

Change from Within: A 10-Year Journey to Improve Health in Five Wellville Communities
Speaker notes and slides from January 14, 2025, presentation by Rick Brush, CEO, Wellville, at
Connecticut Children's Pediatric Grand Rounds – Honorary Dworkin Lecture ([link to recording](#))

Change from Within:

A 10-Year Journey to Improve Health in Five Wellville Communities

Connecticut Children's AY25 Pediatric Grand Rounds Honorary Dworkin Lecture

Wellville

*Rick Brush, CEO of Wellville
January 14, 2025*

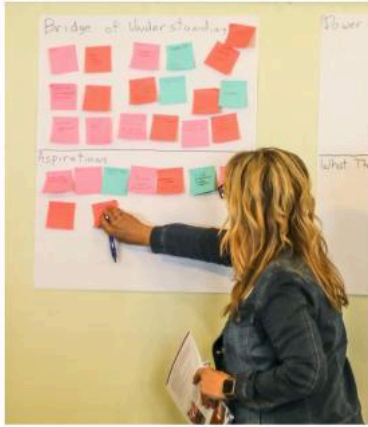
Thank you for this opportunity to share a little about [Wellville](#), a national nonprofit project supporting five U.S. communities over 10 years, which concluded on December 31, 2024. This decade-long journey points to a better way forward for health and wellbeing, with communities in the lead. What I've come to appreciate most during these 10 years is the powerful capacity for communities to *change from within*. Today I will share a few examples of how this is happening in places you might not have otherwise heard about, by people who don't often make the headlines, and what all of us can learn from their progress.

For me, this journey began in the corporate world, where I spent 20 years, the last part of this at Cigna, the large health insurer. That work helped me see the limitations of traditional approaches to health care and insurance that view health through a narrow lens and are insufficient in dealing with the much larger, social drivers of health in communities.

That led me into the consulting world, where I worked on innovative financing strategies to shift how we invest in the conditions that matter most to health and wellbeing, rather than mostly paying to treat illness after it occurs

And this eventually was my path to working with communities, where people who love where they live are reimagining and redesigning those places, with a growing number and diversity of stakeholders who see how their long-term shared futures are bound together.

Objectives



1. **Describe effective strategies** to improve long-term community health and wellbeing.
2. **Differentiate collaborative approaches** from individual efforts to improve health.
3. **Apply insights** to health-improvement opportunities that would benefit from greater alignment and coordination among stakeholders.

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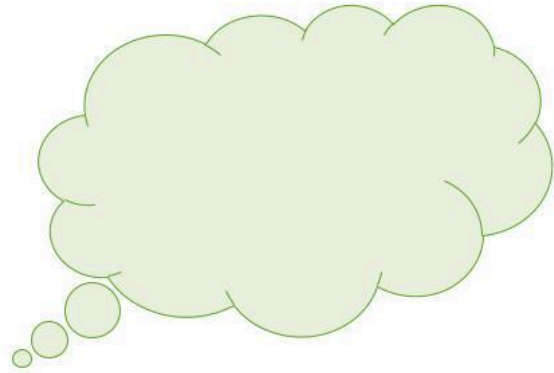
In the next 40 minutes or so, I hope to do three things.

First is to share with you strategies that our Wellville communities have been using to significantly improve long-term health and wellbeing.

Second is to differentiate this kind of collaboration from what we typically see, which are individual or siloed approaches to improve health.

And third is to discover together how these insights can be applied in your work, no matter whether you are a clinician or you work in government or at a nonprofit organization, or maybe even as a resident in your own community.

Imagine your
ideal community
10 years from now.



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Before I present to you, let's start the way so many transformative changes have started in our Wellville communities: *by listening to you*. If we want to improve community health, we need to engage the people who live in those communities, the people who know their communities best.

So let's pause for a moment, maybe take a few slow, deep breaths. Consider what future you want for the communities *you* care about.

What comes to mind? What do you see?

Share out loud or in the chat.

[Participants offered a range of examples: shared spaces to live and to play; people who are informed and empowered to take care of their own health and wellbeing; affordable housing that's centered around transit; the ability to walk places and be a part of a neighborhood that's clean, safe and stable; places that are infused with justice.]

What future do we want?

A community where our kids, our families, our neighbors and our neighborhoods thrive.



Wellville

Yes! That is pretty much what we hear when we spend time listening to the people who live in most communities. And it's what we hear when we invite institution leaders who serve those communities – people who work at hospitals, local government, faith organizations, businesses and nonprofits – to think outside their silos.

Most of us want the same thing: *A community where our kids, our families, our neighbors and our neighborhoods thrive.*

And yet, this ideal does not exist everywhere. Within many communities and our nation as a whole, there is an unequal distribution of the assets that we need to live full, healthy lives.

