

RHODE ISLAND'S HEALTH EQUITY ZONE INITIATIVE





Introduction

Historically, resources devoted to public health have been largely insufficient. Instead of intervening upstream to confront the social determinants of health, most health spending in the United States is devoted to treatment and care—after people have already gotten sick. Further, these limited resources are typically not applied in a manner that produces sustainable gains in health equity. Funding cycles, departmental structures, community engagement techniques, and programmatic approaches that characterize traditional public health prevention work are, in many ways, a hindrance to reducing health inequities.

To alter this pattern of inadequate investment in upstream solutions and to remove unnecessary barriers to robust community engagement in addressing health inequities, the Rhode Island Department of Health launched Rhode Island’s Health Equity Zone (HEZ) initiative in 2015. Rhode Island’s HEZ initiative is a health equity-centered approach to prevention that leverages place-based, community-led solutions to address the social determinants of health. Health Equity Zones are identified geographic areas where opportunities to address health inequities through investment in the community exist. Each HEZ is led by a community-based collaborative that conducts an assessment to identify, describe, and prioritize inequities of importance to the community and develops and implements an action plan informed by the assessment to address root causes of health inequities.

Rhode Island’s Health Equity Zone initiative is strategically designed to resolve inefficiencies inherent in traditional prevention work, and to create measurable, sustainable gains in health equity at the state and local levels.

To learn more about Rhode Island’s Health Equity Zone initiative, visit health.ri.gov/hez.

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Evaluating HEZ Impact 2020-2021

As a novel approach to public health prevention, Rhode Island's Health Equity Zone initiative requires an innovative method of evaluation to measure its impact on community health and well-being. The HEZ Theory of Change articulates the initiative's long-term goals and describes the preconditions necessary to achieve those goals.

"If Rhode Island collaboratively invests in defined geographic areas to develop sustainable infrastructure and aligns a diverse set of resources to support community-identified needs, then we will positively impact the socioeconomic and environmental conditions driving disparities and improve health outcomes."

The development of **sustainable community infrastructure** working to improve the community from within.



The **alignment of resources** to create sustained investments in the community to address the needs identified by the community.



Will lead to **positive impacts on the social and environmental determinants of health** and improved population health benefits.

To measure impact, the HEZ initiative uses the Rhode Island Health Equity Measures to establish baseline data and inform outcome evaluation efforts. Using the five domains that affect health equity identified in the Rhode Island Health Equity Measures, what follows are examples of how HEZs are addressing inequities in their communities while simultaneously advancing key metrics identified by Rhode Island to address the social determinants of health needed to support healthy communities. Through these activities, the Health Equity Zones are addressing integrated healthcare, community resilience, physical environment, socioeconomics, and community trauma in order to decrease health disparities and improve health equity in Rhode Island.

To learn more about the Rhode Island Health Equity Measures visit health.ri.gov/data/health-equity.

Health Equity Measures

Integrated Healthcare

Integrated healthcare is an emerging model for treating the whole person. It offers a more efficient and effective way for health professionals to work together by coordinating diagnoses and treatment of all health conditions. By expanding access to quality care and leveraging limited resources, integrated healthcare can lead to improved overall health for individuals, families, and communities. It also allows for healthcare cost savings by helping to reduce hospital and emergency room utilization rates.

The United States is known for the quality of its healthcare, but the quality of care has less of an influence on the health of our population if systemic barriers related to cost, access, language, or transportation prevent more marginalized individuals and families from pursuing needed services. Creating sustainable, effective linkages between the clinical and community settings can improve patients' access to preventive and chronic care services by developing partnerships among organizations that share a common goal of improving the health of people and the communities in which they live. Further, culturally appropriate care enables patients to feel comfortable with, trusting of, and respected in the healthcare setting.



Healthy Bodies, Healthy Minds: The Washington County HEZ

In Washington County, the HEZ is improving behavioral health by increasing awareness, screening, and access to behavioral healthcare, including providing mental health literacy training; implementing crisis intervention teams (CIT) with law enforcement, first responders, and behavioral health providers; integrating behavioral health in local medical facilities; supporting direct therapy campaigns, such as preschool mental health through the Incredible Years program and establishing a mental health consultation to preschool teachers; and advocating for mental health parity legislation. Three hundred fifty-six Washington County community members -- including first responders, public safety professionals, and youth -- completed Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training, and 709 community members completed Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) training for suicide prevention. In addition, three local police departments in the county now meet the gold standard of having 20% of officers CIT trained. Lastly, 13 families have completed the Incredible Years program and 34 hours of mental health consultation has been provided to preschool teachers.



