

Long-Term Investments, Cross-Sector Partnerships and Tailored Support Fuel Collaborative Efforts to Create Healthy and Thriving Delaware Communities

Kate Dupont Phillips, MPH;¹ Monica Burnett Castellano, MSPH;² Linda Tholstrup, MS, MCHES;³ Bill Swiatek, MA, AICP;⁴ Sarah Lester;⁵ Lauren J. Footman, MSOD, EdD⁶

1. Healthy Communities Delaware
2. Healthy Communities Delaware
3. Healthy Communities Delaware
4. Wilmington Area Planning Council
5. Cornerstone West Community Development Corporation/West Side Grows Together Steering Committee
6. End Community Violence Now

Abstract

Healthy Communities Delaware's experience validates three tenets for partnering with communities to improve health, well-being, and equity: long-term investment, cross-sector partnerships, and community-tailored approaches. Community stories from West Side Wilmington, the Route 9 Corridor, and Laurel illustrate how putting these principles into practice advances the Vital Conditions so all Delaware communities can be healthy and thrive.

Introduction

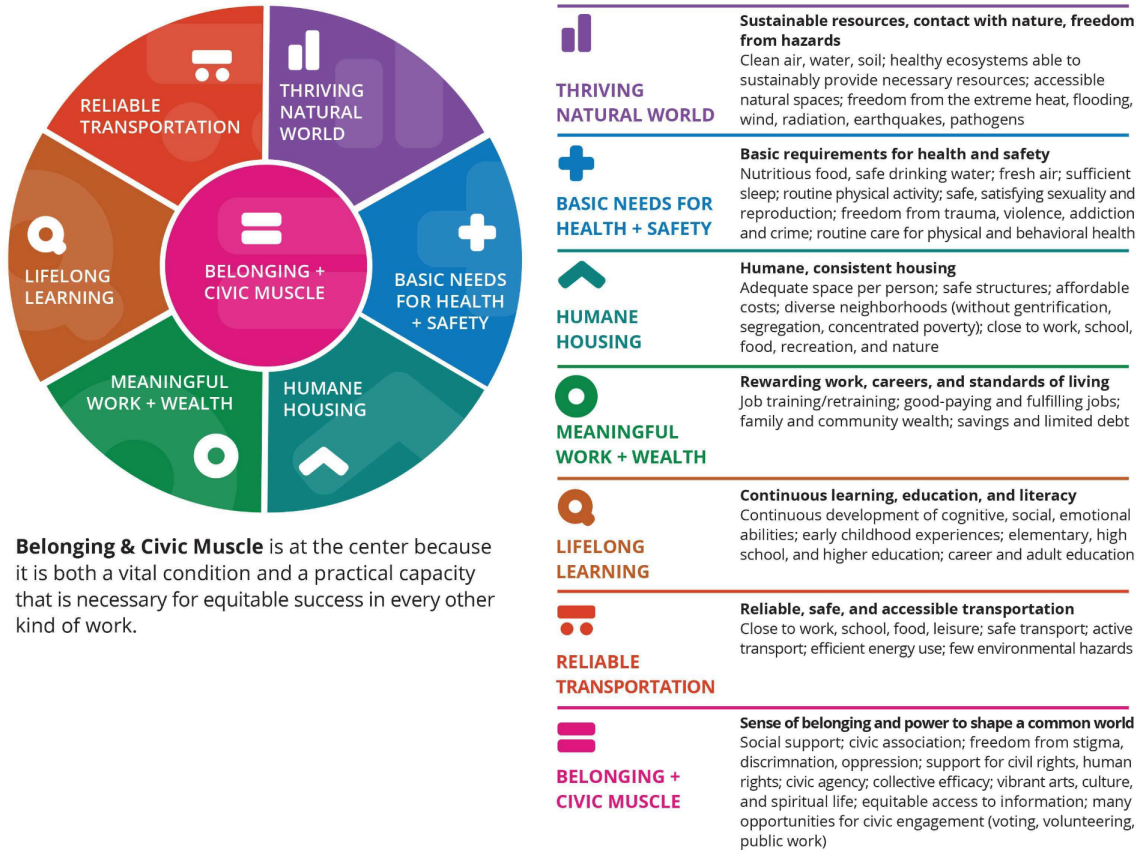
Healthy Communities Delaware is a network of community and investment partners working together to advance health, well-being, and equity by improving community Vital Conditions: humane housing, lifelong learning, a thriving natural environment, meaningful work and wealth, basic needs for health and safety, reliable transportation, and a sense of belonging and civic muscle (see Figure 1).² Healthy Communities Delaware invests in building community capacity for transformation (including comprehensive planning, steering committees, and backbone support), as well as resident-prioritized projects that drive systemic change. By supporting local organizations that work closely with the community, Healthy Communities Delaware gives voice and power to those who know their community best.