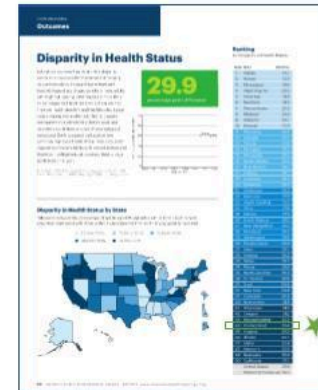
Equitable wellbeing?



Connecticut:

3rd in overall
health status

43rd in health
disparities



Wellville

For example, Connecticut is continually ranked as one of the healthiest states in the country. It was third in the nation in the [2018 America's Health Rankings](#), [fourth in 2023](#) and [fifth in 2024](#). However, Connecticut has significant and persistent disparities in health status across neighborhoods and demographics that rank the state near the bottom – [number forty-three](#) – due to the size of this gap.

Let's pause again to consider what would need to shift so that everyone experienced this same level of health that people at the very top experience. Again, share out loud or in the chat

[Participants offered a range of responses.]

We hear similar responses when we ask people in our communities what would need to shift. There are lots of things we could do to improve health outcomes. We can increase urgent medical services to deal with rising chronic disease rates. And we can also invest longer term in community conditions that keep us well, like healthier food systems, good paying jobs, early child development and learning.

What needs to shift?

Events
What is happening?

Patterns of behavior
What trends are there over time?

Systems structure
How are the parts related?

Mental models
What values, assumptions and beliefs shape the system?

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The [iceberg model](#) helps us see this range of options – and the connections among them. Some of these options focus on the most visible and immediate needs based on the day-to-day “events” we see, such as a loved one becoming ill. Other options consider “patterns” of results, like the trends I just shared from Connecticut. The most powerful levers for change lie below the surface, addressing the deeper causes of these events and patterns.

In 1976, the iceberg model was used by anthropologist [Edward Hall](#) to illustrate the visible and [invisible aspects of culture](#). Over time, the model has been used by systems and management theorists like [Dana Meadows](#) to identify the underlying “structures” and “mental models” (or ways of thinking) that drive behaviors and results in any system, including health.

Without shifting these larger, underlying influences, we’re likely to get the same outcomes. It’s like continually mopping water that’s overflowing onto the floor, without unclogging the sink or turning off the faucet. As Einstein is often quoted: “We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.”

If we want transformation, we need to move from the tip to the base of the iceberg. That means reexamining how we see the world – our fundamental beliefs, values and assumptions – and how we *act* in the world accordingly.

What needs to shift?

Short-term self interest

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About five years into the Wellville journey, our team looked under the surface, and with prodding from our Advisory Board, we landed on a core problem at the center of our work: *America's deteriorating health and growing inequities result from short-term self interest.*

Short-term self interest is not inevitable. But it is perpetuated by systems and structures, culture and beliefs that too often favor the individual over the collective, the immediate over the future. We don't have to look far for examples where this can produce a vicious cycle.

For instance, the U.S. now spends [nearly \\$5 trillion per year](#) on health care, mostly for treating illnesses we could have prevented through long-term investments to keep us well. A fixation on election cycles and quarterly earnings means that candidates and corporations too often prefer quick wins that benefit their most influential stakeholders. The relentless pursuit of "likes" and the last word on social media has [shortened our attention spans](#) and made us more anxious, isolated and lonely.

And [affective polarization](#) – when we feel strong positive emotions for our in-group and strong negative emotions for out-groups – has increased to such a degree that the most commonly cited quality Americans use to [describe our country is "divided."](#)

When combined with power, extreme self interest can lead to tribalism, racism, and exploitation of people and planet.

What needs to shift?

Short-term self interest

Tragedy of the commons



- Spend more to remediate problems (illness, crime, poverty).
- Compromise our long-term collective potential.

Wellville

When we believe that short-term self interest is human nature, we might get caught in what's known as the "tragedy of the commons."

As ecologist [Garrett Hardin](#) wrote in 1968, when people enjoy unrestricted access to a limited and valuable resource – like a pasture for grazing sheep – they will tend to overuse it and may end up destroying it over time. Even if a few sheep farmers voluntarily limit the amount of grazing-time for their flock, the others would take advantage of this and increase their use of the pasture, resulting in a "tragedy" for all.

If we extend this metaphor to the overconsumption of resources needed for health and wellbeing, we can imagine how this might end up producing problems – like illness, crime and poverty – that cost us more as a society to remediate, while compromising our long-term collective potential.

But again, this is not inevitable. In fact, there's good evidence that this is not even human nature.

What needs to shift?

Short-term self interest

Tragedy of the commons



- Spend more to remediate problems (illness, crime, poverty).
- Compromise our long-term collective potential.

