

## **A Vision for Community, Connection and Reinvestment**

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### **Abstract**

Jefferson Street Center (JSC) implements community-driven priorities that support quality of life, improved community health and neighborhood vitality in Northwest Wilmington. JSC serves as a Connector and Capacity Builder in the Washington Heights Blueprint Community® and its surrounding neighborhoods and responds to the needs of residents and stakeholders. The organization focuses on two implementation strategies: opening of a shared-use community hub, in partnership with Hanover Presbyterian Church, and channeling resources to implement place-based revitalization projects and initiatives. These strategies focus on long-term efforts to cultivate place-based asset growth, aiming to alleviate poverty, promote housing stabilization and grow civic muscle. These strategies are also specific tactical responses to the public health concerns of the residents and stakeholders in Northwest Wilmington.

As a small yet growing nonprofit, the organization is building toward these efforts through the growth of collaborative partnerships, focusing on leveraging established resources into Northwest Wilmington. JSC is also working within the structure of its Community Hub to elevate programming directly supporting positive outcomes associated with social determinants of health, such as workforce development, food access, physical activity and connections to educational opportunities. All efforts continue to be guided by the values, needs and priorities of the surrounding neighborhoods and local community members and leaders.

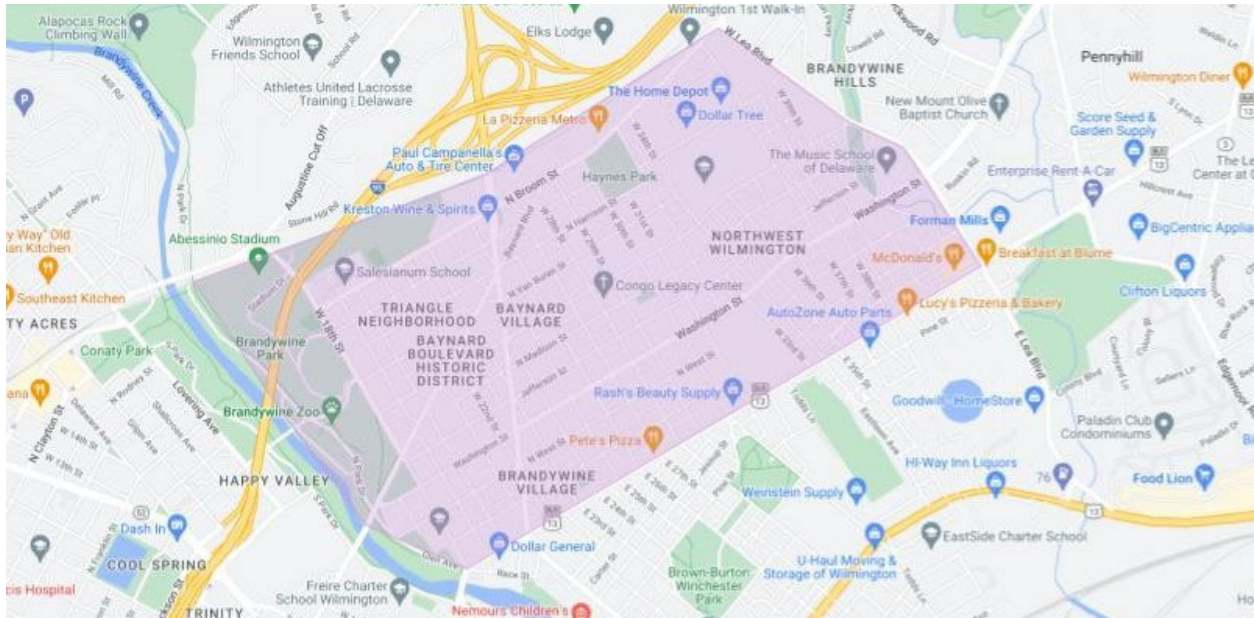
### **Jefferson Street Center**

Implementing Community development initiatives through an asset-based framework promotes long lasting impact, strengthening civic muscle and sense of belonging.

