

## **A Comprehensive Approach to Building Healthy Communities**

Reverend Dr. T. S. Keeling

There is a great deal of research being produced in the healthcare industry showing a correlation between community health and community structural characteristics, particularly in low-income communities.

These studies have shown that chronic illnesses in low-income communities can be attributed to environment. For example, instances of asthma can be related to the poor quality of the housing stock, diabetes and heart disease can be affected by the lack of access to healthy foods, and longevity itself is adversely affected by poverty. What this means is that health care professionals must go beyond the physical health of individuals and begin to address the physical condition of communities if they are to effectively address health care in distressed urban communities. There is therefore not just an opportunity but a need for healthcare professionals to work collaboratively with communities in distressed urban communities to achieve their shared goal of comprehensive community health.

In this article, I will present a strategy that has brought together public and private stakeholders in an effort to bring physical, social and philological/spiritual revitalization in the distressed urban community of the Eastside of Wilmington, Delaware. Our belief is that the approach and actions applied in this effort present an effective model that could be used by healthcare professional to invest their knowledge and resources in a collaborative effort with community stakeholders and other institutions to comprehensively address whole community health in distressed urban communities.

### **Demographics**

The Eastside community of Wilmington Delaware is a transitional community, which happens to be one of the oldest communities in Wilmington, DE. The Eastside community is located adjacent to the development of the Riverfront and the revitalization of downtown Wilmington. It has a mixed quality of housing stock, vacant or blighted properties, mixed ownership and lacks a commercial corridor. The total population is 4,196, of which 92% is African American, 40% of the population is living below the poverty level, and 47% of its residents earn less than \$15,000 a year (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Study entitled “Wilmington East Side Neighborhood Investment Plan” was conducted by KSK Architects Planners Historians Inc., Timothy Crawl-Bey & Associates, and RES Advisors (November 2013); based on 2010 US Census data (subset of tracts 9 and 29) and 2011 Crime city data



## With high poverty, crime, and rentership, the Eastside needs attention

A study\* conducted for Wilmington Housing Partnership shows the following...



In order to create sustainable change in the Eastside community, the following factors need to be addressed in a way that will improve the vibrancy of the community: poverty, housing instability, and the serious, inherent health challenges faced by community members. In the city of Wilmington, heart disease, stroke, and diabetes are among the top causes of death<sup>1</sup> – all three are closely linked to and exacerbated by obesity.<sup>2</sup> In the state of Delaware, African Americans experience the highest rates of obesity and associated diseases. Over 40% of African Americans are obese in the state, and the rate of obesity has doubled in the last twenty years.<sup>3</sup> African Americans in impoverished neighborhoods with limited access to healthy foods, like the Eastside, are most at risk. However, an improved diet, through access to healthy foods, along with exercise, can significantly lower the number of individuals affected by obesity and associated diseases in these high poverty areas.

The Eastside is an area in need of improved access to healthy foods in order to combat health issues affecting the community. Experts on food deserts consider the Eastside a ‘Limited Supermarket Access’ neighborhood (Figure 2). The nearest supermarket, a Shoprite, is more than one mile south of the Eastside, and to reach the store, residents must walk through potentially dangerous areas. Furthermore, many corner stores throughout the Eastside have been left vacant, and none of the remaining stores carry fresh produce regularly, if at all. The community is left to choose from options comprised predominately of highly processed foods and fast foods.

Figure 2. The Reinvestment Fund, Limited Supermarket Access analysis mapping tool



In addition to the physical challenges and barriers faced by Eastside residents, there are several philological/ spiritual issues that also exist in the community. By and large there is a general sense of hopelessness and despair among community members as they have come to accept these conditions that have existed for over fifty years as commonplace. Over those years Eastside has been the subject of many studies by outside organizations, which have identified community needs and developed programs to address them. However, those programs produced little to no long-term effects as the organizations soon departed when the money from their grants ran out. The result was a spirit of dependency, as residents began to look for the next organizational or government program that would temporarily address one or more of their needs.

