds will cover the costs of preconstruction documents, environmental impact report, and economic development impact study.</p> <p>Acquisition-rehab of a vacant laundromat. Funds used for environmental remediation and site improvement in preparation of transforming the property into a community asset.</p>



CAPITAL PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

Project description (SPARCC funding)	How SPARCC contributed
Klondike Smokey City Community Development Corporation projects \$141,000 over two grants	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tom Lee House: This project includes the rehabilitation of the Tom Lee House, a historic structure, into a museum and facility for community-based educational programming. The second project component is the removal of blight and predevelopment for the redevelopment of an adjacent 3.1-acre site into a Senior Independent Living Facility. • Resource Center: Upgrade and expand the resource center into an energy efficient building that will include offices, artist space, event space and community convening space. 	<p>Funds used for building rehabilitation of one building and predevelopment costs for an adjacent building.</p> <p>Funds used for building rehabilitation.</p>
North Memphis Home Improvement Program \$56,225 grant	
<p>The North Memphis Home Improvement Program helps prevent displacement and reduced blight by providing vital home repairs.</p>	<p>Funds will be used to make exterior improvements on homes in North Memphis</p>
The Table Spread \$56,000 grant	
<p>Midtown Mosque renovated a 3,750 square foot building into a food distribution facility (client-choice food pantry in partnership with the Mid-South Food Bank), nursing clinic (operated by the University of Tennessee Health Systems Center), and a non-profit retail green grocer working with local farmers to provide affordable fruits and veggies to the residents of the Klondike neighborhood.</p>	<p>Funds used to complete renovations.</p>
Carnes Elementary School \$50,000 grant	
<p>Focus on a shuttered elementary school, revitalizing it into a community center and offices.</p>	<p>Funds used for due diligence to determine whether the cost of rehab is an efficient use of funding.</p>
Bearwater Park Senior Housing \$50,000 grant	
<p>Affordable housing development in Uptown. The development has received myriad public and private funding resources. SPARCC funds were to complete the final three lots, reserved for low-income, disabled seniors. These two-bedroom homes will be built to Memphis Light Gas and Water's eco-build standards. They are within a one-half mile of the Oasis of Hope's senior community center, which provides free transportation, medical assistance, utility assistance, exercise classes, field trips, social services, meals, and other activities and services.</p>	<p>Funds used to fill a gap in a 40-lot subdivision project.</p>



CONCLUSION

Since forming for SPARCC in 2017, North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition has grown, strengthened, and learned more about what it takes to build a collaborative that can move forward community development priorities centering those most affected. Guided by a dedication to meaningfully engage the North Memphis community, North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition employed a variety of techniques tailored to their community context. They made notable progress in changing policies and practices related to racial and health equity, arts, healthy environments, and economic vitality by living into their values of integrating community voice. North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition moved forward nine capital projects, demonstrating a new way to conduct community development, rooted in racial equity and community priorities.

“SPARCC has given us a chance to build and sustain something that will have far exceeding impact beyond the SPARCC work. Now there is an organization [CTC] that is beginning to solidify and concretize this orientation to work, which is equity promoting work that didn't exist in our ecosystem. We can now continue to take these learnings and create an equity promoting network.”

The work is far from done and they are committed to pushing for a more equitable North Memphis for years to come. One of North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition's next steps is to lead an investigation into the intersections between love and power. The theme of love has been threaded through much of their work, from the approach they take to treating each other within the coalition, to promoting self-love and love of neighborhood through numerous community projects. For example, their Black Joy project showed how love could be measured by organizations as a valuable impact of their work. They believe that love and power are mutually supporting and must be looked at together. A local journalist wrote about this topic in the wake of Tyre Nichols in 2023, quoting Dr. Jr. Martin Luther King. These words hold special power in Memphis and will help pave the path for the North Memphis V.O.I.C.E Coalition going forward.

“Power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political and economic change...And one of the great problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites-polar opposites- so that love is identified with the resignation of power, and power with the denial of love. Now we've got to get this thing right. What [we need to realize is] that power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic...It is precisely this collision of immoral power with powerless morality with constitutes the major crisis of our time.”

Center for Community Health and Evaluation
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The Center for Community Health and Evaluation is an evaluation partner for foundations, nonprofits, and government agencies to determine what works to improve community health. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation funded this evaluation.