As one of the last active Blueprint Communities® in Delaware, Jefferson Street Center (JSC) works to preserve resources in Northwest Wilmington while empowering the resourcefulness of local community leaders and networks. Resourcefulness-based approaches<sup>1</sup> support the development of self-determination regarding choices about health, access, distribution of goods and building agency. This approach to organizing and elevating is embedded in the strategic mission of JSC.

JSC is a growing grassroots 501(c)(3) that serves four Census Tracts (2,3,4 & 5) and two Qualified Census Tracts (3 & 4), in which at least 50% of the households have an income less than 60% of the Area Median Gross Income. The organization's service area is bounded by North Market Street, Lea Blvd, Broom Street/Miller Road, and the boundary of Brandywine Park (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Map of Jefferson Street Center Service Area



There are several communities that reside within Northwest Wilmington: Brandywine Village, Baynard Village, Harlan Neighborhood, 9th Ward and Triangle Neighborhood. The area is composed of a majority BIPOC residents, mostly African American. Each community has differing assets, needs and boundaries, which is reflected in the 2020 Census Data. Throughout the service area, residents who live below the poverty level peak at 35%, with 23% representing individuals over the age of 65. In certain areas, upwards of 65% of adults over the age of 25 have not graduated high school, translating to a 68% unemployment rate for residents ages 16 and over. Over 40% of households are married, and 38% of total households also have children. While there is a strong homeownership and renter population within the Northwest, some areas reveal up to 18% of the housing stock as vacant.

This data only tells part of a story. These communities are growing their civic associations and finding creative ways to engage and recruit new neighbors or those who are not on social media. They meet on evenings and weekends to clean up the yards of vacant properties or fundraise to plant new trees on their hot, city streets. Local organizers volunteer to create momentum around healthy food and cultural events, working to alleviate the lack of substantial grocery stores in the area. Neighborhoods that are more affected by crime utilize their deep networks to prevent public health scares, which range from shooting sprees to low-access health care and go door-to-door to build awareness and support. Residents and local stakeholders work together to build up the commercial corridor on Market St. and Concord Avenue to increase local job opportunities for the residents. These organizing approaches, which leverage deep resourcefulness, feed the strategic planning of Jefferson Street Center and its community-centric collaboration.

The organization, which originally served as a nonprofit childcare center from 1987-2010, located in Hanover Presbyterian Church, closed because of the Great Recession in 2010. As a result, several members of JSC's board, Hanover congregation, and additional community members began to engage with the local schools as part of the Delaware Readiness Team ecosystem. Funded by the Early Learning Challenge Grant in partnership with private foundations and corporations, Delaware Readiness Teams are a state-wide initiative offering a unique opportunity for communities to build strong and reciprocal linkages between early

learning and K-12 schools and support young children's, ages 0-8, readiness for school and for life. As a result, this dynamic group, called the Hanover Dream Team (HDT), started working in the community surrounding Warner Elementary and Shortlidge Academy schools in 2013. Part of the work of the HDT Readiness Team included a community assessment to better understand the needs of parents and guardians raising children in the community. The community boundaries of the HDT Readiness Team are nearly the same as the boundaries of the current Washington Heights Blueprint Community®. Three central themes emerged from the HDT Community Assessment<sup>2</sup>:

1. How individuals felt about their community varied greatly depending upon the street and sometimes the block where they lived.
2. Breaking the cycle of inadequate parenting is critical.
3. Personal and organizational connections and relationships make a real difference in how a person feels about their community.

As these themes laid the groundwork for the HDT Readiness Team, who looked to expand their outreach, they were informed of the Blueprint Communities® proposal request from the University of Delaware Center for Community Research & Service. Additional members were recruited to the team and a proposal was submitted; Washington Heights Blueprint® revitalization initiative was eventually approved and began the process in 2016.

The Washington Heights Blueprint® team was composed of demographically diverse members of the service area, and the city of Wilmington, as well as representatives from a variety of job sectors. Throughout this year-long engagement endeavor, the team received training through the University of Delaware, which provided the skill sets to utilize relational data collected from JSC's service area. This trust building activity laid the foundation for the work ahead and was a catalytic exercise for getting the organization on the community development map. The trained team engaged directly with local stakeholders, identifying assets to protect, issues to address, and projects to prioritize. As a result, the Washington Heights Blueprint Community® Revitalization plan was constructed, and it drives the strategic work of JSC today. The strategic issues that arose out of the Blueprint® plan focused on six buckets: Public Safety and Crime, Education, Youth Opportunities, Cleanliness, Housing and Rentals and Family & Household Relations (figure 2).