Long-term shared interest



- Free up investment to promote greater wellbeing.
- We all benefit from a healthy country where everyone can reach their full potential and contribute to building a better society.

Wellville

[Elinor Ostrom](#), who won the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences in 2009 for her work on economic governance, showed that common-pool resources – like sheep pastures or community health – can be managed effectively by “people in small, local communities” who establish rules to care for and use these resources “in a way that is both economically and ecologically sustainable.”

As this [reference](#) to Ostrom’s work concludes: “There is no reason to believe that bureaucrats and politicians, no matter how well meaning, are better at solving problems than the people on the spot, who have the strongest incentive to get the solution right.”

In practice, communities and other groups of stakeholders are showing us that it’s possible to move to long-term shared interest. When we recognize our interconnectedness, we redirect our collective resources toward greater societal flourishing.

So, what will it take to make this happen?

What will it take to make this happen?

Change from Within:

“There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about.”

- *Margaret Wheatley*

(sometimes a catalyst can help)

Wellville

Wellville’s hypothesis these past 10 years is that better community health doesn’t come from outside experts. It requires a transformative shift from within. This shift is both personal – challenging deeply held assumptions that hold the status quo in place; and collective – building on the inherent capacity of communities to connect more broadly, work more collaboratively and create new paths together.

As [Margaret Wheatley](#), the organization and community consultant, wrote: “There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about.”

It is this process – the ongoing work of *discovering* what we care about – that brings communities together. It doesn’t happen without intention. It takes stepping outside silos and the daily demands of our lives and work. That’s why sometimes a catalyst can help.

Wellville



- 5 places, 10 years
- Dedicated advisors
- Cross-community connections
- Change from within:
thinking → actions → results



Wellville

That was the idea behind Wellville. A little more than a decade ago, Esther Dyson (pictured here, second from left in the gray hooded sweatshirt and down jacket) wrote [“The HICcup Manifesto,”](#) where she posed a provocative question.

“It is hard to find anyone in health care who does not believe that spending \$100 now on healthy behavior could yield more than \$200 in lowered costs and improved outcomes,” writes Esther. “So why do individuals and communities not act on the basis of this knowledge?”

Esther is not your typical philanthropist. And before she founded Wellville, she wasn’t someone typically known in the health sector. But Esther’s influence as a tech analyst and investor, her experience as a journalist, and perhaps even her training as a backup cosmonaut have earned her a reputation for asking provocative questions.

I met Esther shortly after she wrote the article – and then joined her in launching what would become the 10-year national nonprofit Wellville project. The idea was to find a handful of communities that were already doing some of the things we know would improve health – and to give those communities a little boost and a platform to demonstrate to the rest of the country how their work could be scaled to a national level.

In early 2014, we put up a website, announced our call for applications, and 42 communities from 26 states responded. Our advisory board helped us narrow the pool to 10 places – which we visited over two weeks – and we selected the [Wellville 5](#) (W5) communities. You’ll hear more about them in a moment.

Originally, Wellville was going to be a contest: five places competing over five years to see who could improve most on five health metrics. But this structure and many other aspects of Wellville shifted, as I'll soon share with you. Some of our initial design remained, however, and this turned out to be important to the progress and learning of the W5 communities over the past decade.

For instance, we didn't provide the communities with direct financial support, since typical grants – two-year, top-down, outside-expert-driven philanthropic contributions – are ineffective in sustainably changing the way communities work. Funding also creates power dynamics that would get in the way of the open and trusting relationships we wanted to establish with our communities.

Instead, we provided a dedicated advisor to each community, someone who really gets to know them, earns their trust and helps them build on their own capacity for thinking and acting differently. That's the seven-person [Wellville team](#) you see here, including Esther who was not only our founder and funder but also served as our advisor to Muskegon County, Michigan. With a group of five places, we hoped the cross-community interaction would influence what they did as well.

Ultimately, we recognized that change from within is the most powerful force for shifting the *thinking* that informs the *actions* that produce the *results* we want.

Turning our plan *inside out*



Wellville

But first, we had to shift our own thinking. We brought our W5 communities [together for the first time](#) in September 2014 in Tampa, Florida, to share our proposed plan. After the first day, there were some rumblings in the hallways. Esther – whose approach has been called “wildly different” from most such philanthropic initiatives – knew we needed to stop and listen.

We jettisoned the next day’s agenda; no content, just an open forum to hear questions and concerns. The communities pushed back on our proposed plan: A competition would prevent them from sharing and learning with each other. Prescribing expert interventions and metrics wouldn’t let them determine their own priorities. They were open to new ideas, but they were feeling uncomfortable and confused by “innovative” concepts and terminology not typically discussed at public health conferences. One community member described this as a “culture bump.”