OneCranston HEZ

The OneCranston HEZ supported pop-up flu vaccination clinics which immunized 130 residents, targeting the hardest to reach areas in the community and those historically underrepresented. In partnership with Comprehensive Community Action Program's behavioral health services, OneCranston HEZ implemented four emotional safety workshops that reached 50 participants. These workshops equipped attendees with the ability to recognize signs of trauma and to connect community members to the appropriate clinical resources that can support community members experiencing trauma or emotional distress. OneCranston HEZ also expanded access to clinical supports for community members experiencing substance misuse by partnering with Anchor Recovery, Project Weber RENEW, the Cranston Fire Department, and other community partners. Through this collaboration, OneCranston HEZ was able to train 100 Cranston fire fighters in overdose prevention and intervention and provide them with 500 resource packets that included the medicine that can reverse an opioid overdose, naloxone (sometimes called Narcan®), and other overdose prevention resources.



Woonsocket HEZ

The Woonsocket HEZ is committed to teen health and providing access to high quality healthcare and health information. Examples of programmatic efforts include implementing a district-wide mental health program that provides information and increases access through dissemination of resources to educators. The Woonsocket HEZ maintains a family planning and sexual health educator at Woonsocket High School who delivers evidence-based curriculum to all ninth-grade health classes to provide accurate and comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education in order to support informed decisions and improved outcomes. Their aim was to support a 33% decrease in the teen birth rate by the end of 2021.



Central Providence HEZ

The Central Providence HEZ sought to reduce disparities in women's cancer screening between African American and white women and to reduce delayed diagnosis and poor prognosis by conducting six focus groups with women from diverse areas to identify barriers to cancer screening and designed appropriate interventions based on the results of the analysis.

Community Resiliency

Community resilience is a process that uses a community's assets to strengthen public health and healthcare systems to improve the community's physical, behavioral, and social health. This supports the community's ability to withstand, adapt to, and recover from adversity. Strategies for building community resilience include increasing social connectedness, reducing social vulnerabilities, and making sure everyone in a community is represented in decision making. Social connectedness relates to the frequency of interactions between people. Social ties exist among family members, close friends, neighbors, and coworkers. People also connect within a variety of social settings, including in the workplace or community. Strong social ties have a positive impact on health.



Central Providence HEZ

In Central Providence, the HEZ supported workforce development and the Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI) that provided civic education and leadership training. The PLTI included 30 hours of industrial metal work training, 279 hours of on-the-job training, 420 hours of workforce development in digital literacy instruction and career coaching, 144 hours of learning lounge services with 96 hours of career coaching, 180 hours of bilingual digital literacy classes, and training and employment of 37 community health workers.



Pawtucket Central Falls HEZ

The resident leadership academy in the Pawtucket Central Falls HEZ trains residents in leadership, communication, social determinants of health, and structures of power with a curriculum that teaches important leadership skills to participants and introduces resident leaders to organizations, municipal representatives, and community change makers. A total of 30 individuals graduated from the Academy last year, with four individuals immediately recruited into community leadership positions. In addition, the Pawtucket Central Falls HEZ had nine residents engaged as a lead in their communities, provided 34 residents with one-on-one financial counseling and budget support, and graduated 60 residents from the homebuyer and financial assistance program. To advance youth engagement opportunities, the Pawtucket Central Falls HEZ engaged 10 youth in online learning programming, 10 youth in leadership programming, and 38 youth in their positive decision-making program.



OneCranston HEZ

OneCranston HEZ's community connectors, physical health & nutrition, and trauma subcommittees create platforms for Cranston residents to build meaningful relationships with each other while promoting racial equity, social cohesion, and community well-being. The community connector subcommittee's book club provides a space for residents to deepen their understandings of injustice and unpack how these injustices may impact their neighbors. The physical health & nutrition subcommittee hosts cooking classes where residents use healthy ingredients to teach other residents how to prepare a dish from their culture. In this way, Cranston residents share each other's cultures while implementing healthy eating practices. The trauma subcommittee organized a series of choir workshops where residents of all ages could gather to engage in trauma-informed performance art exercises. These sessions culminated in a community concert that was open to the public.