Figure 2. Washington Heights Blueprint® Strategic Issues

## Strategic Issues

As noted above, our Blueprint Community consists of three neighborhoods within the City of Wilmington. These neighborhoods (Triangle, Washington Heights, and Brandywine Village) combine to form an economically significant and socially and professionally diverse section of the city. While there are notable differences in such areas as family income and home ownership, our survey and other planning tools revealed several shared key areas of concern. Our decision to include all three neighborhoods in our Blueprint Community was based on a realization of these common concerns, and an understanding that, by addressing them under a single initiative, we will bring these adjacent neighborhoods closer together and leverage the wide range of talents and assets for the benefit of the larger constituency.

Six key areas of concern have been raised continually as we have gathered information through focus groups, conversations, surveys, and data analysis. These areas are:



Public Safety & Crime



Education



Youth Opportunities



Cleanliness



Housing & Rentals



Family & Household Relations

Growing its grassroots efforts from this plan, JSC focuses on community-driven development work throughout Northwest Wilmington. Five years after the Blueprint® process began, the organization hired its first staff to carry out its operational strategy, connecting with community leaders and partners in JSC's service area, and to learn what had changed since 2016. The staff work to connect with stakeholders in the service area, building strong rapport and identifying the importance of trust relationships, particularly in disinvested communities. It has been through a steady and consistent presence (e.g., attending monthly civic meetings, listening more than talking, organizing and volunteering at neighborhood cleanups, being invited into places of worship, business or people's homes) that residents have grown to recognize that JSC is truly invested in working with them to build stronger, more connected neighborhoods.

Growing its grassroots efforts from this plan, JSC advances community-driven development work toward neighborhood vitality throughout Northwest Wilmington. These strategies are aimed at investing in all residents and stakeholders throughout our service area. These efforts focus on providing programmatic opportunities for youth and intergenerational connection; increase civic muscle and engagement through education and revitalization efforts; build on positive assets and activities to grow a strong, connected sense of place; connect resources to small businesses, nonprofits and organizations; and address areas of concern that affect the health and wellbeing of stakeholders. To achieve these goals, JSC serves as a *Connector*, providing responsive hub programming to the surrounding communities, supporting the recovery efforts from COVID-19 and building partnerships to support the growth of strong housing stock. The organization also works as a *Capacity Builder*, focusing on supporting youth and neighboring schools and leveraging resources to organizations, groups and programs that serve the community.

## The Community Hub

Jefferson Street Center, in partnership with Hanover Church, has established the first community hub in the Washington Heights Blueprint Community® neighborhoods and Northwest Wilmington. From any direction, there is no other Community Hub within one mile of JSC. The building provides access to a commercial kitchen, basketball gym, classroom space and a social hall with a stage. Throughout the Blueprint Community® Revitalization process, as well as a recent impact survey conducted with community stakeholders in summer 2022, residents and

participants emphasized the need for a safe neighborhood space for recreation, physical activity, intergenerational programming, resources and a place to share a meal, promoting a sense of belonging.

