

2019–2020

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT  
AND EARLY CHILDHOOD

# Partnering for Better Outcomes



in partnership with



Center for the  
Study of Social Policy  
Ideas into Action

# Credits

## Lead Writers

Cailin O'Connor, Senior Associate, Center for the Study of Social Policy  
Selena Chavez, Program & Research Assistant, Center for the Study of Social Policy  
Angela Rohs, Senior Relationship Manager, NeighborWorks America  
Paul Singh, Vice President, Community Initiatives, NeighborWorks America

## Contributors

### Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County

Travelle Northern, BRIDGES Initiative Director, Children's Home Society

### Community Partners

Schiller Ambroise, Community Partners, Housing & Financial Capability Manager, Community Partners  
Jaime-Lee A. Bradshaw, Vice President, Community Services, Community Partners  
Lynda Charles, Vice President of Housing Services, Community Partners

### East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation

Veronika Cole, Neighborhood and Economic Development Manager, East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation  
Anita Kumar, Neighborhood Collaborations Manager, Havenscourt, East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation  
Adrienne D. Smith-White, Resident Services Manager, East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation

### Eden Housing Resident Services, Inc.

Annie Hankins, Youth Program Manager, Eden Housing  
Zara Bukhari, Youth Programs Coordinator, Eden Housing  
Bernadine Martin, Associate Director, Resident Services, Eden Housing  
Anna Gwyn Simpson, Director of Resident Services, Eden Housing

### First 5 Alameda County

Lanikque Howard, Early Childhood Projects Coordinator, First 5 Alameda  
Carla Keener, Director of Programs, First 5 Alameda

### Urban Edge Community Development Organization

Alia Pacombe, Director of Community Engagement, Urban Edge

### United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley

Carla Therriault, Director, Community Impact, United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley  
Karley Ausiello, Senior Vice President, Community Impact, United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley

### Mutual Housing Association of Greater Hartford

Catherine MacKinnon, Executive Director, Mutual Housing Association of Greater Hartford  
Stephen Yenke, Communications Coordinator, Mutual Housing Association of Greater Hartford

### Connecticut Children's Office for Community Child Health

Marcus Smith, Senior Manager, Healthy Homes Program, Connecticut Children's Medical Center

## Special Thank You

Sarah Norman, Former Director of Healthy Homes & Communities, NeighborWorks America

# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction: How Community Development and Early Childhood are Connected</b> .....	2
<b>Identifying and Understanding Potential Partners</b> .....	4
Early Childhood Development .....	5
Housing and Community Development .....	6
Grounding Frameworks .....	8
<b>Opportunities for Action: Project Summaries</b> .....	9
Urban Edge and United Way, Boston, MA: Two-generational approach to school readiness .....	10
Community Partners of South Florida & Children’s Services Council of Palm Beach, Palm Beach, FL: Home repairs and code enforcement remediation for families, and access to family support services .....	11
East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation (EBALDC) & First 5 Alameda County (F5AC), Alameda, CA, Strengthen early childhood education and resource hub at the Family Resource Center .....	11
Eden Housing and First Five Alameda County (F5AC), Alameda, CA, Access to quality parent support programs and parent engagement in affordable housing .....	12
Mutual Housing Association of Greater Hartford and Connecticut Children’s Medical Center, Hartford, CT, Improved housing conditions to improve child health.....	12
<b>Lessons Learned</b> .....	13
<b>Recommendations</b> .....	14
<b>Sources</b> .....	15

## Introduction: How Community Development and Early Childhood are Connected

A growing body of research provides evidence that the places where children live, learn, and play have a significant impact on their health and development. Positive neighborhood factors – like safe and affordable housing, accessible public transportation, safe places to play, and good employment opportunities for parents – can have a positive impact on early childhood development, setting children up for success in learning and in life. On the other hand, a number of neighborhood factors can undermine healthy early childhood development, including exposure to high rates of violence or environmental hazards, unsafe housing, inadequate access to grocery stores, and a lack of economic opportunity for parents and caregivers. Given the persistent racial and ethnic segregation in housing in the United States, Black, Indigenous, and people of color are more likely to be exposed to these risk factors, and less likely to experience positive neighborhood factors, than their White counterparts. Improving neighborhood conditions is therefore a critical strategy for improving child well-being, and particularly for eliminating racial disparities in school readiness, child health, and other critical outcomes.