That first gathering was held alongside the health care consulting firm Oliver Wyman’s 2014 Health Innovation Summit, which was a sort of health market 2.0 visioning session called “[MediFuture 2024](#).” This brought the W5 community participants together with executives from tech companies and other “health mart” solution providers, and some of them were eager to help. The communities’ response: If you’re going to come to our communities, come in with a sense of curiosity. Learn what we care about, learn about our context and priorities. Find out what we are already doing and meet the local people and organizations who have been at this work long before you arrived. Then, ask us the questions we aren’t already asking ourselves.

So we turned our plan inside out. About 18 months into what was originally a five-year project, Esther extended Wellville to 10 years. Change from within takes time. And she was modeling what we were inviting our communities to do – “Always make new mistakes!” – advice that appears below the signature line of every email Esther sends. If you want to inspire others, winning a contest is less useful than learning, adjusting, and sharing along the way.

Convene community stakeholders to...

- **Listen** empathetically
- **Uncover** ground truths
- **Imagine** new futures
- **Collaborate** across differences
- **Learn** and adjust along the way



Wellville

The inside-out plan – with Wellville as catalyst – refocused our support on helping the W5 communities bring together an expanding network of people across neighborhoods, institutions and systems. We provided this support in ways that our communities have told us were valuable and unique.

For instance, unlike most grant-based technical assistance, Wellville's dedicated advisors weren't focused on a specific area of expertise, theory of change or logic model. Their role was to be present – showing up again and again, in person, in coffee shops, at community meetings – asking questions, encouraging progress, facilitating connections and conversations, and provoking new ways of seeing old problems. So much of what matters – in this work and in life – centers on the quality of our relationships.

Deep relationships have also formed across our five communities, in part because we listened to them – shifting from a competition to a collaboration – and in part because of the ways in which we brought people together across diverse places and perspectives. The annual [Wellville Gathering](#) was a three-day convening, hosted in one of our communities each year, where residents and organization folks from all of the W5 communities got to know and learn from each other.

The Gatherings gave people the rare opportunity to set aside daily distractions – in a mostly unstructured, un-conference-like setting they co-designed – to share openly, have fun and reflect together in ways that reveal bottom-of-the-iceberg truths hiding in our assumptions.

Much of what we did together over the 10 years was to convene community stakeholders to

- Listen empathetically and generatively;
- Uncover ground truths about the causes of harm and health;
- Imagine new futures;
- Collaborate across institutions and cultures; and
- Move forward together, learning and adjusting through all the messiness, breakdowns and potential opportunities that emerge along the way.

So, what happened? And what were the results?

The communities were successful in launching new initiatives, raising investment, building connections and developing local leaders in ways that we could not have anticipated a decade ago, and certainly more so than if we told them what to do rather than supporting them as they walked their own paths.

I'll summarize these results at the end. First, here's a brief overview of the W5 communities, and a few stories of change from within.

W5 Communities: Clatsop County, OR



- 40,224 people
- Tourism: seaside destination
- Low wages + high housing costs (17.4% unhoused)
- Equity, children, food, physical activity, mental health



Clatsop
Equity
Committee

PERINATAL TASK FORCE

Pre-k/child care
investments



Wellville

[Clatsop County](#) is in the northwest corner of Oregon, named for the Native American tribe first to live along this stretch of the Pacific Coast from the mouth of the Columbia River south to Tillamook Head. Clatsop today is a beautiful seaside community with about 40,000 people. Tourism has brought opportunities and challenges to Clatsop, including a rising cost of housing that combined with low wages has contributed to a high rate of unhoused people.

Over the decade, the Clatsop community has rallied around the need for greater equity, child care and food access. They've launched initiatives to increase mental health awareness, training and services, with a particular focus on trauma. They've expanded local collaboration through groups like Clatsop CHART: [Community Health Advocacy + Resource Team](#).

Along the way, Wellville has supported local leaders, like the Clatsop residents who are renovating an historic building to create the [Outpost](#), a space for community connections and services.

Clatsop Equity Committee



Wellville

Working in the same places over 10 years has allowed us to observe some important turning points in our communities. In Clatsop, one of those shifts came during the COVID-19 pandemic. Following large outbreaks at the fish canneries, which employ a substantial Hispanic and Latino population, some Clatsop residents began pointing fingers about who is responsible for the growing number of cases.

Alarmed at the increasingly heated and discriminatory comments, local leaders formed the Clatsop Equity Committee, bringing people together from Clatsop's Public Health Department, the Oregon Health Authority, the two local hospitals, Consejo Hispano, The Harbor, Clatsop Community Action, Oregon Health & Science University and more.