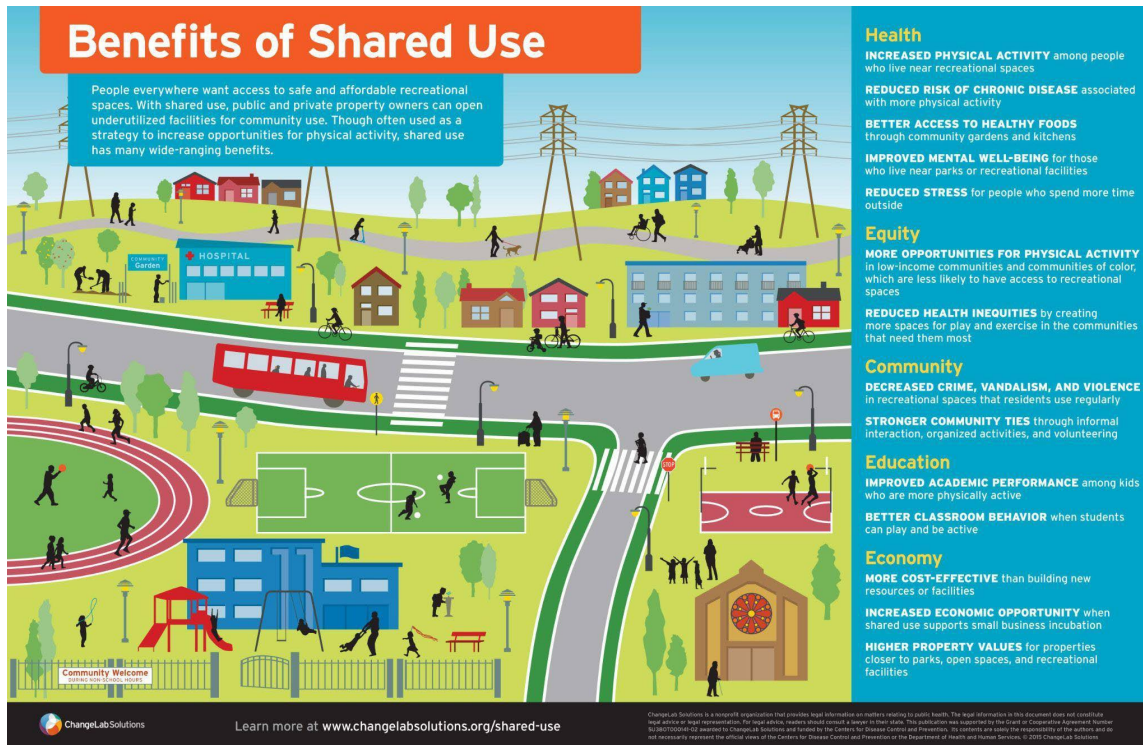
Our Community Hub<sup>3</sup> is a central point where residents can access a range of services, programs, and/or activities offered by diverse organizations, community groups or individuals depending on the needs of the community. It is a conveniently located space that is recognized and valued by local residents (figure 3).

The hub's current direct services are highly utilized, which include a food pantry and clothing closet. Within JSC's service area, 35% of the community lives at or below the poverty line, earns less than \$25,000 annually<sup>4</sup> and has a highly concentrated area of seniors 62 and older, who live in subsidized housing. Based on this data, JSC conducted a six month pilot program in 2022, which hosted over 180 community events focused on physical health and well-being, addressing food insecurity, workforce development, youth programming and access to personal care needs. A quantitative survey was also conducted, collecting responses from 75+ participants, volunteers, program leaders and staff.

The survey results revealed that the most vulnerable recipients of services, like from our food pantry and clothing closet, experienced an increase in well-being, social connectedness and physical health. JSC then looked to grow the program's impact and incorporate partnerships into an already-existing framework, with the goal of connecting services to alleviate the symptoms of poverty. The organization partnered with Bright Spot Farms, who provided free produce for 16-weeks along with recipe examples and lesser-known foods, as well as the Wilmington Community Advisory Council to directly connect income-qualified individuals to free or reduced internet. These services are provided during the Food Pantry, which doesn't demand additional travel for recipients to receive these services. JSC also partnered with Network Connect, who worked with the Food Pantry and Clothing Closet programs to host free stores, which provide free personal items to the community.

Figure 3. Benefits of Shared Use, Change Lab Solutions.





The unique approach of co-facilitating a shared use space within a faith-based building provides a breadth of opportunities to a multitude of initiatives to thrive while keeping the integrity of the space. First and foremost a place of worship, developing meaningful relationships with the congregational community creates capacity for equitable input. The resourcefulness embedded in the networking emphasizes trust-building and transparency, encouraging both organizations to work with each other through an inclusive and generative practice. Throughout the six month pilot program, which brought new programming into the church, this demonstrated a sustainable opportunity to reactivate building amenities, grow connections and cultivate positive outcomes.