Early childhood advocates increasingly recognize the importance of these community determinants of health and are paying more attention to the housing, neighborhood, and

community conditions in which families are raising young children. At the same time, housing and community development professionals recognize families with young children as an important population and are finding ways to support them, such as by providing or connecting them to needed services, or by improving housing stock to promote safe and healthy development of their youngest residents, contributing to outcomes such as kindergarten readiness in their communities.

In 2019, NeighborWorks and the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) convened an Action Lab of NeighborWorks members and their early childhood counterparts in communities that are part of CSSP's Early Childhood Learning and Innovation Network for Communities (ECLINC). Five affordable housing and community development organizations teamed up with early childhood leaders in four communities across the country to carry out projects at the intersection of community development and child development. This report summarizes the projects they carried out – including the adaptations they had to make when the COVID-19 crisis began – and lessons learned, along with recommendations to guide others who are looking for ways to improve outcomes for young children and their families by partnering across these two fields.



## About NeighborWorks

NeighborWorks America is a congressionally chartered, nonpartisan nonprofit that has created places of opportunity in communities across the country for nearly 40 years. We build the skills, supplement the funding, and amplify the reach of community-based organizations so they can leverage additional resources to achieve their missions. Our network of more than 240 independent, nonprofit organizations helps individuals, families, and communities thrive through comprehensive approaches to affordable housing and community development. We build strong, resilient communities by providing people with opportunities to live in safe, healthy, and affordable housing.

Recognizing the deep tie between community development and health, NeighborWorks America combines its investments and strategies in health, affordable housing, community building, financial capability, and economic development to support health and well-being at each critical stage of life. Through grants, training and technical assistance, we support the efforts of our network and the community development field to develop healthy homes and communities.

## About the Center for the Study of Social Policy and EC-LINC

CSSP is a national, non-profit policy organization that connects community action, public system reform, and policy change to create a racially, economically, and socially just society in which all children and families thrive. To do this, we translate ideas into action, promote public policies grounded in equity, support strong and inclusive communities, and advocate with and for all children and families marginalized by public policies and institutional practices.

The Early Childhood Learning and Innovation Network for Communities (EC-LINC) is a network of partners working to support families and improve results for young children, convened by CSSP and including early childhood system builders and parent leaders from 14 communities across the country. EC-LINC member communities apply a growing body of knowledge around early childhood system building, and are at the forefront of developing an emerging evidence base to support its efficacy. EC-LINC is designed to elevate the work of communities, parent leaders, and other networks committed to improving equitable outcomes for young children.

**IDENTIFYING AND UNDERSTANDING POTENTIAL PARTNERS**

# **An Orientation to the Fields of Early Childhood Development and Housing and Community Development**



**The fields of early childhood development,** on the one hand, and housing and community development on the other, are informed by some of the same grounding frameworks and focused on some of the same families, but are largely uninformed about the details of each other's work. In each of the communities participating in this Action Lab, partners found ways to educate each other about their areas of work – and as they did so, potential opportunities for collaboration became clear. We are sharing a brief overview of each of these fields in order to help potential partners in other communities across the country identify similar possibilities.

## Early childhood development

The science of child development – a body of research that has grown by leaps and bounds in recent years – points to the significance of early experiences, relationships, and opportunities in building the “architecture of the brain” and creating the foundation for lifelong health and social and emotional well-being. Children's experiences particularly in their first three years of life – with their families and other caregivers, in their homes and in their neighborhoods – establish the foundation for future success. In turn, parents' and caregivers' abilities to provide the best possible experiences for young children are influenced by the communities in which they live.