By finding continuous – and creative – ways to elevate the voices of Hispanic and Latino residents, the committee has influenced the way Clatsop leaders are allocating resources. For instance, one outreach effort by Consejo Hispano at Wednesday night soccer games invited community members to vote – using Monopoly money and jars labeled with various priorities – on how to invest the federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) dollars received for COVID-19 recovery.

More affordable daycare and good paying jobs were the overwhelming winners. This feedback was shared through op-eds and ultimately with the Clatsop County Board of Commissioners, who ended up allocating 20% more funds to daycare.

W5 Communities: Lake County, CA



- 67,878 people
- Cleanest air, largest lake, agriculture, wildfires
- Low income (\$51,800 vs. \$91,500 CA) → health challenges
- Substance misuse, food and housing insecurity, cancer



Wellville

[Lake County](#) is a spectacularly beautiful, rural California community about 130 miles north of San Francisco. With just under 68,000 residents across 1,329 square miles, the county's sprawling landscape supports agriculture and surrounds Clear Lake, the oldest lake in North America. Multiple wildfires have hit over the past decade, burning more than 60% of the county since 2015. The destruction of homes has compounded other significant challenges in Lake County, including high poverty, overdose and cancer rates.

Wellville's initial support of Lake County focused on creating [Hope Rising](#), a nonprofit collaborative to bring together executives from local health systems, county government, nonprofits and other organizations. Over the past 10 years, the collaborative launched a number of initiatives, ranging from Hope Center, which serves community members experiencing homelessness, to SafeRx focused on reducing the harm of the opioid crisis.

In 2017, the Hope Rising collaborative was selected for the California Accountable Communities for Health Initiative, or [CACHI](#).



Getting the hospital CEOs and county government officials to work together through Hope Rising was an early success for Lake County. But change from within requires broader and deeper participation of all residents. Hope Rising's more recent efforts aim to expand the partnership, including Lake County's significant Native American population.

As Lake County was preparing to host the [2022 Wellville Gathering](#), the Wellville team worked with locals to reach out to members of Lake County's Pomo tribes. After we built a foundation of trust over several months, Pomo tribe members joined W5 community participants at the Gathering. In a very moving ceremony, Pomo tribe members generously shared their stories about the historical and continued trauma inflicted on their people. It was an invitation to heal together, to think about all those whose voices are not being heard, and to ultimately answer the question: What will we do together that none of us can do on our own?

That spirit carried into the W5 community team huddles at the Gathering. And it influenced Hope Rising leaders to more meaningfully engage members of the Pomo tribes. One was elected to serve as Hope Rising's board chair.

This latest chapter in Lake County's journey is unfinished. Trust-building is an ongoing process. It's messy, like stitching together a quilt of various fabrics from different communities (pictured here from the 2022 Gathering). Trust-building requires patience and persistence, accountability and forgiveness, continual demonstration of commitment and results that come through actions.

W5 Communities: Muskegon County, MI



- 173,566 people
- 27 miles of beaches
- 37% adult obesity rate
- Metrics reflect unevenly distributed assets



LIVABILITY LAB
MUSKEGON COUNTY, MICHIGAN



Goodwill
Industries of West Michigan, Inc.

MI Tri-Share
CHILD CARE



the Y **DIABETES PREVENTION PROGRAM**

Wellville

[Muskegon County](#), about halfway up the eastern shore of Lake Michigan, is our most populous Wellville community, with more than 173,000 people. It's also a place where community members are reaching across a diverse range of urban and rural towns, races and ethnicities, political parties, income and education levels. Just like in our other communities, working together has strengthened the social fabric in Muskegon. And, of course, there's more work to do, especially to address the uneven access to resources among the county's many different populations.

Sometimes collaboration starts with motivating metrics – like Muskegon's high obesity rate, which is one of the community health risks the Muskegon YMCA and partners are addressing through the [Diabetes Prevention Program](#). DPP has expanded in virtual form to YMCAs across the state, serving more than 1,300, and generating measurable results.

Similarly, the growing unmet need for child care was a catalyst for Muskegon's innovative [Tri-Share Child Care](#), which splits the cost of high-quality, affordable child care equally among the employer, the employee and the State of Michigan. Tri-Share is also now a statewide model.

Community leaders and organizations are partnering on a range of other initiatives as well: from neighborhood associations to community organizing; from economic development to food entrepreneurship; from maternal health to trauma-informed training.



One of the efforts cultivating greater collaboration in Muskegon is [Livability Lab](#), an annual process where community members generate ideas to improve wellbeing, form action teams and make meaningful progress during a 100-day challenge. The process kicks off each year by reporting to the community – using data and resident voices – how Muskegon is doing on essential elements of livability, depicted here in the orange and blue Livability Lab framework. This includes health and education, transportation and housing, safety and security, social connections and trust, and more.