Since 2020, Healthy Communities Delaware has invested over \$9.5 million in 18 Delaware communities with the poorest health and social outcomes. Working alongside Delaware communities has validated three long-standing tenets for partnering with communities: long-term investment, cross-sector partnerships, and community-tailored approaches.³⁻⁵ The following community stories highlight real-world examples of these principles in action:

1. West Side Wilmington: Illustrates how long-term, flexible funding for both collaborative infrastructure and community-driven projects drives transformational change,
2. Route 9 Corridor: Highlights how strategic, strong cross-sector partnerships align resources and expertise to solve complex community problems, and

3. Laurel: Demonstrates the need for tailored approaches that respect and leverage each community’s unique characteristics and capacity.

Figure 1. The Vital Conditions for Health and Well-Being Framework Describes the Conditions That are Essential to Health and Well-Being¹



West Side Wilmington

For more than 15 years, organizations and residents have been working together to improve the community's vital conditions in West Side Wilmington. Their collective success has been fueled by sustained investment in both the organizations leading transformative community-driven projects and in the collaborative infrastructure that makes the work possible. The West Side’s approach is coordinated, but flexible. Organizations maintain their independence, while leading components of a shared plan that match their mission and capacity. West Side partners often refer to their collaborative efforts as “working the plan.” The West Side infrastructure consists of:

- The Revitalization Plan: Serves as a north star, promoting alignment of investment with community-driven priorities.
- The Steering Committee: Offers a consistent forum for residents, nonprofits, small businesses, local institutions and civic leaders from five diverse neighborhoods to synchronize strategies and resources.

- The Backbone Organization: Provides administrative capacity for coordination, communication, implementation tracking, and collaborative fundraising.

This collaborative infrastructure began to take shape in 2011, when the community undertook a comprehensive community planning process to produce a West Side Revitalization Plan. The process established the West Side Grows Steering Committee and formalized Cornerstone West Community Development Corporation (Cornerstone) as a backbone organization for collaborative, community-driven, revitalization efforts. In 2023-2024, Cornerstone and the Steering Committee, guided the community through a second comprehensive planning process to update the West Side Revitalization Plan. The commitment of West Side partners alongside consistent investment have sustained the collaborative infrastructure since its inception.

Supported by the collaborative infrastructure, West Side partners have successfully implemented key priorities outlined in the Revitalization Plan, including those listed below. While these organizations manage fundraising independently, their participation in the collaborative ensures their efforts remain aligned with the community's shared vision. This alignment also helps organizations demonstrate when projects are high-priority and community-backed, which lends them credibility to secure funding.

West Side Revitalization Plan implementation highlights include:

- Be Ready Community Development Corporation replaced a block of vacant housing with the Solomon's Court development. Phase 1 built six units of affordable and accessible rental housing and 1,600 sq. ft. of commercial space. Phase 2 will add 12 units of affordable rental housing and 4,500 sq. ft. of commercial space this year.
- Cornerstone West Community Development Corporation led community-driven design processes and leveraged \$5 million for the renovation of six West Side parks. They also partnered with a grassroots effort, Green For the Greater Good, to transform the 3.78-acre Rodney Reservoir into a nature-focused community park (2025).
- Through its \$6 million Education Expansion Project, the Latin American Community Center increased community access to early childhood education and community spaces. Key milestones include the multigenerational garden (2022), La Fiesta 2 Infant and Toddler Center (2023), and a school-age playground to be completed this year.