Brain development begins prenatally and continues into adulthood, with vast numbers of neural connections created in response to sensory input and interactions with others. In the first three years of life, more than one million neural connections are formed each second. Some of those connections are reinforced and strengthened through repeated experiences, while many others are pruned away, allowing the connections used most often to become more efficient. Infants, toddlers, and preschoolers are constantly taking in information from their surroundings, including how caregivers respond to them, to shape their understanding of the world and develop the skills they will need to survive and thrive in it. Physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development all take place simultaneously, driven by this process of forming, reinforcing, and pruning neural connections.

Development in the early years proceeds in a predictable order. Basic skills critical to survival – like breathing and swallowing – develop first, with more complex skills like physical mobility, language, and impulse control emerging as the brain develops from the brain stem up. Development also happens on a predictable timeline, although there is substantial indi-

vidual variation from the norms for developmental timelines, even among typically developing children. A significant delay in meeting developmental milestones is often the first indication that a child has special needs and may need additional support. Cultural norms can influence the age at which children are expected to reach certain milestones, such as toilet training and independent sleep, while other milestones are more universal.

A variety of services and supports exist in every community to promote healthy early childhood development. The core services that make up an early childhood system are:

- **Health care**, including pediatric and general practice clinics, hospitals, public health agencies, and early intervention services for children with developmental delays
- **Early care and education**, including formal child care, preschool, and Head Start, as well as informal “family, friend, and neighbor” care
- **Family support**, including family resource centers, home visiting, parenting education, parent leadership training, mutual support groups, child abuse and neglect prevention, and financial supports

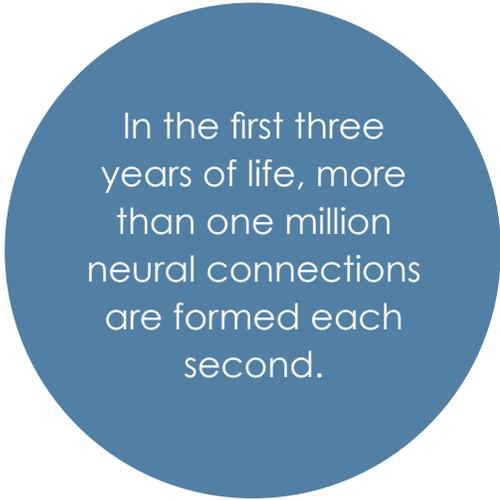
Services to young children and their families are often provided by private agencies (non-profit or for-profit) that operate with funding, licensing, and/or regulation from a combination of local, state, and federal government agencies and programs. Some programs are entirely funded or directly

A variety of services and supports exist in every community to promote healthy early childhood development.

operated by government entities; many are partially funded by the government (such as through child care subsidies or Medicaid payments); some receive public and private grants or individual donations to deliver services; and some operate entirely on a fee-for-service model paid by individual families or private health insurance.

There is a growing field of local early childhood system-building, focused on aligning and coordinating within and across the sectors that make up the early childhood system at a city, county, or regional level. CSSP defines an early childhood system as an aligned set of multi-sector services, supports, programs, and policies aimed at improving equitable outcomes for young children and families, in partnership with parents. Focusing on improving population-level outcomes of child health and well-being with partners from across all of the contributing sectors allows local leaders to direct resources where they are needed most, improve the quality and accessibility of services, and promote equity. Some states and counties have dedicated, sustainable funding streams for local early childhood systems, while in other places, leaders from the sectors that make up the early childhood system are partnering and coordinating in less formal ways or building systems without dedicated or sustainable funding. Networks of communities have developed at the regional, state, and national level, like EC-LINC, to facilitate learning and joint problem-solving.

As part of the Early Learning Nation initiative, and in partnership with the National League of Cities, CSSP recently developed the Building Blocks of an Early Learning Community, and a set of tools for communities to use to assess their current efforts and work toward becoming Early Learning



In the first three years of life, more than one million neural connections are formed each second.