The Livability Lab process, which is about to enter its fifth cycle, has already produced dozens of self-organized action teams...with hundreds of community members across neighborhoods, organizations and experiences...working together on small projects that lead to big improvements in livability for all in Muskegon County.

One of those action teams created [How YOU Birth Doulas](#), which trains doulas, helps them find clients and earn reimbursement so they can provide birthing support, mostly to persons of color. Together they are actively addressing the 49% of Black births that have less than adequate prenatal and postnatal care.

And by the way, the first 2025 baby born with How YOU Birth support, arrived on January 1. She's a girl!

W5 Communities: North Hartford, CT



- 24,329 people
- 3 sq. miles, 3 neighborhoods, many assets (e.g., Keney Park)
- Life expectancy gap
- Reversing systemic underinvestment in basic needs, children and community development



Community Action Task Force



Strategies for Healthier Cities



TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES INITIATIVE



United Way Central and Northeastern Connecticut



NORTH HARTFORD ASCEND

CONNECTICUT STATE INNOVATION MODEL (SIM) HEALTH ENHANCEMENT COMMUNITY INITIATIVE PROPOSED FRAMEWORK

NORTH HARTFORD TRIPLE AIM COLLABORATIVE

Wellville

[North Hartford](#) – which includes three neighborhoods that serve as a primary entry corridor into the Connecticut capital city of Hartford – is the smallest community among the W5. About 24,000 residents live in this 3-square-mile urban core community that has a mix of historic and multi-family homes, small retail and service businesses.

While North Hartford is too often cited for its challenges – including a double-digit gap in life expectancy compared to suburbs just a few miles away – it is a community of assets. There are diverse social, cultural, and recreational organizations; there’s beautiful Keney Park, which residents call a “hidden gem”; and there’s a renewed spirit of collaboration – neighbors and local organization leaders working together to create change from within.

When North Hartford became a Wellville community in late 2016, locals warned us that “no one collaborates in Hartford.” There was even a 2002 Harvard Kennedy School [case study on Hartford’s struggles](#) with “multi-agency collaboration.” But we’ve seen just the opposite.

The [North Hartford Triple Aim Collaborative](#) was created in 2017 through a co-design process by community members and local institutions. It serves as the city’s designated table for multi-stakeholder collaboration on long-term health and wellbeing initiatives. The Healthy Hartford Hub’s [Community Action Task Force](#) is a group of residents and supporting organizations bringing a grocery store into a food desert as well as other health-promoting policies and services. Trinity Health’s Transforming Communities Initiative is investing in a host of resident priorities, including a healthy bodega project and mental wellness hub.

North Hartford is collaborating with other regions in Connecticut as well, leveraging the relationships and shared interests developed through the state’s [Health Enhancement Communities](#) initiative.



Of course, it's important not to underestimate the work – and the temperament – required to collaborate effectively. A good example is [North Hartford Ascend](#), which provides prenatal-to-career, wrap-around services to children and families in North Hartford. Ascend is funded by a U.S. Department of Education grant that is administered by Connecticut Children's, the state's only pediatric health system.

When this headline hit in September 2021 – "[CCMC to Administer \\$30 Federal Grant](#)" – it generated a lot of attention. But an equally important story was highlighted in Dr. Paul Dworkin's opinion piece from January 2023 – "[Improving Children's Lives in Hartford Moves at the Speed of Trust.](#)" The project got off to a rocky start. As Paul tells it, during the city's town hall following the award notice, North Hartford residents "were extremely vocal in sharing their lack of confidence in our commitment to engage them as partners."

Communities like North Hartford have experienced too many grant projects that are awarded based on their deficits, but do very little to improve them. It wasn't going to happen this time. So the project team listened to residents during the town hall and over the weeks that followed, in each case reflecting back what they heard. And they responded: The budget was shared openly. Project staff was hired from the community. Residents joined every level of the governance structure. The partner list expanded to more than 70 local organizations. Community conversations continue monthly, with about 400 people at the last virtual meeting. Local institutions have committed \$36 million in matching funds over the five-year period, bringing the total investment in North Hartford to \$66 million.

So in very real, ongoing and tangible ways, residents and project partners are in this together. They sit side by side in work groups and teams, co-invest their shared time, resources and experience, make decisions together, and learn and improve through collaboration.

W5 Communities: Spartanburg, SC



- 39,040 people
- Economic shift: from textiles to automotive hub (BMW)
- Persistence of racial inequities, poverty, access gaps
- Resilient children, families, neighborhoods



Highland & Southside Neighborhood Development

Wellville

[Spartanburg](#), in northwest South Carolina, is a city of 39,000 people that has had an economic and development boom in recent years. While its history as a textile town is still evident – with many remaining mills converted into apartments, offices and retail space – Spartanburg’s growth is now being fueled by diversified manufacturing and service businesses, including the BMW assembly plant that opened in 1994.