In 2008, the Eastside Blueprint community was started as part of the Federal Home Loan Bank's initiative to help distressed communities develop a community conceived plan for the revitalization of their communities. In 2010, The Central Baptist Church joined the Eastside Blueprint in their effort, and established The Central Baptist Community Development Corporation, (referred to as the CDC) a recognized 502(c).<sup>3</sup> The importance of the corporation became increasingly evident as both organizations came to the realization that the community would need a local development non- profit, not only to implement the plan, but also to continue

the process of sustained movement toward comprehensive health and revitalization. Together, both organizations came to the conclusion that in spite of the challenges existing in the community, through engagement efforts and the strengthening of our capacity through strategic partnerships, we could position ourselves to take the lead in a continuing process that would form a healthy Eastside community.

## **Our Mission**

Our combined mission was to unite community members with public and private stakeholders for the purpose of developing a comprehensive plan for the revitalization of the Eastside Community of Wilmington, Delaware.

## **Our Methodology**

Our methodology applied the principles of asset-based community development, developed by John McKnight and John P. Kretzmann at the Institute for Public Policy at Northeastern University. We chose this methodology rather than a needs-based approach focused on deficiencies, which we had seen utilized by many healthcare and service providers in the past. Our asset based approach focused on identifying the gifts and resources already in our community through asset mapping. At the core of the initiative was our belief that residents of the Eastside community had the inherent vision and ability to effectively transform our community in a way that would bring pride and dignity back to the Eastside.

The process brought together community residents, community churches, and community organizations through a three-step process of identifying and enlisting current and potential leaders, development of small group committees, door to door interviews and information sessions. Five years of community organizing and strategic planning meetings, in which the emphases were turned from community problems to community possibilities, resulted in a community developed plan for the revitalization of the Eastside community known as “Eastside Rising.” The plan focuses on the mutually reinforcing pillars of housing stabilization, workforce development, and economic empowerment with Central Baptist CDC acting as the lead organization for its implementation. Working in conjunction with the CDC was a team of community volunteers who gave constant input and feedback to the corporation at every phase of the implementation.

It was our belief that with resources and guidance this comprehensive community developed, and implemented, plan would be the key to a revitalization movement that would revitalize the Eastside Community and bring whole community health.

## **Our Vision**

Our vision was to be a safe, healthy, mixed income community where every resident is contributing to providing access to quality education, skills development that leads to living wage employment, and entrepreneurship development with our community schools, Central Baptist Church and Henrietta Johnson Health Center as hubs.

## **Every Person Valued, Every Person Contributing, Every Person Accountable**

### **Housing Stabilization**

The first pillar of our strategy that we engaged was housing stabilization. We realized that Central Baptist Community Development Corporation, our lead organization, lacked the experience and resources to implement this part of the plan and it would take years for the CDC to acquire them. Our strategy, therefore, was to build capacity through collaboration, developing relationships with organizations who had expertise and resources, who were or could be stakeholders in our community, and to combine them with the Central Baptist CDC and Eastside community social capital.

In order to facilitate the revitalization of our Eastside community housing, The Central Baptist Community Development Corporation, partnering with the Eastside Blueprint Community formed a collaborative called the Eastside Community Redevelopers Coalition. The coalition consists of community residents, non-profit housing developers, service providers and educational institutions. Coalition members include the Central Baptist CDC, Eastside Blueprint Community, Central Baptist Church, the city's non-profit housing development corporation The Wilmington Housing Partnership, Habitat for Humanity of New Castle County, non-profit developer Inter-Neighborhood Foundation, Woodlawn Trustees, The Delaware Community Reinvestment Action Council (DC RAC), University of Delaware's Center for Community Research and Service, and American Baptist Churches of Pennsylvania and Delaware.

These various constituencies signed a Memorandum of Understanding, with the legal pro-bono assistance of the law firm of Richards, Layton and Finger. In this Memorandum they committed to work together to construct, refurbish and remodel 150 homes in a 4x10 block area of the Eastside community over the next five years as the initial step in the revitalization effort.