Communities. The four building blocks include 1) community leadership and commitment to make early childhood a priority, 2) quality services that work for all young children and their families, 3) neighborhoods where families can thrive, and 4) policies that support and are responsive to families. Efforts like these are helping to bring the importance of neighborhoods to the attention of early learning advocates in communities across the country.

### Housing and community development

A stable, affordable, healthy home in a safe, vibrant neighborhood is an essential, empowering foundation upon which children, individuals and families can flourish. Housing and community development efforts are focused on ensuring that people have access to such homes, in neighborhoods strengthened by opportunity and community-driven vision. Housing development is more than just building houses and apartments. It is a complex process including, but certainly not limited to: identifying housing needs of those in the community; creating feasible projects; locating land that suits the needs of potential residents; finding sources of funding from a variety of partners; navigating building requirements, codes and laws; securing qualified contractors and builders; finding potential residents and ensuring that they can afford what is built, whether they purchase or rent; keeping residents in their homes; and providing resources and opportunities to support residents. It is a challenging and ongoing endeavor that requires specific subject matter expertise in a variety of areas.

Housing development is one piece of a holistic community development strategy, which serves to engage, empower, and



Important aspects of a successful community development strategy include an integrated and cross-sector focus on people, place, and systems.

improve neighborhoods. Important aspects of a successful community development strategy include an integrated and cross-sector focus on people, place, and systems, as shown

below. This list represents only a small part of the overall strategy a neighborhood can pursue to engage in comprehensive community development, but should provide an idea of the wide variety of opportunities available.

People	Place	Systems
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership by residents</li> <li>• Collective capacity to create positive outcomes</li> <li>• Social connections among residents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Real estate market is strong stable</li> <li>• Physical conditions are visually attractive, sound infrastructure and amenities</li> <li>• Image is positive and celebrates the history of the neighborhood and building pride in place</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Institutional capacity demonstrated through collaboration</li> <li>• Economy is healthy and inclusive</li> <li>• Public services and amenities contribute to local community health and well-being</li> <li>• Public policy supports vibrant local communities</li> </ul>

Many different types of organizations and agencies have developed in the United States to help support improved access to housing and further community development efforts. While these agencies and organizations all focus on ensuring

individuals and families have access to safe, healthy housing in prospering neighborhoods, each can be quite different in terms of how they approach the work. The following list represents the range of entities supporting this work:

Federal	National/International Foundations	State & Local Organizations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer programs and services designed to improve access to affordable, safe housing in healthy communities in the United States.</li> <li>• Provide funding to state housing finance and housing development agencies to implement these programs on a statewide level.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• National and international foundations often spearhead major initiatives and fund projects in communities around the country.</li> <li>• Most foundations focus on those initiatives and projects closely aligned with the foundation's mission or target their resources in communities of some special interest to the foundation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• National non-profits often provide funding, capacity building and training for other organizations working in these fields, and may also work to increase visibility on issues that impact practitioners in housing and community development.</li> <li>• Regional not-for-profit organizations and local community development corporations engage in similar efforts, usually on a smaller, and more targeted, local scale.</li> </ul>

## Grounding frameworks

Three foundational frameworks informed and shaped the work of all partners in this project. The frameworks are:

- The socio-ecological model of human development** puts an individual's development in the context of the relationships and environments in which they develop. The model is often depicted as a set of nested circles with the individual in the center, surrounded by family, neighborhood, community, and society. This model is useful in understanding the interplay of influences from different levels of the social ecology and identifying how human behavior both shapes, and is shaped by, those contexts.
- Social determinants of health** are conditions in the environments in which people live, learn, work, and play that affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes and risks. Originating in the field of public health, the social determinants of health have been adopted by practitioners in many fields as a way to understand the influence of factors outside of an individual's genetics and behavior that affect their health – and to target social determinants in order to effect change at the population level.
- Strengthening Families** is a research-informed approach to increase family strengths, enhance child development, and reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect. It is based on engaging families, programs, and communities in building five key protective factors associated with better outcomes for children and families. Using the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework, more than 30 states are shifting policy and practice to help programs working with children and families focus on protective factors. States apply the Strengthening Families approach in early childhood, child welfare, child abuse prevention, and other child and family serving systems.