But this growth hasn’t benefited all equally. And Spartanburg like other communities is still contending with past harms, such as urban renewal, which demolished Black-owned businesses and several primarily Black neighborhoods. Along with the new businesses, housing and schools, Spartanburg community leaders know that they will need to address persistent problems – like poverty and racial inequities – for everyone to thrive.

And that’s what they are doing. Over the past decade, we’ve seen people come together across neighborhoods and institutions to speak openly about the challenges, work continuously to expand access to the opportunities, and act creatively to generate the investment and support needed for success.

Sometimes this takes shape through community-wide collaborative efforts, like [Live Healthy Spartanburg](#) and [Spartanburg Academic Movement](#). And sometimes it requires a bit of “good conflict,” like the advocacy work of [SIREN: Spartanburg Initiative for Racial Equity Now](#). Neighborhood by neighborhood, Spartanburg is a remarkable example of change from within.

hello family

BirthMatters

FAMILY CONNECTS Spartanburg

QualityCounts

Triple P

"I am proud of the partnerships in developing the Hello Family PFS project," said Dubno. "It has been wildly successful in its goals around improved birth outcomes, increased school readiness, and enhanced childhood health and well-being."

Forbes

The Transformative Power Of Pay For Success Programs

Newsweek

How Partnerships Between Organizations Can Transform a Community for the Better

Figure 6. Trends in Low-Birthweight Rates (per 100): City of Spartanburg versus Synthetic Spartanburg, 2017-2023 (Quarterly)

Quarter	Spartanburg City	Synthetic Spartanburg City
2017:Q1	14.5%	8.5%
2017:Q2	10.5%	9.5%
2017:Q3	10.5%	10.5%
2017:Q4	15.5%	14.5%
2018:Q1	14.5%	14.5%
2018:Q2	13.5%	11.5%
2018:Q3	13.5%	11.5%
2018:Q4	17.5%	17.5%
2019:Q1	13.5%	14.5%
2019:Q2	11.5%	13.5%
2019:Q3	11.5%	11.5%
2019:Q4	11.5%	11.5%
2020:Q1	11.5%	11.5%
2020:Q2	11.5%	11.5%
2020:Q3	11.5%	11.5%
2020:Q4	11.5%	11.5%
2021:Q1	11.5%	11.5%
2021:Q2	11.5%	11.5%
2021:Q3	11.5%	11.5%
2021:Q4	11.5%	11.5%
2022:Q1	11.5%	11.5%
2022:Q2	11.5%	11.5%
2022:Q3	11.5%	11.5%
2022:Q4	11.5%	11.5%
2023:Q1	11.5%	11.5%
2023:Q2	11.5%	11.5%
2023:Q3	11.5%	11.5%
2023:Q4	4.4%	13.1%

Source: Vital statistics records obtained from DHEC from 2017 to 2023. (preliminary)

Wellville

The story of [Hello Family](#) illustrates Spartanburg’s collaborative culture. Shortly after Spartanburg was selected to be part of Wellville, a team of community leaders got together and shared what they most hoped to achieve by the end of the project. One of them was Spartanburg’s current city manager, who asked: “What if every child in Spartanburg showed up at school ready to learn?”

With a lot of persistence – and a lot of social capital – the team expanded, the investment came through, and Hello Family was fully launched in 2022. An alliance of over 60 partnered organizations is providing a continuum of evidence-based services to young children and their families, free of charge to all who live in the city. The effort is producing community-wide improvements in full-term births and healthy birth weights, reduced neonatal intensive care admissions, and other measures.

Hello Family is also a model for aligning goals, investments and systems. Program providers, investors, government and other stakeholders are connected through a set of shared outcomes. And the effort is financed through an innovative [pay-for-success strategy](#). Investors provide the upfront capital needed to offer the program free to Spartanburg community members, while the City of Spartanburg and other partners agree to specific “outcome payments” if results are achieved.

Following its initial success, Hello Family is now being expanded to the entire county, part of a comprehensive effort led by Spartanburg Academic Movement. The effort, called [Movement 2030](#), has [raised \\$100 million](#) to advance economic mobility and educational attainment in Spartanburg County.

Why does it matter?

Together, the W5 communities...

- **Launched dozens** of long-term community-wide initiatives, shifted policies and systems
- **Generated hundreds** of millions of dollars in co-investment
- **Learned skills** and practices that facilitate collective action toward shared interests
- **Established processes** and enduring structures for collaboration among neighborhoods and institutions
- **Developed trusting** relationships and local leaders to carry the work forward



Wellville

Five communities, 10 years, change from within.