West Side partners have blended and leveraged funds from diverse sources over multiple years to execute these transformational projects and maintain the collaborative infrastructure that supports them. Long-term, flexible investments from partners such as the Regional Foundation, (formerly the Wells Fargo Regional Foundation) from 2011 to 2022 and Healthy Communities Delaware from 2020 to 2026 have been essential to maintaining the stability of these collaborative development efforts.

Insight from the Field: Collaborative, Community-Driven Work Requires Long-Term Investment

As demonstrated by the West Side story, community-driven change required funding for both resident-prioritized projects and the underlying collaborative infrastructure. Long-term, flexible investments in community-driven planning, a dedicated backbone organization, and a consistent steering committee have enabled West Side partners to build and maintain the community trust and consensus necessary for collective action (figure 2). Consistent, flexible, long term funding has enabled West Side partners to execute complex multi-year projects that realize the community's shared vision.

Figure 2. West Side Wilmington Residents Providing Feedback on a Community Garden Plan



Note. Photograph by Green for the Greater Good, 2024. Adapted with permission.

Rt. 9 Corridor

In 2017, the Wilmington Area Planning Council's community-driven Route 9 Master Plan established a shared vision for transportation and land use redevelopment along the suburban Route 9 corridor just south of Wilmington. The Route 9 Monitoring Committee, which is composed of civic leaders, government agencies, and business representatives now acts as a steering committee to drive implementation of the plan.

The Route 9 Monitoring Committee has had several implementation successes. These include: helping secure Healthy Communities Delaware funding to support two area Community Development Corporations; incorporating community land use priorities into the New Castle County Comprehensive Plan; forming a Health Subcommittee to better understand and communicate local health needs; and guiding transportation investments to improve mobility access and safety. One example of these mobility successes is the Tri-Parks Trail lighting project.

The Tri-Parks Trail traverses three New Castle County parks—Surratte, Rose Hill, and Oakmont—and provides a convenient walking and cycling connection between several neighborhoods. The trail supports physical activity and provides an alternative to walking along

busy area roadways to reach key destinations. It also forms the spine of a planned interconnected neighborhood pathway network running the length of the corridor.

The absence of lighting, however, makes the trail feel unsafe at night. This constrains opportunities for physical activity and safe travel for residents who rely on walking to travel to and from bus stops, community centers, libraries, and shops. Previous community-led efforts to add lighting had been unsuccessful. County officials had long maintained a policy against lighting in parks, citing concerns that adding lighting could encourage crime or other undesirable activity. Local elected officials were similarly hesitant to advocate for lighting due to these concerns.

In response, the Route 9 Monitoring Committee—working with the University of Delaware’s Cooperative Extension—began researching the relationship between lighting and crime, as well as gathering community lighting needs. In two letters sent to New Castle County in 2021, the committee cited studies showing that improved lighting reduced criminal activity elsewhere by 20–39 percent. The letters also documented the Route 9 Master Plan’s call for adding lighting throughout the corridor to improve pedestrian safety. Survey data from the New Castle Prevention Coalition (now the Route 9 Community Development Corporation) was cited to further highlight this need: 67 percent of residents reported sparse or nonexistent lighting in their neighborhoods. Finally, informal interviews with Tri-Parks Trail users detailed the lighting needed along this trail. Whether they used the trail for transportation or exercise, residents said that lighting would allow them to use the trail for more hours each day—expanding opportunities for physical activity and improving safe access to nearby services.

This advocacy from the Route 9 Monitoring Committee ultimately helped prompt a policy shift within New Castle County. And in the following year (2022), the county applied for Delaware Department of Transportation Alternatives Program funding to install lighting along the Tri-Parks Trail. After a period of project development in coordination with the Route 9 Monitoring Committee and local civic leaders, a full concept plan was presented in 2025.

The nearly \$1 million project will install lighting along the Tri-Parks Trail and also involves several additional improvements that support accessibility and safety. These include accessibility upgrades for people with physical disabilities, a safer crossing of a roadway, and a new pathway connection to Oakmont’s outdoor basketball court. The Delaware Department of Transportation currently expects construction to begin in spring or summer 2027.