Partnering with The Federal Home Loan Bank of Pittsburgh, the Delaware Community Reinvestment Act Coalition, an eastside stakeholder, committed to produce and promote programs for local first time home buyers that would make available low- interest rate mortgages. The plan called for all potential homeowners to complete a HUD Certified Housing Counseling Course provided by The Delaware Community Reinvestment Action Coalition. Additionally, after settlement, buyers would participate in at least 8 hours of post-homeowner repair classes and financial counseling offered by the Stepping Stones Credit Union with Central Baptist Church and Eastside Blueprint Team utilizing the assets of its members to provide space and a teacher for this project.

Working with Central Baptist Church, Habitat for Humanity, Eastside community volunteers and American Baptist Churches of Pa and Delaware, began a program to identify senior citizens and low income homeowners within the designated area, who were in need of assistance to repair their homes. The feeling was that those homeowners who had been a valuable part of the community for years should not be left out of the revitalization efforts. Through Habitat for Humanity's "A Brush with Kindness" program, a total of eight homes received exterior façades and much needed interior repairs totaling over \$100,000. The funds were secured by grant applications to Delaware State Housing and no interest loans through the City of Wilmington.

## Workforce Development

The second pillar in the strategy in our community plan was workforce development. This effort was focused on helping us achieve our vision of becoming a self-sustaining community focused on technical, as well as social skills, that would produce productive citizens and integrate them into the Eastside. One of the conditions agreed upon in the Eastside Community Redevelopers Coalition MOU was a local hire policy that committed the developers to seek to hire up to 30% of the labor on the housing projects from residents of the Eastside first, and then from the city and county at large. Those persons would be the prime candidates for the housing counseling through DCRAC as part of the housing strategy. The goal was to integrate these individuals back into the community as homeowners of the newly constructed housing in the coalition's MOU.

Central Baptist Community Development Corporation's charge was to take the lead in developing the skilled labor that would be necessary to meet that commitment. As a result, Central Baptist Community Development Corporation established the Eastside Rising Training Center, centrally located in the designated community hub, Central Baptist.

The training center recruits community member and engages them in a job readiness soft skills training program, then moves them into a construction pre- apprenticeship hard skills training program, through an agreement signed with the Local 55 Construction Laborers Union. Through the program Central Baptist CDC is able to address the issue of high unemployment among economically disadvantaged residents on the Eastside and in the city of Wilmington at large.

This year The Central Baptist Community Development Corporation entered into contracts and formed partnerships, which has greatly increased their ability to train unemployed individuals, as well as the underemployed in the community. Through the financial contributions of Barclays Bank, M and T Bank, and our team of community volunteers, we were able to construct our new corporate offices and set up our community computer work stations. This year a total of twenty-seven eastside community members have used that computer center and received assistance with job searches and resume writing from our staff and community volunteers. A total of nineteen of those serviced chose to participate in the Eastside Rising Training Center's job readiness program. Those members received our soft skills job readiness training based on the nationally recognized "Secretaries Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills" which focuses on, not just finding, but keeping a job.

Seventeen or 89% of those participants completed the program and fourteen or 82% have been, and still are employed in jobs making from \$10.50 to \$20.00 an hour.

In July, we expanded our program when we engaged in a partnership with Delaware Health and Social Services and the National Community Reinvestment Coalition in a research grant known as "Delaware Wonder".

Through this partnership with DHSS, we have been able to increase our staff to a total of six paid and five community volunteer positions. Three of those who are paid are Eastside community residents and two are persons who are themselves graduates from our training program. It should be noted that the training and placement effort has focused on the hardest to serve population. The majority of our trainees have been recruited from the street corners of the Eastside and most have a history of spending time in the prison system.

In 2016, the CDC developed more partnerships that have helped position it for even further expansion of the training program in 2017. Through a grant from the Laffey-McHugh

Foundation and Delaware State Housing Authority's Building Blocks Grant, it has been able to become a certified C- Tech training center giving it the ability to certify graduates, who choose to enter that track, in copper cable and fiber optic wiring. Through a signed MOU with the Christina School District Adult Education Division, and the CDC's newly formed partnership with the State Department of Corrections, we have started to train twenty inmates, many of whom will be released into our community in the cable-wiring field. The program will position these current inmates for employment upon release.

