

An Alley Becomes a Gateway to a Healthier Community

Urban alleys are not generally thought of as public health havens. However, a conversation among a student, her adviser, built environment professionals and community members has helped transform an alley in Baltimore's historic Jonestown neighborhood into a garden, open space and play area for local children.

Shawn Rauson, longtime resident and current owner of 1009 East Lombard Barber Shop, Salon and Spa, remembers when the alley was home to a crumbling warehouse infested with rats, the opposite of an asset to community health. "Working together," Rauson says, "we changed the space from being a place that you would warn people off of — especially kids — to one where you would invite people to."

The initial idea for the alley project came from a graduate student, Muriel Harding, at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and her adviser, Lindsay Thompson, another Jonestown resident. The initiative became a catalyst for years of community action to address other challenges in the neighborhood, where some residents faced high rates of chronic health issues such as diabetes, obesity and low birth weights.

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In the social determinants of health, every place matters.

- Lindsay Thompson, Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health

With the assistance of a Robert W. Deutsch Foundation grant, the Jewish Museum of Maryland played a key role by providing the resources necessary for residents to develop a master plan for the neighborhood. Its goal was to spur revitalization while avoiding outcomes like unaffordable

housing that would displace current residents. Thompson and Harding began reaching out to architects, landscape architects and builders. And when they did, a remarkable thing happened: The professionals donated a total of \$100,000 in time, expertise and labor to help kick-start investment in the community. Meanwhile, Rauson was among those who were instrumental in enlisting support from residents of the nearby Helping Up Mission.

This served another fundamental goal of the project: ensuring continuity of social services through the integration of comprehensive health access into the master planning. "What people often think of as 'dumping ground' services, like addiction centers, shelters and health services for the homeless, we recognized as critical resources," Thompson says. "In the social determinants of health, every place matters."





Conversation guide

Projects and initiatives related to health and health equity in the built environment often start with a conversation between individuals or among small groups. It may be a formal convening led by a foundation or city agency, a workshop at a convention or even coffee between colleagues.

The Joint Call to Action to Promote Healthy Communities is engaged in a year-long effort to spur these conversations among our members and beyond. We've compiled stories about discussions that have led to healthy solutions at the community, regional and state levels.

Here are the questions they asked in Baltimore →



Then-mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake works with neighborhood volunteers to plant the first seedlings during Historic Jonestown neighborhood's Exeter Gardens Community Day

WHO'S COME TO THE TABLE SO FAR

- CityLab
- Deutsch Foundation
- Helping Up Mission
- Historic Jonestown Corporation
- Home Depot
- Jewish Museum of Maryland
- Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health
- Johns Hopkins Carey Business School
- Mahan Rykiel Associates (landscape architecture)
- Morgan Stanley
- National Aquarium in Baltimore
- Whole Foods Market
- WPM Real Estate Management

1. STARTING THE CONVERSATION

The historic Jonestown neighborhood in Baltimore was suffering from a range of challenges — litter, a lack of open spaces and decaying buildings — and residents faced chronic health challenges. A master of public health degree student saw an innovative way to help spur community transformation, which led to broader questions:

- What does the community see as top priorities for transformation, and what role can others play in addressing them?
- What physical space is underutilized, and how do we capitalize on that?
- How do we help residents reimagine and reshape their neighborhood as a means of improving public health?
- Who are our potential allies and partners, and what resources can they provide?

2. BUILDING OUT THE CONVERSATION

One of the catalysts for a series of improvements to the neighborhood was the idea to turn an alley into a vibrant public space, which provided one solution but raised additional questions:

- Where will the funds come from to make this idea a reality, and how will the space be maintained?
- As projects to revitalize the neighborhood beyond the alley begin to take shape, how do we ensure the community is fully engaged so that the benefits accrue for current residents and displacement is avoided?
- How do we maintain vital services like accessible health care as part of the fabric of the neighborhood?

3. CLOSING THE LOOP

With the help of a planning grant from the Deutsch Foundation, residents took the lead in creating a master plan for the community. At the same time, a group of architects, landscape architects and property managers donated \$100,000 in consulting and professional services. As the neighborhood transforms, remaining questions include:

- As the community and its partners achieve short-term priorities, what's next?
- How do we maintain the momentum, and the funding, behind this work?
- How do we weave a revitalizing historic Jonestown and adjacent neighborhoods of concentrated poverty into the fabric of a quickly gentrifying area of Baltimore City?