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How pivoting toward a community's goal to improve its built environment led to long-term change.

TIMEFRAME	2017
COMMUNITY	Urban, low-income
GEOGRAPHY	Roseville, California
FOCUS	Walkability

CORE PRINCIPLES	Inclusive, Co-created, Culturally-centered
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT OUTCOMES	Strengthened Partnerships + Alliances Expanded Knowledge Improved Health + Healthcare Programs + Policies Thriving Communities

PROJECT BACKGROUND

How can we expect communities to live healthy lives when their public spaces are unsafe? Funded by a \$60k award from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the [Health Education Council \(HEC\)](#) engaged the community of Roseville, California in an effort to improve the health of its residents. HEC is a nonprofit organization committed to promoting health and preventing chronic disease in underserved communities. The funded proposal was designed to address food insecurity—a well-documented need in the community supported by many data sources, including community health needs assessments from local hospitals, CalFresh Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and school lunch programs.

After receiving the award, HEC went back to community residents to confirm that the project was a community priority. “We asked, ‘what’s nearest and dearest to you when you think about health? What comes to mind?’” said Debra Oto-Kent, MPH, Founder and Executive Director of HEC. The resulting neighborhood input highlighted that food insecurity was not the highest priority. In fact, residents consistently raised having a safe and walkable neighborhood as a bigger need. Specifically, the neighborhood park was identified as not feeling like a safe, usable environment for families. Walkability to local stores was also called out, as there were no curb cuts for shopping carts and strollers. Based on community guidance, HEC pivoted and redesigned its strategy around what community members said they wanted.

The Walkability Project – An Impact Story



Watch Debra Oto-Kent, HEC Founder and Executive Director, describe the Walkability Project and its sustained community impact.

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We did kitchen table discussions, we met in people’s backyards. We engaged with parents after school. We cast a very wide net when talking to people...and based on that input, we pivoted and changed our approach.

Debra Oto-Kent

HEC Founder and Executive Director

KEY ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

To align the project with community priorities, HEC pursued a series of engagement strategies to incorporate community members into all aspects of the work.

Built a mechanism for broad community inclusion throughout the project. A five member, cross-sector team and advisory committee of community-based organizations (CBOs) and residents were assembled to confirm project goals with the community. This was important because other neighborhoods in the city had neighborhood associations that could advocate for their needs; this community did not.

Engaged as many stakeholders as possible, and met them where they lived and worked. The Advisory Committee sought input from diverse stakeholders with everyday experience of the community. These included residents in core neighborhoods, neighborhood associations, city officials, hospitals, health and social service agencies, faith organizations, and law enforcement. To do so, the advisory committee held key informant interviews, backyard chats, after-school engagement with parents, and focus groups. Notably, they reached out to people who had not been involved and did not know who to turn to in order to make their voices heard.

Experienced the park firsthand. HEC engaged in a [walking audit](#) in which they toured the park to experience the setting and its issues for themselves, including broken benches and drug paraphernalia. These efforts brought home the specific ways in which safety was an issue and a barrier to use of the park and activities such as walking groups, which could improve health.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

The partnership between HEC and the community created a stream of benefits:

Generated new programs and improved quality of life. HEC has since leveraged their original \$60k award into additional forms of support that have collectively raised the life quality of the community. For examples, HEC applied for and received block grants to fix sidewalks; they partnered with the city and secured a \$750,000 grant to fix a swimming pool; Kaiser Permanente awarded two improvement grants to build classrooms and an outdoor learning center in the park; the local electricity company prioritized the Roseville park in its

program to upgrade streetlights to brighter LED bulbs; and the Parks and Recreations department started implementing new programs. New programs included yoga and soccer, movie nights in the park, and the “Saturday in the Park” program, where non-profits set up tables and provided service information to local residents.

Created sustained infrastructure for ongoing community action. The Advisory Committee has continued to meet monthly. Furthermore, there are now three active neighborhood associations that meet regularly and share updates with the Advisory Committee. Most significantly, rapid changes to the built environment (lights, benches, classroom, etc.) were visible to residents, who could see results from their participation. This built “civic muscle” among residents who had previously felt disconnected and did not know who to talk to about local issues.

Built relationships with and within the neighborhoods. As a result of new and strengthening relationships, when COVID-19 emerged, community members were ready to address food insecurity issues. HEC partnered with the City, local contributors, and local restaurants that were severely impacted by closures to launch Family Meals Roseville. Residents and food service providers set up drive-up school programs and new food access points, delivering nearly 20,000 hot meals to neighborhood families.