Insight from the Field: Cross-Sector Partnerships Solve Complex Problems

For years, Route 9 Corridor residents advocated for lighting, but these efforts alone did not lead to change. By leveraging its broad coalition of community organizations, public agencies, researchers, and civic leaders, the Route 9 Monitoring Committee shared resources and knowledge to influence a shift in New Castle County’s park policy. This paved the way for partnership with the Delaware Department of Transportation that produced a trail lighting project concept that reflects community priorities. This example demonstrates how cross-sector partnerships can solve complex problems that no single group can solve alone.

Laurel

In 2023, in the town of Laurel in Sussex County, three teenagers were fatally shot within just six months. Given that Laurel is a rural town of just over 4,000 residents, this level of gun violence was particularly striking.

Concerned residents came together to respond to these traumatic incidents, to heal, and to make a change in their community. They formed Operation West Laurel, a group of community volunteers focused on addressing the root causes of violence and “transforming the community from the inside out.” Since its inception, Operation West Laurel has developed an impressive array of youth development, outreach, and advocacy programs aimed at creating a safe, supportive environment where children and families can thrive.

Operation West Laurel was doing amazing work with a small group of dedicated volunteers. Then in 2024, they began partnering with End Community Violence Now, a backbone organization working to build Delaware’s coordinated, statewide approach to reducing community gun violence. End Community Violence Now brought important elements to this partnership, including expertise in community violence intervention, knowledge of best practices, organizational capacity to receive and administer grant funding, and alignment to a broader statewide strategy. Combining the capacity and expertise of End Community Violence Now and the local knowledge and social capital of Operation West Laurel, the partnership was able to secure a grant from Healthy Communities Delaware to bolster their efforts and turn local passion into transformative action.

With funding support from Healthy Communities Delaware, End Community Violence Now and Operation West Laurel are collaborating to implement Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design principles in West Laurel. These design principles make physical environments safer by using strategies such as improving visibility with lighting and landscaping, maintaining spaces to signal community care and ownership, and using walkways, fences, and signage to guide movement and control site access. West Laurel residents and Operation West Laurel members have selected local sites for revitalization, conducted community clean-ups, installed new community assets like gardens, murals, and lighting improvements, and sustained resident engagement activities. These strategies are grounded in evidence demonstrating that improving physical environments, strengthening social cohesion, and increasing community ownership can reduce opportunities for violence and improve overall safety.⁶

Since the tragic events of 2024, violent crime is down in Laurel, including homicides, shootings, and shots fired. While multiple factors influence crime trends, the coordinated, community-led strategies implemented in Laurel align with evidence-based approaches shown to reduce violence and contribute to positive shifts in community safety.⁷

Operation West Laurel and End Community Violence Now plan to continue this work to make Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design-informed improvements to even more sites in the community and are seeking additional funding to support the expansion. End Community Violence Now is also supporting Operation West Laurel to build its organizational capacity through activities that foster leadership, build board capacity, and develop advocacy skills. The intent is to strengthen and solidify the capacity of Operation West Laurel to sustain the revitalization momentum over the long-term, adding both physical and organizational assets to the infrastructure of West Laurel.

Insight from the Field: Different Approaches are Needed for Different Communities

Every community is unique, with its own character, culture, assets, and challenges. As a result, different communities require different supports and approaches to strengthening their vital conditions. In the Wilmington communities described above, there are community-based organizations to secure investment dollars and capacity to implement community development projects once that funding is received. But not all communities have that kind of capacity. Smaller, more rural communities tend to have fewer non-profit organizations and less overall capacity to seek and take in investments for revitalization efforts. This often leads to fewer resources like funding and technical assistance going to smaller communities, even though their needs are just as great. The Laurel story illustrates one model for overcoming this common rural challenge: pairing local knowledge, passion, and leadership with tailored support from a regional backbone organization.

Call to Action

The public health field has come to recognize the extraordinary impact that community conditions have on health and well-being, and therefore the necessity of building cross-sector partnerships to address these conditions. When public health funding is less available, it is more important than ever to leverage the wisdom, time, talents and resources that come with long-term, cross-sector partnerships. We call on Delaware funders to strengthen their commitment to long-term, flexible funding for community-driven work that improves the Vital Conditions. By blending and braiding resources, across sectors, public and private, we can build a future where every Delawarean has the opportunity to thrive.

Ms. Phillips may be contacted at kate@healthycommunitiesde.org.

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