At the outset of the Action Lab, participants shared how they used these grounding frameworks and developed the graphic below, depicting a hybrid of the overall housing, health, and early childhood systems and frameworks that families engage with or experience.



In that context, Action Lab participants were especially impressed by a graphic developed by the East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation (EBALDC):



OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

## Project Summaries



**As part of the Action Lab**, NeighborWorks members and EC-LINC communities paired up in Boston, Massachusetts; Hartford, Connecticut; Palm Beach, Florida; and two neighborhoods in Alameda County, California, combining the knowledge and experience of affordable housing and early childhood to implement community-serving and cross-sector projects. Each of the participating NeighborWorks organizations received a grant of \$10,000 to support their community's efforts. The project launched with a full-day in-person meeting in August 2019 with teams returning home to carry out their projects, participating in monthly Action Lab virtual meetings to learn more about each other's projects, engage in joint problem-solving, and share resources that might be helpful.

Although each project was responsive to the needs of the communities and how the partners complimented each other, the projects can be grouped into a handful of types. Several projects used *housing as a platform for child and family services*, such as providing resources for early childhood education, expanding the services of a family resource center or parenting program, and educational initiatives directly providing books and resources to families. Two of the projects *improved housing stock for families with young children*, recognizing the effect of the home and community environment on child development. Several of the communities conducted *collaborative learning sessions* where affordable housing and early childhood professionals shared expertise in their fields as part of their larger projects.

Each NeighborWorks and EC-LINC Action Lab team collaborated on the purpose, design, and implementation of their projects, and had to navigate working in unique partnerships with each other to benefit their shared community. For some teams, this meant expanding the services of one organization to the population of another. For others, this meant one organization providing staff training, TA, expertise, and/or support while the other took the lead on implementing the project. And though each partnership looked different, the Action Lab helped to strengthen connections between the housing and early childhood sectors in their communities, hopefully leading to lasting, strategic partnerships that allow for further cross-sector collaboration and learning. Ultimately, these partnerships and projects achieved their goals: to provide needed services, opportunities, and improved housing to families in their community.

## Urban Edge and United Way

Boston, MA

### Two-generational approach to school readiness

Urban Edge and United Way led several collaborative efforts, including cross-sector learning and networking between housing and early childhood professionals, offering training in developmental screening to parents participating in Urban Edge's Strong Start program, and informing each other about the affordable housing and early childhood conditions faced by families in their community.

Staff from Urban Edge presented about affordable housing to a Birth to 8 Convening of the United Way's Boston Opportunity Agenda in October 2019. The Early Childcare providers were surprised to find out about the difficult process of obtaining affordable housing, and they were able to connect and network with Urban Edge. Urban Edge and United Way continue to have conversations with the Boston Opportunity Agenda to create a Birth to 8 workgroup focused on the intersection of Affordable Housing & Early Childhood. Other core activities of this project focused on the Urban Edge's Strong Start Program, which already serves parents with young children living at Urban Edge. The United Way's DRIVE (Data and Resources Investing in Vital Early Education) Initiative offered Strong Start participants training in administering the Ages & Stages Questionnaire (ASQ), expanding on their work with parent screeners in other neighborhoods in Boston. After first attempting to train all Strong Start participants in the fall 2019 cohort, they pivoted based on feedback that not all participants were interested in becoming screeners. For the spring 2020 cohort, a United Way parent screener presented at a Strong Start Program and the training opportunity was offered, with a number of parents expressing interest. With the onset of COVID-19, another pivot was required and the parent screener training was successfully held as a virtual training. Finally, United Way and Urban Edge worked together to develop a survey to learn about where children living in Urban Edge are attending early care and education programs, and how satisfied families are with those services. The Google Form survey was created in February 2020 and was administered in March 2020, but has not yet been completed due to COVID-19.