While we are proud of our training, and the effect it is having on building the capacity and transferable skills of community residents, we do realize that training is not effective without the ability to provide jobs. With that in mind, the Central Baptist Community Development Corporation established The Eastside Employment Service LLC in 2015 to help find and place those who graduated from our training center, and others in need, in living wage jobs in various fields. Since its inception, we have placed a total of twenty- six individuals in a diverse range of positions for employment.

### **Eastside Community Builders**

Through Central Baptist CDC the community has also made several improvements that we are confident will have a major impact on the distressed housing situation that exists on the Eastside, while also making an impact on community employment. Through our newly formed Eastside Community Builders LLC, Central Baptist Community Development Corporation has purchased, will rehabilitate and redevelop, a vacant commercial and residential 'mixed use' property on the Eastside. The three-story property has nearly 1300 square feet of commercial space on the first floor.

The CDC plans to rehabilitate the entire structure and rent out two, 2-bedroom and one, 3-bedroom affordable units to households at or below 50% of the Area Median Income. The three apartments will provide quality housing for residents, help support the project, and develop lasting capacity-building in housing and commercial development for the CBCDC. The Wilmington Housing Authority will provide 'project-based vouchers' for the units to help ensure affordability since all units are aimed at households at or below 50% AMI.

The commercially zoned ground floor will house a coffee café, which will be WiFi equipped and feature specialty coffee products creating a space to enjoy coffee and community. It will feature soup, salads and sandwiches, as well as pastries and baked goods manufactured by local artisans in a small, FDA approved production space, which the café will make available for rent. In the back room of the café, there will be a small commercial kitchen that will be accessible to local small food service and catering businesses. This café will partner with coffee manufacturer and marketer Golden Valley Farms to provide training and support for aspiring coffee baristas who are looking to become part of the growing specialty coffee market. It will also bring employment opportunities for community residents. The mission is that this cafe will help fuel other commercial interests to invest in the Eastside Community.

As a community, we adhere to the ideology that in order to achieve comprehensive health for the community as a whole, we have to prevent and deter crime, promote quality education, and crime prevention through meaningful employment must be available and attainable for all. This project specifically addresses these matters by focusing on training and employment of local residents in skill- based construction jobs through the partnership between Central Baptist CDC

's Eastside Rising Training Center (ERTC) and our Eastside community partner, The Challenge Program. Together, with The Challenge Program acting as general contractor, this project will meet all three of the objectives of the "Eastside Rising" Plan. It will develop a skilled and productive Eastside community workforce, stabilize the community through renovating abandoned housing and converting these units into affordable housing, and promote small business and entrepreneurship for community residents. J.P. Morgan Chase Foundation has provided a \$100,000 grant, which has allowed work on the project to begin, and we are looking to raise the remaining \$840,000 through a capital campaign that will begin in 2017.

### **The Community Restoration Collaborative**

In 2016, Central Baptist CDC partnered with one of our collaborative developers, the Inter-Neighborhood Foundation (INF), to form a joint business venture called The Community Restoration Collaborative LLC. The two non-profits created this progressive business to further provide employment and high quality, affordable housing opportunities to residents of the Eastside community as well as to residents in the city and county at large. Each organization brings a proven track record of implementing successful and effective projects. INF successfully implements and manages affordable housing and community development initiatives in the Eastside. Central Baptist CDC has a successful track record of providing a comprehensive, high quality workforce development training program through the Eastside Rising Training Center that directly leads graduates to jobs through its Eastside Employment Services LLC. Through the Community Restoration Collaborative Central Baptist, CDC increased its capacity to participate in addressing the housing stabilization objectives laid out in the plan. It also gave CDC the ability hire more people on housing projects, which will result in more Eastside community members being trained and employed for jobs paying consistent and livable wages.

