

Livability Lab Update: The Role of Neighborhoods

Challenge Teams have rounded the 30-day mark and are entering the next stage of the 100-day Challenge. The energy is strong and the focus on action and cross-sector involvement is motivating. This week, we'll put the spotlight on Team 1 as they work toward forming a neighborhood association council. We'll also explore the Livability Framework a little more, but first—let's take a moment to look back to earlier this year and highlight one of the many ways the community was invited to engage and add their voices to the process.

A CENTRAL THEME: The Importance of Neighborhoods

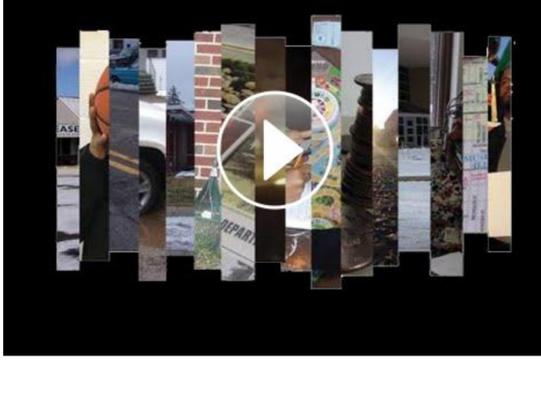
Over the past year, we worked on creating a focused model for implementing and evaluating processes for community engagement and empowerment in Muskegon County. Several areas throughout the county were considered, and in the end our focus led us to approach residents in a neighborhood of Muskegon Heights. We found welcoming partners and learned much together through the process, and are grateful for the insight and knowledge shared. We'll cover some highlights and related work in today's newsletter.

SOUTH HEIGHTS PHOTOVOICE INITIATIVE

[Photovoice](#) has been used around the world for decades. It is a participatory research effort that tells a story through photography as told by everyday people—the experts on their own lives and lived experiences. The insight from this initiative was included with the hundreds of community surveys, conversations, and local reports that helped create the Livability Lab Framework and vision.

Last November, in the South Heights area of Muskegon Heights, a group of residents took on the challenge to meet every week for over two months, sharing photographs and discussing positive community values and areas for actionable community change. In the end, the residents chose the images and accompanying narratives they felt best represented their community. An exhibition of the work premiered in spring of 2019 and was on view again at the Livability Lab launch. From there, the exhibition traveled to Grand Rapids, where it was featured at the state conference for the Neighborhood Associations of Michigan. Photovoice is a catalyst for discussion about building community, and it continues to carry the conversation forward.

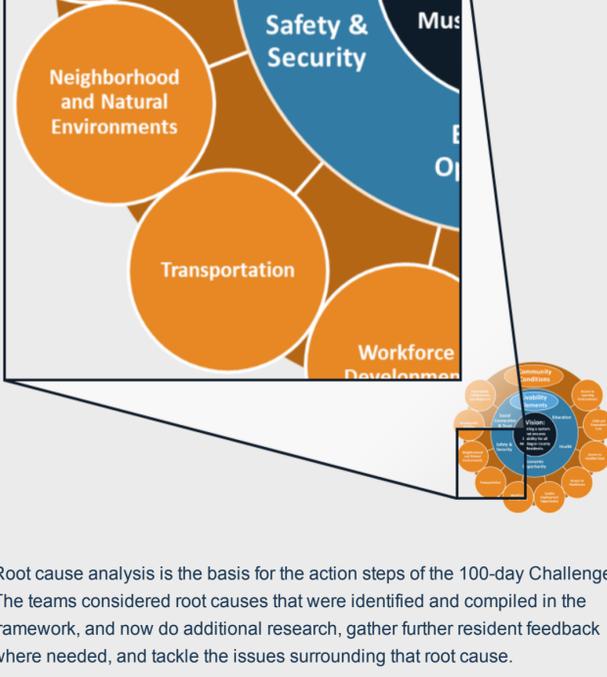
We have linked to a [short video](#) where the South Heights Photovoice participants talk about the experience:



THE LIVABILITY LAB FRAMEWORK: UNPACKED

In the last newsletter, we provided a link to the interactive [Livability Lab Framework](#). Once you begin to click through it, the sheer amount of information gathered from the community that helped determine its form becomes apparent—the vision developed by the community, the livability elements they prioritized as needing to be in place to achieve that vision, and the community conditions to evaluate how well those elements were supported throughout the county.

