



Michael & Susan Dell
FOUNDATION



COMMUNITY-LED HEALTH

HOW TWO AUSTIN NEIGHBORHOODS DEFINED THEIR OWN GOALS

TO DRIVE LASTING CHANGE

Published July 2021

CONTENTS

REFLECTIONS	3
THANK YOU.....	6
INTRODUCTION	9
APPLYING VALUABLE INSIGHTS	13
CREATING A COMMUNITY-CENTRIC MODEL	18
IDENTIFYING AND DEVELOPING LEADERS.....	26
MEASURING SUCCESS	33
KEY WINS AND OUTCOMES	43
ENSURING SUSTAINABILITY.....	52
FINAL THOUGHTS	57
APPENDIX	60



REFLECTIONS

WHEN IT COMES TO CREATING SIGNIFICANT AND

LASTING CHANGE THROUGH PLACE-BASED HEALTH

WORK, COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP ISN'T A NICE TO

HAVE — IT'S A MUST.

That's one of the first and most important lessons we learned when we launched Go Austin/Vamos Austin (GAVA).

I remember the false start of GAVA like it was yesterday.

I was returning to the Family Resource Center near Mendez Middle School in Dove Springs, a community in Southeast Austin that served as a hub for our pre-launch discussions. I was meeting with women who played a key role during our preparatory work. They listened to our ideas, provided guidance and vision, drove us around the neighborhood so we could experience their reality, and made invaluable introductions — which by the very nature of their involvement, endorsed us as trustworthy partners. I wanted them to know how their contributions and counsel had been leveraged to create a plan for our work together.

To be sure, our team's work had been laborious and well-intentioned. We studied other place-based efforts and our own national partners to learn what worked and what didn't in community health efforts.

We pored over data, disaggregating it to try to understand neighborhood-specific needs and assets. We didn't believe that maps alone told the full story, so we walked the neighborhood. We didn't just collect names, we spoke to *people*.

When trusted with a relationship in the community, we strove to listen deeply and act with honesty — being transparent about what we could and couldn't do, and sharing that we were ready to commit to a long-standing partnership through funding and action. And then we took all our learning back to develop a plan that we felt was poised for success.

Our plan focused deeply on community leadership of the work, and we were committed to sharing data back with the teams on the ground to better hone our efforts and increase our chances of delivering impact by controlling obesity and improving the health of the community. We committed funding for staff, action, and measurement. Given that success depended on many different stakeholders, we also identified a partner organization committed to leading the work and keeping the moving parts aligned.

The only problem?

While we knew community leaders were essential to the success of the work, in order to simplify the design and funding of the initiative, we chose a single organizational lead that the foundation knew and trusted. This organization worked *in* the community, but it was not *of* the community. To the women I was speaking with, getting this giant idea across the funding finish line with our board was of little relevance if the true leadership and support of the work lay outside the community it was designed to partner with.

And, they contended, **we could forget any hope that the work would sustain after our engagement if it wasn't led by the community in the first place.**

As it was recently articulated to me, we needed to meet the community at their own table, versus inviting them to ours. The one-hour meeting we scheduled at Mendez that morning bled into two and then three as we cleared our afternoon to create a different governance structure. For me, this was the first of many lessons in humility and the way community work is managed.

GAVA has provided me with many such moments, face to face with my own misconceptions, biases, the power dynamics of philanthropy, and inequities in our communities that need to be examined and dismantled. This work is ongoing, but GAVA set me firmly on the journey. It has torn me down and built me up, but I have always been in awe of my teachers who turned GAVA into something I could never have planned or envisioned — a sustainable and successful effort which stabilized obesity rates among adults in two South Austin communities; an effort to improve the health of a community by the community.

We built new models of measurement, tousled over the reach and impact of strategies, and struggled to find the balance between self-determination and accountability. As I write this, inequities in health and life have been laid bare by the differential impact of COVID-19 among our communities. I am glad there is a GAVA in our community to contribute to the amplification of community voices, to identify relevant solutions and support their implementation, and to hold us all accountable for creating equitable access to opportunities to be healthy and prosperous.

Aliya



Aliya Esmail Hussaini, MD, MSc

Portfolio Director, Health

Michael & Susan Dell Foundation



THANK YOU

WE'RE GRATEFUL FOR THE VARIETY OF VOICES WHO
CONTRIBUTE TO GAVA'S SUCCESS, SOME OF WHOM
ARE FEATURED IN THIS REPORT.