Physical Environment

Environmental factors are vital to understanding health outcomes. Research shows that the health of individuals and families, in part, is largely determined by the conditions in their environment. Environmental factors that influence health go far beyond biological agents such as air, water, and climate. Public health also considers the types of policies and investments in housing, transportation, safety, public recreational spaces such as parks and playgrounds, and the aesthetics of streets and neighborhoods. Whether in an urban or rural environment, these factors affect large groups that share common living or working spaces. They can also account for vast differences in health status across ZIP codes and geographic locations.



West Warwick HEZ

In West Warwick, the HEZ worked to ensure adequacy of Rhode Island Public Transit Authority (RIPTA) bus routes and bus stops to connect residents traveling by bus with jobs, resources, and basic needs. Prior to this effort, a 15-minute drive for healthcare and other support services in a neighboring town could take a West Warwick resident a full day traveling by bus. The HEZ also advocated for bus stops to have suitable shelter for protection from the weather. Additional accomplishments include the establishment of a new bus stop at the Kent County YMCA and Anchor Recovery Center, the prevention of further cuts to local or specialized transportation services through 2022, and continued advocacy to address residents' transportation needs.



Newport HEZ

The Newport HEZ's greening urban spaces working group and the housing working group collaboratively drafted a joint letter to the Newport Planning Board and Newport City Council identifying barriers and providing solutions for increased resident engagement within the North End Urban Plan, as well as advocating for improvements to municipal emergency response plans to better reflect the needs of vulnerable populations in Newport. Sixty residents co-signed the letter. In addition, the Newport HEZ's transportation working group fulfilled a longstanding community goal of free public-transit access to local beaches for residents of the North End neighborhood on Saturdays and Sundays during the summer months. In addition, the Newport HEZ is working to establish a green and complete street ordinance, which would ensure that pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, and public transportation users of all ages and abilities can safely move along and across a street.

Socioeconomics

Socioeconomic factors that determine health include education, employment, occupation, and income. Together, these factors influence one another and influence health behaviors. Divisions in socioeconomic status are relevant to understanding risk factors associated with population health outcomes. For example, the lower the social and economic position of a population or community, the higher their rates of mortality and morbidity. On the other hand, the better the social environment, such as can be found in more economically resourced communities, the more possible and likely it is for people to adopt and sustain healthier behaviors.

The HEZs are reducing barriers to healthy food access by supporting Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) acceptance at farmer's markets, connecting residents with food from local farms and dairies, bringing local farmers of color to the community, developing community gardens, offering cooking demonstrations with food bag distribution, establishing food pantries, providing home food deliveries for those who are isolated or experiencing health issues, and participating in the Diabetes Health Equity Challenge.



East Providence HEZ

The East Providence HEZ increased access to healthy food by delivering 5,261 meals to residents who were isolated and/or experiencing health issues unable to leave home and 125 bags of groceries to older adults in their community.



Central Providence HEZ

The Central Providence HEZ implemented Central Providence Opportunities, an investment toward improved economic mobility for residents of the 02908 and 02909 ZIP codes which provides civic education and leadership training, including multiple avenues of training and workforce development and career coaching. The Central Providence HEZ also helped residents complete 296 rental assistance applications and provided temporary cash assistance for rent relief and utility payments through a partnership with United Way of Rhode Island's Safe Harbor Housing Program, which served as an alternative to a traditional eviction process so Rhode Islanders can maintain stable housing.



Bristol HEZ

In Bristol, the HEZ hosts a monthly cooking demonstration, which teaches residents how to use fresh, healthy ingredients to create a delicious meal. Ingredients for the cooking demonstration are also provided to 65 residents each month. The cooking demonstration averages over 2,500 views.



West Elmwood 02907 HEZ

One of the goals of the West Elmwood HEZ is to improve educational outcomes for parents and young children. The HEZ has aligned efforts with West Elmwood Housing Development Corporation (WEHDC)'s Dunamis Synergy, a two-generation initiative to support parents with young children to acquire postsecondary credentials and career track employment while preparing their children for successful futures. Fifty-one families and 64 children have participated in Dunamis Synergy, 15 parents have received post-secondary credentials, and families have received 95 family coaching sessions.