## Community Partners of South Florida & Children's Services Council of Palm Beach

Palm Beach, FL

### Home repairs and code enforcement remediation for families, and access to family support services

The Community Partners of South Florida (CPSFL) and the Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County partnered with each other and the Children's Home Society of Florida (which operates BRIDGES at Northwood) and the North-end RISE community to identify and carry out small-scale renovations to homes with families with young children. The partners each had expertise within their areas: housing rehab, community engagement, and system design. The project aimed to engage families with young children that faced health or access issues based on the physical challenges of their current home, such as needing minor repairs or having challenges associated with code enforcement issues. Ensuring the physical space that families with young children reside in is essential to utilizing a comprehensive approach to supporting families within communities and mitigating the physical and environmental barriers that hold children back from achieving overall and academic success. While the project has been delayed due to COVID-19, the rehabilitation work is set to begin in ten homes in July 2020 after a process of recruitment, intake, and selection. Additionally, ongoing general housing rehabilitation education and awareness will be offered to renters and potential homeowners within the community. The project is still looking to engage additional partners to provide additional funding, resources, incentives, and general expertise or knowledge, whether online or through social media.

## East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation (EBALDC) & First 5 Alameda County (F5AC)

Alameda, CA

### Strengthen early childhood education and resource hub at the Family Resource Center

For the Action Lab, EBALDC piloted a birth-5 early literacy "Learning Adventure Backpack" program based on the First 5 Alameda County model. The program objectives were to increase early childhood literacy and strengthen parent-child engagement and bonding time. Prior to the Action Lab, EBALDC & F5AC had been actively working together through the Healthy Havenscourt Collaborative (HHC) and launched an early childhood resource hub, the Havenscourt Cub House at Lion Creek Crossings, an affordable housing development. EBALDC was easily able to do outreach for the Learning Adventure Backpack program through the Havenscourt Cub House playgroups. The Learning Adventure Backpack program allowed parents to check out one of 18 backpacks, each comprising 4-5 books in English or Spanish, that explore a particular theme, such as literacy, Science, Mathematics, and Social Skills. Parents and caregivers could check-out the books for two weeks at a time. After three months, the plan was to administer a brief survey to assess whether or not, as a result of participating in the program, the parents read to their child more often, better understood the importance of participating in early childhood programs or preschool, and felt they could better support their child's readiness for kindergarten, among other activities. However, due to COVID-19, the programming was paused and the survey could not be administered.

In the future, the Learning Adventure Backpack Program may be expanded by 1) adding F5AC's content cards in the backpacks, which will help parents identify all of the various ways they can use book contents to support early learning and school readiness; 2) incorporating an early literacy-related incentive (e.g. if a parent checks out five backpacks, they get to keep a book) in an effort to have parents return the backpacks; 3) identifying ways to increase the variety of books; and 4) identifying opportunities to support parent leadership to strengthen the program and community outreach.

## Eden Housing and First Five Alameda County (F5AC)

Alameda, CA

### Access to quality parent support programs and parent engagement in affordable housing

Eden Housing and First Five Alameda County partnered to provide high quality educational resources to Eden youth residents as well as educational resources on early childhood development for parents and caregivers. F5AC provided guidance to Eden Housing's staff on how to enhance Eden Housing's Raising a Reader program model to provide additional early childhood education resources while increasing family engagement. F5AC also conducted a training on early childhood development for Eden Housing Resident Services staff and provided early childhood education materials and resources to share with parents. The modified Raising a Reader program offered a 10-week bag rotation program with each book bag containing three books, a puppet, and an educational game or activity for children to enjoy with their parents; as well as three family engagement events where a Resident Services Coordinator provided early education materials and fun activities for families. It was offered to 25 residents and children aged 0-5 residing at Eden Housing affordable housing properties located in Alameda County. The program reduces barriers for children to access educational materials at home by providing free high-quality educational resources to families right where they live and seeks to support parents to feel confident in engaging in their child's learning and development. Additionally, this program seeks to create at-home literacy routines that promote family bonding time and foster a nurturing environment for a child's healthy brain development. To measure program outcomes, parents completed a 19 question pre and post survey at the beginning and end of the program, though not all families were able to give final survey responses due to COVID-19.