Erica Reyes
Organizer, GAVA



Kurt Cadena-Mitchell
Policy Advisor,
Austin City Council;
Former Dove Springs
Community Programs
Coordinator, GAVA



Ivanna Neri

Partnership Director,
Family Independence
Initiative; Former
Organizer, 78745, GAVA



Alba Sereno

Innovation Catalyst,
City of Austin Office
of Innovation; Former
Community Director,
78745, GAVA



**Sandra van den Berg,
MPH, PhD**

Associate Director,
Michael & Susan Dell
Center for Healthy Living,
Professor, Health
Promotion &
Behavioral Sciences



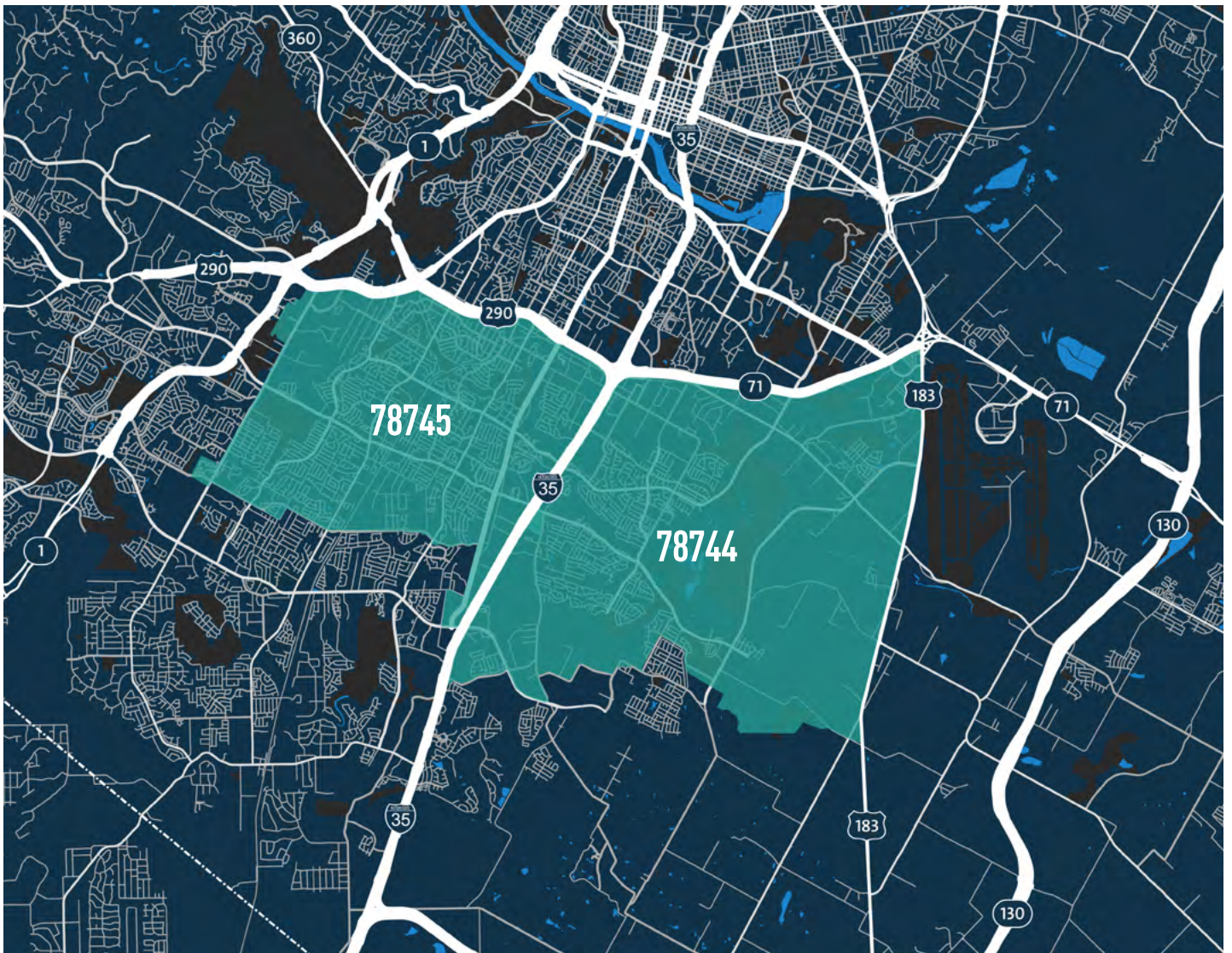
Carmen Llanes Pulido
Executive Director, GAVA



Rhonda Mundhenk,
JD, MPH
Chief Executive Officer,
Clinical Health Network
for Transformation;
Board of Directors, GAVA



THE TWO AUSTIN NEIGHBORHOODS





I THINK I WAS BORN TO HELP PEOPLE.