### **Urban Acres Produce**

The final pillar of this strategy that was addressed was economic empowerment. One of the first ventures started by Central Baptist CDC was the urban produce retail and wholesale distribution company named Urban Acres LLC. The company began as a corner vegetable stand on the corner of 9th and Pine Street with the intention of bringing healthy food to the community. This year, Urban Acres has reached several milestones towards reaching its ultimate goal of increasing access to healthy foods for Eastside residents, while creating jobs and entrepreneurship opportunities in communities in need. With the help and support of the Delaware Department of Agriculture, Discover Bank, and Cinnaire CDFI, Urban Acres LLC was able to purchase a new 2016 Dodge Cargo Van which allowed them to double the amount of locations and people served. This year, Urban Acres expanded to seven different locations throughout the city, serviced over 2,894 people, increased staff to five full time employees, who work with several community volunteers. Through our relationship with the Food Trust of Philadelphia we have begun distributing fresh produce to five corner stores in "food desert" communities throughout Wilmington. With the help of The Woodlawn Trustees, Urban Acres has opened its first year-round location in the Flats - Woodlawn's new housing development.

This year, through Urban Acres, Central Baptist Community Development Corporation took another major step in implementing the Eastside Rising community plan. Four parcels within the target area were transferred to Urban Acres Produce, the LLC subsidiary of Central Baptist CDC. The properties were donated to Urban Acres Produce by the Wilmington Housing Partnership as



their contribution to the Eastside community stabilization effort. Vacant for many years, the properties are now set to become the centerpiece garden of the Eastside. Construction on the grounds will transform the property into a community garden where residents will have the opportunity to grow their own vegetables, and participate in other community activities in the garden in 2017. A production garden where locally grown produce will be sold by Urban Acres Produce will be another economic development benefit of the project. As with all Eastside Rising initiatives, the Urban Acres Community Garden will create jobs and enthusiasm among community residents.

### **Central Baptist CDC/First State Community Loan Fund**

Other economic development activities that are planned in order to meet our charge of Economic Empowerment on the Eastside is our collaborative effort with First State Community Loan Fund a Delaware CDFI. The collaborative was initiated, to develop small business on the Eastside. Through this collaboration small business development activities and entrepreneurial training which will be held in the Eastside community. The workshops target Eastside residents and provide an overview of First State CLF programs, (Women's Business Center, Hispanic Business Development Program, Small Business Lending Programs, Retail Assistance Program, and One-on-One Consulting) which are available for people interested in starting or expanding a small business.

These courses will include business planning and other industry specific trainings (such as marketing, accounting, social media usage, how to structure your business). One-on-one business consulting will also be made available to existing Eastside business owners and individuals interested in starting new businesses.

First State CLF will schedule regular, weekly sessions for people interested in one-on-one business consulting. These sessions will be used to provide feedback on business plans, assistance with access to capital, and general business advice and guidance. All training and consulting activities will take place at the community hub Central Baptist Church

### **Conclusion**

We believe that through our community engagement organizing efforts, and the help of our lead organization the Central Baptist CDC, we have been able to initiate and continue the process of integrating the parts necessary to form a Healthy Community on the Eastside of Wilmington. That has lead us to conclude that the most important part of community redevelopment is not just the development of brick and mortar projects, but the redevelopment and uplifting of the people so they are able to obtain new skills, education, gain hope and see a future that includes them being part of the process of building healthy communities. One of the lessons learned from our experience with these efforts include that communities can be revitalized when organizations, such as those in the healthcare industry, are willing to add their resources and expertise in collaboration with community organizations engaged in implementing a community conceived plan for the revitalization of their community. When that happens, the result will be a more stable, safe, viable and healthy community with ever increasing social capital, excitement, enthusiasm and pride.

## References

1. Delaware Health and Social Services. (2010). Delaware vital statistics annual report 2010. Retrieved from <https://dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/dph/hp/2010.html>
2. American Heart Association. (2013). Obesity and Stroke: What is their connection? Retrieved from [www.heart.org](http://www.heart.org)
3. DE HEAL. (2011). Physical Activity, Nutrition, and Obesity Prevention Comprehensive Plan, 2010 – 2014. Retrieved from: [https://dhss.delaware.gov/dph/dpc/files/pano\\_comp\\_plan-09.pdf](https://dhss.delaware.gov/dph/dpc/files/pano_comp_plan-09.pdf)

---

Copyright (c) 2017 Delaware Academy of Medicine / Delaware Public Health Association.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>) which permits unrestricted non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.