Woonsocket HEZ

Woonsocket HEZ's Food Access workgroup provided funding, ready-made food, and pantry food items to local partners including the Boys & Girls Club, the Refugee Dream Center, and Connecting for Children & Families. These food items were then distributed to Woonsocket community members in need. Woonsocket HEZ also partnered with Farm Fresh Rhode Island and Thundermist Health Center to coordinate farmers' markets.

Community Trauma

Trauma can affect anyone, regardless of age, gender identity, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or any other factor. In many neighborhoods, the destructive impact of trauma can overwhelm efforts to advance collective health and well-being. When people don't feel safe in their homes or neighborhoods, they are less likely to walk to the grocery store, use local parks, access public transportation, or let their children play outside. Social cohesion is replaced by social isolation, and factors that contribute to healthy lifestyle behaviors are replaced with unhealthy, undesirable alternatives.



Newport HEZ

The Newport HEZ conducted a racial-justice and economic inclusion audit of the City of Newport's proposed land-use and economic development plan in its North End neighborhood. The Newport HEZ launched a project to work with residents to develop an equitable development plan for the community to address the cascading sequence of large-scale public- and private-sector development projects that threaten the North End neighborhoods with gentrification and displacement.



Central Providence HEZ

The Central Providence HEZ plans to expand the existing Central Providence Opportunities program to include working with Garden Time to train formerly incarcerated residents within the 02908 and 02909 neighborhoods to be placed in green jobs and to educate green industry employers on the benefits of hiring people who were formerly incarcerated. The program has already enrolled ten formerly incarcerated residents in job training and six local employers participate in the program.

Poised to Respond to COVID-19

For the HEZs, the 2020-2021 fiscal year was focused on addressing health equity while simultaneously supporting the needs of their respective communities and residents during the global COVID-19 pandemic. Embedded in the communities, the HEZs were already uniquely poised to respond to critical needs that quickly emerged, and as a result, became an essential resource to provide relevant and essential information and outreach, community testing, vaccination clinics, and access to services and supports for basic needs (such as food, rental assistance, and support during quarantine) to the diverse communities throughout Rhode Island. During a time of widespread community isolation, the HEZs were able to foster a strong sense of community, becoming a critical source for realizing effective COVID-19 response by providing trusted grassroots outreach, education, and vital services to support health, health equity, and COVID-19 response and recovery in Rhode Island.

Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funding was dispersed to the HEZs for COVID-19 response in June of 2020. After the first year of COVID-19, the HEZs showed their ability to have a significant impact on the communities served, distributing nearly 2 million masks, over half a million meals, fostering confidence and trust in the COVID-19 vaccine, and bringing testing and vaccination sites directly to the communities that were most impacted by COVID-19. For example, collaborating with municipalities across Rhode Island, the HEZs supported door-to-door canvassing; COVID-19 education; personal protective equipment (PPE) distribution; quarantine supports for food, unemployment, and rent assistance; and responding to COVID-19 hot spot areas with testing and vaccination information so residents knew where to get tested and vaccinated, and helping locations be more welcoming, visible, trustworthy, culturally and linguistically competent, and operationally efficient.



Conclusion & Call to Action

Since traditional prevention approaches largely do not move the needle on health equity, or adequately empower and engage communities that are experiencing health inequities, Rhode Island's Health Equity Zone initiative provides an alternative approach. The Rhode Island Department of Health firmly believes that community-led initiatives are the way forward for advancing health equity and investing in local communities.

The true beating heart of Rhode Island's Health Equity Zone initiative is community leadership. Without community members and organizations stepping up to create and implement action plans, there would be no Health Equity Zones.

Building stronger communities is the primary goal for Rhode Island's HEZ initiative. Investment in community growth is more than just a means to advancing Rhode Island Department of Health goals. True community leadership is the secret ingredient that was previously missing from equity-informed prevention approaches. It is what will make the difference in ensuring that all Rhode Islanders—regardless of who they are or where they're from—have a fair opportunity to live healthy lives.

Ultimately, the Rhode Island's HEZ initiative is all about long-term public health sustainability. It takes considerable effort, time, commitment, and funding to sustain the initiative. The Rhode Island Department of Health offers its sincerest gratitude to all the HEZ collaborative partners across the State, as well as all the backbone agency staff, community-based organization partners, funders, and State agency advocates.

For more information about how to get involved with Rhode Island's Health Equity Zone initiative, contact Christopher Ausura at christopher.ausura@health.ri.gov or Mia Patriarca at mia.patriarca@health.ri.gov.





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