I was born to support people. But when I was given the opportunity to learn how to organize, I said, I don't want to just help people — I want to develop them. I want them to become leaders. I want them to know how to advocate for themselves, and I think that's the difference between just helping your community and being part of it and developing other people as you go.

Erica Reyes

Organizer, GAVA

FROM 2013 TO 2018, GAVA achieved something extraordinary.

DURING ITS INITIAL FIVE YEARS, THE COALITION-LED HEALTH INITIATIVE SUCCESSFULLY FLATTENED THE OBESITY RATES AMONG ADULTS IN TWO LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES IN AUSTIN, TEXAS (ZIP CODES 78744 AND 78745).

Perhaps surprisingly, the most significant takeaway from the initiative has less to do with specific healthy eating and physical activity interventions, and everything to do with its community-centered, resident-led approach.

Instead of bringing in outside experts to deliver an intervention or create programming, the coalition of local nonprofits and community leaders used evidence-informed strategies as a starting point for community residents to prioritize, shape, and refine based on what they thought would be most effective in their neighborhoods. GAVA also focused on fostering connections among existing and aspiring community leaders to build and leverage community leadership and, in turn, to build communities that are more supportive of health.

Instead of dividing efforts across dozens of communities nationwide, the coalition concentrated its resources into two neighboring ZIP codes.

INTRODUCTION



This way, nonprofits and community leaders could key into and address specific challenges within each neighborhood and drive meaningful change.

Evaluation efforts — determined to provide residents with the data they needed to inform their work and help untangle the complexities of a community-led intervention — were more feasible using this deep-dive approach. Because data is vital in driving forward action, real-time data collection was designed in partnership with the coalition and informed activity on the ground and advocacy with municipal agencies and institutions.

Most importantly, GAVA focused on addressing the root causes of obesity in these communities — limited access to resources like healthy foods and adequately equipped parks — and built power within neighborhoods to advocate for their right to an equitable distribution of those resources. The result was an initiative that was not only resident-adopted but also resident-led.

As you read this report, please keep in mind that GAVA is not a “secret sauce” solution, nor do we intend this resource to serve as a blueprint for reducing obesity or other health concerns plaguing underserved communities. Instead, our goal is to share our discoveries, processes, measurement methodologies, and the importance of leveraging community organizing to cultivate sustainable change.

Here is what we achieved and what we learned along the way.

APPLYING VALUABLE INSIGHTS



GEORGIAN ACRES NEIGHBORHOOD PARK WAS ONE OF MANY
THAT RESIDENTS IMPROVED

RATHER THAN LECTURING PEOPLE

ON WHY IT'S IMPORTANT TO EXERCISE

we instead identified what they were most concerned about. And every parent wants their child to be healthy and successful. So it's not a large leap to identify people who want to have a place where their children can play and recreate. That's not the hard part. The hard part is figuring out how to connect that to their everyday concerns.

Kurt Cadena-Mitchell

Policy Advisor, Austin City Council

Former Dove Springs Community Programs Coordinator, GAVA

SECTION ONE

WHAT MADE GAVA DIFFERENT? Early in the organization's inception, GAVA stakeholders acknowledged two of the many critical insights they learned through examining previous efforts and engaging with residents:

INSIGHT ONE

INTERVENTIONS THAT TARGET A POPULATION'S

HEALTH WORK BEST WHEN THEY ADDRESS

A VARIETY OF SETTINGS WITHIN A SPECIFIC

GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION.



Before GAVA, the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation invested in several innovative and effective interventions that addressed particular aspects of a child's environment and behavior.

For many reasons, large urban school districts were often the setting for core interventions, but others addressed corner stores, community-based work, large retail environments, physical activity behavior, and advocacy efforts.

However, given the complex interplay of settings and influences that contribute to obesity, we determined an overlay of these successful approaches in a specific geographic location held the greatest chance of success.



INSIGHT TWO

EVIDENCE-BASED RESEARCH DOES NOT SUPERSEDE LIVED EXPERIENCE.

By taking time to listen to residents' stories, acknowledge their needs, and offer resources to support the work community members had already begun, GAVA was able to catalyze progress that continued long after the initial pilot ended.

Instead of directing a program based solely on evidence-based solutions, stakeholders and organizers collaborated with residents to understand the real obstacles preventing them from accessing the resources needed to improve their health outcomes.

It's also important to note that some residents were understandably apprehensive of outside-funded initiatives. Community members who participated in previous efforts by other well-meaning institutions observed that funding and resources often disappeared after studies ended.