For example, one of the ten orange Community Conditions featured on the framework delves into [Neighborhood and Natural Environment](#). If you click on any of the circles you can see what information—both qualitative and quantitative—was gathered from the community to identify root causes for that condition.



Root cause analysis is the basis for the action steps of the 100-day Challenge. The teams considered root causes that were identified and compiled in the framework, and now do additional research, gather further resident feedback where needed, and tackle the issues surrounding that root cause.

The approach is focused on action that leads to sustainable change, which happens when you address the root cause and not simply the symptoms. The idea is to continue to address the many root causes, one by one, until the small wins add up to a significant improvement in livability for all Muskegon County residents. The results will show over time in the metrics identified for each of the blue Livability Elements.

In the next newsletter, we'll further unpack those Livability Elements and explore the meaning found within. Stay tuned!

SPOTLIGHT ON: TEAM 1

Increasing resident voice in local decision making by building a Neighborhood Association Council in Muskegon Heights.



Team 1 forms at the Livability Lab launch

Team 1 is led and coached by Muskegon Heights resident Marquis Childers, Jr. The city of Muskegon Heights has seen its neighborhood cohesion disrupted over the years, some of the reasons being the closing of elementary schools, loss of industry, and increasing rentals over home ownership. Without that cohesion, the resident voice in local decision making diminishes. Neighborhood associations have proven to be pivotal in increasing the power of the resident voice, and a concerted effort is being made to nurture the development of these associations.

Childers serves on the board of the Neighborhood Associations of Michigan and has the insight and support from this organization to help fledging groups work on organizing and applying for their 501(c)(3) status.

"Neighborhood associations are important because they give the residents an opportunity to engage with one another to create relationships and trust," said Childers. "These two elements are vital to community. Also, the neighborhood associations provide safe spaces for residents to voice their concerns about their city. The benefit in having a neighborhood association is to empower the residents to take ownership of their own community."

Team 1 understands that once all neighborhoods of Muskegon Heights have a neighborhood association in place, a council can be formed where representatives meet regularly to review local, state, and federal policies, as well as other activities and developments that have an impact on their lives.

"This Council will be vital in the community as a whole because it will have representation from each neighborhood association throughout the city of Muskegon Heights," said Childers. "This will create a powerful and respected voice for this city. Councils work to stay informed of everything going on in their cities, and most importantly it provides a platform for residents to impact decision making while holding elected officials, agencies, nonprofits, businesses, etc. accountable for how things operate."

With the help of Mark Glover, from the longstanding Bethlehem Park Neighborhood Association, and building off two other existing associations, Woodcliffe Neighborhood Association and Crescent Neighborhood Association, the team's action steps first consist of reaching out and working with other areas in the city to grow the associations, with a goal of eventually identifying representatives and beginning to plan for the development of the Neighborhood Association Council.

The action steps included a meeting last week with representatives of the West Side Neighborhood, who have already begun discussions on this topic on their own. At the meeting, a decision was made to form an association from those in attendance, while also continuing to invite others to join. They developed a flyer to inform residents and encourage others to join, and a second meeting is set for next week.



The West Side Neighbors met to discuss the official formation of an association.

Other areas needing official representation are the East Side, Central City, and Edgewood Neighborhoods. The work continues. If residents of Muskegon Heights want to get involved, including those in the neighborhoods listed here, the West Side, or any of the others, please contact Team 1 coach coordinator Logan Jensen by email at Logan.Jensen@mercyhealth.com.

We look forward to hearing more about the successes of the Team 1 Challenge at the celebration event on January 23!

Supported by the Muskegon Community Health Innovation Region. More information can be found at www.LivabilityLab.com.

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