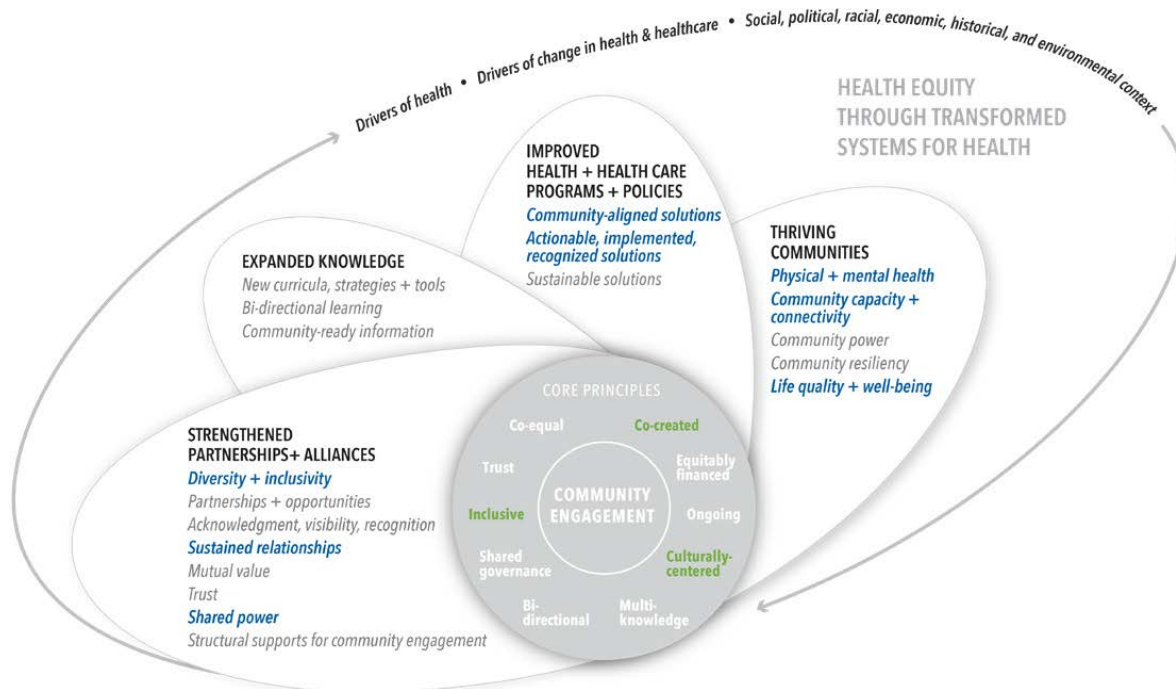
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Listen as community member and neighborhood association president Steve Parker describes the effects of park improvements.

ASSESSING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT OUTCOMES

In this section, we map the ACE conceptual model to the Impact Story. This mapping illustrates how CORE PRINCIPLES of engagement lead to impact across the four OUTCOME domains, and to specific measurable indices within those domains.



The Walkability Project began with CORE PRINCIPLES of: **inclusive** participation (focused on talking to people who had not been previously engaged), **co-**

creation (redesigning the project with community to reflect their priorities), and a **culturally-centered** approach (centering local culture when developing engagement processes and goals).

This approach generated STRENGTHENED PARTNERSHIPS + ALLIANCES, including **diversity + inclusivity** (reinvigorating neighborhood associations with previously unengaged community members); **sustained relationships** (neighborhood associations and the Advisory Committee continue to meet); and **shared power** (residents have heightened expectations and new structures for initiating other community improvement efforts).

Together, Roseville residents and the HEC IMPROVED HEALTH + HEALTHCARE PROGRAMS + POLICIES through **community-aligned solutions** that are **actionable, implemented, recognized** (upgraded park lighting, pool revitalization, and the remodeled park classroom are visible signs of neighborhood improvement; the resulting yoga and soccer programs, movie night in the park, and the “Saturday in the Park” program are also tangible successes).

Today, the Walkability Project fosters THRIVING COMMUNITIES through improved **physical + mental health** (increased numbers of walking clubs and other outdoor group activities) and **community capacity + connectivity** (more community members have turned out to discuss new park-related projects, such as a potential affordable housing development and a new community center). **Life quality + well-being** have also been improved (a stronger presentation of residents in the streets and in the park, which in turn improves perceived social cohesion and safety).

Questions or comments? Assessing community engagement involves the participation of many stakeholders. [Click here](#) to share feedback on these resources, or email leadershipconsortium@nas.edu and include “measure engagement” in the subject line to learn more about the NAM’s Assessing Community Engagement project.