Why does all this matter? I want to talk about three things.

First, it matters because people in the W5 communities are getting the results *they* want. They didn't implement some pre-conceived grant program. And they didn't do it to win a contest. They did it because they care about their communities and each other.

They're getting results because they built relationships. And those relationships led to different levels of collaboration. And that collaboration led to:

- Long-term community-wide initiatives, policies and systems that are now producing more equitable outcomes in areas ranging from maternal health and early childhood to neighborhood development and economic opportunity;
- Hundreds of millions of dollars in co-investment from a broader, thus likely more sustainable, variety of internal and external sources;
- Skills and inclusive practices that facilitate deeper connections, bridge differences and focus collective learning and action on shared interests;
- Processes and structures for ongoing collaboration across diverse networks of people in neighborhoods and institutions; and
- Greater trust and local leaders who will carry the work forward.

Why does it matter?



“This experience has been life changing personally and professionally...”

Connecting with the people I’ve met is helping me find my voice again.”

– Debi Martin, Program Officer, LISC Connecticut



“I believe in this thing called ‘relational activism’...”

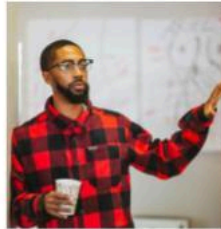
Changing systems starts with relationships.”

– Debra Oto-Kent, Founder & Executive Director, Health Education Council

“I would love for people to come together, talk to people who don’t look like you...”

The power is in *all* of us.”

– Marquis Childers, Chairman, Muskegon Heights Business Association



“Wellville has changed the way we think as a community, how we operate and our work.”

– JaLisa Jordan, Program Manager, Live Healthy Spartanburg



Wellville

Second, it matters because change from within transforms *us* – how we see the world and our role in it.

Here’s what a few people who have participated in Wellville have to say:

- Debi Martin, Program Officer at LISC Connecticut, who, by the way, grew up in North Hartford: *“This experience has been life changing personally and professionally... Connecting with the people I’ve met is helping me find my voice again.”*
- Marquis Childers who grew up in Muskegon Heights and now chairs the Muskegon Heights Business Association: *“I would love for people to come together, talk to people who don’t look like you... The power is in all of us.”*
- Debra Oto-Kent, Founder & Executive Director of Health Education Council, is from Roseville, California, which became a sister community to Wellville: *“I believe in this thing called ‘relational activism’... Changing systems starts with relationships.”*
- JaLisa Jordan, Program Manager, Live Healthy Spartanburg: *“Wellville has changed the way we think as a community, how we operate and our work.”*

Why does it matter?



Finally, this work matters because it draws on – and contributes to – evidence from the field.

For instance, the [Federal Plan for Equitable Long-Term Recovery and Resilience](#) outlines a whole-of-government approach to improve community resilience and wellbeing nationwide. More than three dozen agencies committed to the plan, which focuses on seven “vital conditions” for health and wellbeing – with belonging and civic muscle at the center.

This paper from *Health Affairs* – [“Building Community Power To Dismantle Policy-Based Structural Inequity In Population Health”](#) – and others like it provide extensive research linking community power and health. It calls for increased funding of power-building organizations and democratic approaches that give communities a central role in designing health improvement strategies that dismantle policy-based structural inequities.

The importance of reweaving the social fabric was also brought to the fore in the 2023 U.S. Surgeon General advisory on the [epidemic of loneliness and social isolation](#), which highlighted the “healing effects of social connection and community.” Last week, as he concluded his second tenure as U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy offered this [“Parting Prescription for America”](#):

“Today, we are faced with a profound choice: do we continue with the status quo, marked by pain, disconnection, and division? Or do we choose a different path—one of joy, health, and fulfillment, where we turn toward each other instead of away from each other; where we choose love over fear; where we recognize community as the irreplaceable foundation for our well-being? As I finish my tenure as Surgeon General, this is my parting prescription, my final wish for all of us: choose community.”

We need each other to:

- See and free ourselves from the habits of mind and heart that hold us back.
- Connect more broadly and deeply, including across perceived differences that too often keep us apart.
- Learn our way through the inevitable twists and turns we encounter while walking paths we create together.



Wellville

What we've learned over the past decade – from hundreds of people working to make the world a better place – points to an important insight: *We need each other.*

We need each other to see and free ourselves from the habits of mind and heart that hold us back.

We need each other to connect more broadly and deeply, including across perceived differences that too often keep us apart.

We need each other to learn our way through the inevitable twists and turns we encounter while walking paths we create together.

Change comes from within us – all of us. And we build our capacity for a better future through the ongoing work of discovering – and acting together on – what we care about.

Thank you.

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