## Community-Driven Projects and Priorities

Revealed in the Washington Heights Blueprint Communities® Revitalization Plan, participants expressed the need to protect assets, such as green spaces, small businesses and schools, and address areas of need, like public safety and crime, cleanliness and housing stock. Through the leveraged impact of strong partnerships, JSC directly supports efforts of beautification, facilitating neighborhood clean-ups, subsidizing beautification efforts and working with local organizations to grow green spaces. Continuing to serve as a *connector*, the organization is channeling resources directly into these efforts, which are facilitated by the communities themselves. Some of these efforts include garden installations on highly trafficked areas, the purchasing, planting and maintenance of trees in residential pockets, and providing items needed for neighborhood cleanups.

As a *Capacity Builder*, the organization is building its infrastructure to advance asset growth in Northwest Wilmington. JSC is currently in the process of starting a seed funding pilot program, providing microgrants to small businesses and organizations for a capital project, program or engagement activity. As the organization continues to be introduced to budding entrepreneurs or

grassroots programs, the opportunity to connect them to additional resources and partners will bolster their chances of success, impact and sustainability.

JSC is also focusing on building long-term relationships to support the alleviation of housing insecurities and grow home ownership. The organization participated in the Cinnaire Jumpstart program in 2022, which provided foundational tools about the housing development process, partners in the field and funding sources for small start-up developers. As a result, JSC has connected several residents in its service area to the program, including members of its board, to build the toolbox of home ownership. As the organization strategically grows, connecting resources to support the renter-to-home ownership pipeline is a priority, as well as partnering with financial institutions to assist individuals with credit recovery, education, and financial planning.

Another revitalization focus is Baynard Blvd between 18th and Concord Ave, particularly concerning better sidewalks and street safety.<sup>5</sup> After serving as the official partner for the first Baynard Blvd Open Streets event, in which 0.7 miles of the artery was closed, the community was buzzing with energy to affect long lasting change on the four-lane road.

JSC followed-up with University of Delaware Living Labs, who was present during the Open Streets event, to collect resident input on the safety of Baynard Blvd. The results revealed the high level of concern around safety and traffic hazards, and the lack of accessibility for pedestrians, bicyclists and individuals with differing physical abilities. Serving as a connector and facilitator, JSC connected with DeIDOT, City of Wilmington, WILMAPCO, and Urban Bike Project to establish a plan that could create a space and platform for community members to directly share feedback, concerns and ideas on the boulevard, and take an active role in establishing a temporary transportation installation. Through canvassing efforts, sharing on social media and connecting with the civic groups, JSC facilitated 3 successful public workshops in early fall, and is actively working with the surrounding community and civic associations to ensure the successful impact of the installation in Fall 2023.

The communities in Northwest Wilmington run long and deep. The neighborhoods, with most of the housing developed between 1900-1930, served as a bedroom community for workers employed by the expanding industries and businesses located in Downtown Wilmington and along the Christina and Brandywine Riverfronts.<sup>2</sup> Many of the current homeowners have lived in this area for years, some moving only a few blocks away, whether they needed to expand or had to downsize later in life. Some residents who have experienced times of unrest or development might take longer to trust a 'new' organization, especially in disinvested communities. This has driven the organization to grow low and slow - learning, listening and showing up, over and over - and approaching the work through a trauma-informed lens. It is essential for community-building and engagement efforts to be realistic and transparent about new opportunities and to be truthful about what we are offering.<sup>6</sup> Since becoming staffed in 2021, the past two years have been, and continue to be, critically important to build trust between JSC and the community it serves.

Our work continues to be laid out in front of us and we have much to do. Whether we're building systems of sustainability through the infrastructure of our community hub, or working to decrease vacant housing in our neighborhoods, we must continue to evaluate our work, how it's delivered, who is driving it, and what the impact is on the community. It is imperative that JSC continues to show up and support transformative partnerships, whether organizational or

informal, that directly impact positive physical and socioeconomic place-based changes. Empowering the resourcefulness of Northwest Wilmington will continue to be at the forefront of our work, and so will the community we serve.

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