## Mutual Housing Association of Greater Hartford and Connecticut Children's Medical Center

Hartford, CT

### Improved housing conditions to improve child health

The Mutual Housing Association of Greater Hartford (MHAGH) and Connecticut Children's Medical Center (CCMC) partnered to consider ways that MHAGH's policies and procedures could improve health outcomes of Mutual Housing residents in the Frog Hollow neighborhood of Hartford. By being intentional and using resident health as one of the lenses through which they developed policies and procedures, it became apparent they could significantly impact the health outcomes of the residents, of whom a third are minor children. Mutual Housing incorporated these ideas into several health focused projects and began incorporating health outcomes into their metrics.

- Recognizing that inhaling secondhand smoke significantly impacts childhood asthma, MHAGH developed a non-smoking policy for the newest development, and hope to expand this non-smoking policy to all new developments as well as potentially to existing properties.
- MHAGH incorporated hardwood floors into their next two developments, which is safer than carpeting for children suffering from asthma.
- MHAGH got a lead and asbestos removal grant through the CCMC Healthy Homes Program, which will allow them to move forward in developing safer apartments in their next development.
- MHAGH secured a grant to purchase electric yard equipment and green cleaning products, which reduces both resident and staff exposure to harmful fumes.
- Finally, MCACH secured a new partnership to provide fresh produce for two food pantries located in MHAGH developments to support better nutrition for all residents.

# Lessons Learned



## Lessons Learned

**Through navigating partnerships,** implementing projects, and dealing with the struggle of a pandemic, the early childhood and affordable housing partners emerged from the Action Lab with some important lessons learned that can be applied to multi-partner community impact projects.

Action Lab teams exercised incredible flexibility and adaptability, as no one could have predicted the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the shifts to everyday life it would cause. The teams designed creative ways to keep the projects moving, especially when they involved engaging with families. For example, Urban Edge and United Way shifted to conducting the ASQ parent screener trainings online, even raffling off prizes of dinner delivery to encourage parents' participation. However, some aspects of the projects weren't easily adaptable, and the teams had to be patient and considerate of families' circumstances and safety under COVID-19. This meant that some project activities had to be delayed or paused completely. For example, the Palm Beach team had to reconsider how to recruit families for home renovation when they could not hold in-person meetings or do door-to-door recruitment, which delayed the whole process and timing of the project. However, the team decided to continue the work even after the Action Lab's conclusion. Several project teams were unable to administer (or finish administering) parent surveys, but will revisit those when both staff and families are more able to engage in those efforts. And while the partners in Alameda County would've liked to continue the book bag program for the families in their communities, they had to pause the project because of contamination concerns.

Although COVID-19 presented each team with unique and unexpected challenges, they managed to push forward in their projects and goals, gathering best practices along the way. As many projects directly involved families, the teams learned that parents will be most engaged if the teams take their lead and "meet families where they're at." While Urban Edge/United Way originally trained all the parents in the Strong Start program to be ASQ screeners, they learned that not all parents were actually interested in playing that role in their community. They shifted their program to more intentionally identifying interested parents and offering them the training. In general, the teams found it most effective to connect

Families are most engaged when they feel the program or initiative adds value to their (and their children's) lives.

with families through existing programs that serve children with young families, noting that families are most engaged when they feel the program or initiative adds value to their (and their children's) lives. In Alameda, EBALDC and First 5 Alameda County did outreach to families with young children at the Family Resource Center right on EBALDC's Lion Creek Crossing housing property.

Not only did the partnerships increase knowledge and strengthen relationships between housing and early childhood, they invigorated some teams to consider partnering with other entities and organizations in their communities, internal and external to their own sector. EBALDC and Eden Housing both described the value of having peer exchanges with one another in cohort meetings, where they were able to share resources, ideas, and strategies about supporting residents with low income. Several Action Lab participants commented on the importance of establishing these partnerships with an initial project that, even if small, could be a springboard to future collaboration.

# Recommendations



## Recommendations

**Based on the experiences of the communities** in this Action Lab, CSSP and NeighborWorks make the following recommendations for early childhood and housing and community development partners in other communities:

- 1 Make connections between early childhood and housing and community development.** Find out who your counterparts are in your community, and reach out to explore potential collaboration.
  - For early childhood advocates: Think about neighborhoods or population groups within your community that are not being reached by your current efforts – and find the partners who provide housing or community development services for those families. Do they have space you could use to provide services or outreach on-site? Do they have resident groups or newsletters to share information about services and supports that your organization can provide? Are there improvements they could make to the housing stock or neighborhood amenities that would improve the lives of young children and families?
  - For housing and community development agencies: What are the needs of families with young children among your residents? Do they need support finding services for their children in the community? Are they interested in parenting information or other supports? Are they struggling to keep their homes safe for their children or to find space for outdoor play? Ask them! Then find out who provides or coordinates early childhood or family support services in your community, and ask what it would take to bring their expertise or their services to your residents.
- 2 Educate each other about your work, your areas of expertise, and your current connections to families with young children.** Each of these fields have knowledge that can be very valuable to the other. As you learn about each other's work, opportunities for partnership may emerge. You may be able to replicate or adapt an effective approach from another location rather than starting something from scratch.
- 3 Start with smaller projects and build toward larger collaboration.** New partnerships may want to identify one or two small efforts they can take on as initial steps to help get to know each other, establish a track record, and build confidence among partners and residents about the potential for larger successes in the future. Even small projects can make a difference, and an early win can do a lot to generate momentum.
- 4 Follow parents' lead to determine the best way forward.** The best program in the world won't have any effect if it's not what the intended participants need, or if it is offered in a way that doesn't fit in with people's lives. You might do a broad survey of all parents and caregivers in a housing development to understand their needs, or you might recruit a handful of parents to be part of a focus group to give feedback on an idea, or an advisory committee to make a concrete plan. Note: If you are asking for parents to take the time to help you, be sure to compensate them in some way for their time! Providing food and child care to facilitate their participation may also be critical to your success.
- 5 Be flexible.** In this Action Lab, every project was affected by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic – as families were unable to participate in programs, and staff time was redirected to pandemic response. Each of the project teams found, and are still finding, different ways to pick up their projects again with modifications to the current environment. Adapting to a pandemic is an extreme example, but in any project, there can be unanticipated changes in priorities or resource availability, or events that require you to pause or to change course entirely. Stay grounded in meeting the needs of families with young children in the community, but recognize that strategies, timelines, and plans will sometimes need to change to meet that objective.

## Sources

“About Strengthening Families and the Protective Factors Framework.” Center for the Study of Social Policy. Available At: <https://cssp.org/resource/about-strengthening-families-and-the-protective-factors-framework/>

“Brain Architecture.” Center on the Developing Child. Available at: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/brain-architecture/>

Bronfenbrenner, U. “Toward an experimental ecology of human development.” *American Psychologist*, vol 32, issue 7, 1977, pp 513-531.

“Child Development.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment/facts.html>

“Early Learning Nation.” Center for the Study of Social Policy. Available at: <https://cssp.org/our-work/project/early-learning-nation/>

Gaitán, Veronica. “How Housing Affects Children’s Outcomes.” *Housing Matters*, The Urban Institute, 2019. Available at: <https://housingmatters.urban.org/articles/how-housing-affects-childrens-outcomes>

“Social Determinants of Health.” *HealthyPeople.gov*. Available at: <https://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/topics-objectives/topic/social-determinants-of-health>

**NeighborWorks® America**

999 North Capitol St. NE, Suite 900

Washington, DC 20002

202-760-4000

[NeighborWorks.org](http://NeighborWorks.org)



in partnership with



**Center for the  
Study of Social Policy**  
Ideas into Action