To overcome these concerns, GAVA connected to ongoing community strategy conversations early and shared initial plans with the communities before moving forward. When residents pointed out gaps in understanding or misconceptions about their circumstances and needs, the coalition remained flexible and adapted its approach. GAVA positioned itself as a partner for change rather than a dictating force, which helped foster community trust.

SECTION ONE



*Neighborhood resident
and advocate Bunmi and
son Manny at Georgian
Acres Neighborhood Park*

GAVA recognized that when you put those directly impacted by inequity in charge of the solution, support their efforts, and connect them with the resources they need, you are more likely to achieve sustainable outcomes that outlast the initiative.

Community support should not be a checkbox on a list of actions, but the center of the intervention around which all decisions are made.

CREATING A COMMUNITY- CENTRIC MODEL





THE PROBLEM IS THE SYSTEM.

You're going to eat what you have available,
and you're going to get what you think is best for
you with the money you have. It's more about the
environment around people than the people.

Ivanna Neri

Partnership Director, Family Independence Initiative
Former Organizer, 78745, GAVA

SECTION TWO

ZIP CODE 78744

- ✓ History of community cohesion
- ✓ Influential community leaders
- ✓ Advocacy muscle

ZIP CODE 78745

- ✓ Strong community clinic
- ✓ Nonprofit infrastructure
- ✓ Other essential assets

MUCH OF GAVA'S SUCCESS comes from its commitment to community organizing principles — and, more specifically, elevating community voices and connecting residents with resources and tools to drive long-term change.

BUT DEVELOPING A SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY-BASED

MODEL REQUIRES THAT YOU FIRST UNDERSTAND THE

COMMUNITIES YOU SERVE.

Every community is unique, and it's essential that the methods of organizing acknowledge those differences.

For example, Dove Springs (78744) had a long history of a cohesive community, influential community leaders, and advocacy muscle, but few community assets and infrastructure.

The 78745 community, on the other hand, was more geographically expansive with less of a track record of community cohesion and advocacy, but already had a strong community clinic, nonprofit infrastructure, and other essential assets.

Thus, the strategies for increasing equitable access to health opportunities within each neighborhood varied.

SECTION TWO



Here are the steps taken to better understand resident needs and build a community-centric approach:

STEP ONE

ASSEMBLING COMMUNITY PROFILES

The first step was to examine multiple communities in the Austin area by compiling detailed profiles. The foundation compared several pieces of data, including:

- Demographics
- Data from FitnessGram, an assessment developed by The Cooper Institute to measure students' fitness levels
- Number and location of food access sites
- Presence of green spaces like parks, playgrounds, and hiking trails

Williamson Creek Greenbelt received city resources for a wildflower meadow and public greenway improvements



SECTION TWO

Stakeholders also reviewed which schools previously performed well in coordinated school health initiatives, and Coordinated Approach to Child Health (CATCH) helped identify which schools were the strongest potential partners based on their history of implementing the coordinated school health intervention.

It was important to consider which neighborhoods were already receiving funding through other organizations and research initiatives. This helped the team identify potential partner entities and determine which communities had not received outside funding and were most likely to benefit from additional support.

STEP TWO

GROUND-TRUTHING

Next, the team visited communities to determine whether the data they collected accurately reflected each neighborhood's reality. For example, they investigated whether green spaces on maps were usable parks or merely other types of unusable, undeveloped areas, such as flood plains.

Speaking with residents helped the team learn about existing community leaders and current initiatives. They contacted city officials to learn which communities were most successful in self-advocating for assets like lighting, safety, and code compliance.



STEP THREE

PARTNERING WITH FELLOW ORGANIZATIONS

AND INITIATIVES



The third step was to identify local organizations already working toward similar goals within the 78744 and 78745 communities. The team recognized that collaborating with community-trusted institutions would boost their credibility within these neighborhoods, enhance sustainability by connecting to and aligning with ongoing work, and strengthen the organizations' collective efforts by pooling resources.

GAVA then evolved into a partnership of various organizations, including Foundation Communities, El Buen Samaritano, Marathon Kids, Austin Interfaith, Austin Parks Foundation, the University of Texas School of Public Health, the Sustainable Food Center, and more.

And while aligning multiple groups with different methods, strategies, and messages wasn't always easy, gathering various perspectives was essential to identifying opportunities within each community.



STEP FOUR

DEVELOPING A MICRO-ORGANIZING PLAN

Additional playground equipment was installed in Georgian Acres Neighborhood Park to encourage physical activity

From early in GAVA's existence, the initiative rooted its efforts in one critical foundational principle (which remains a core value today): the right to self-determination. For any initiative to succeed long-term, residents must be the ones to set the priorities and lead the charge. A prescriptive approach directed solely by outside entities is unlikely to be fully accepted and adopted by the community.



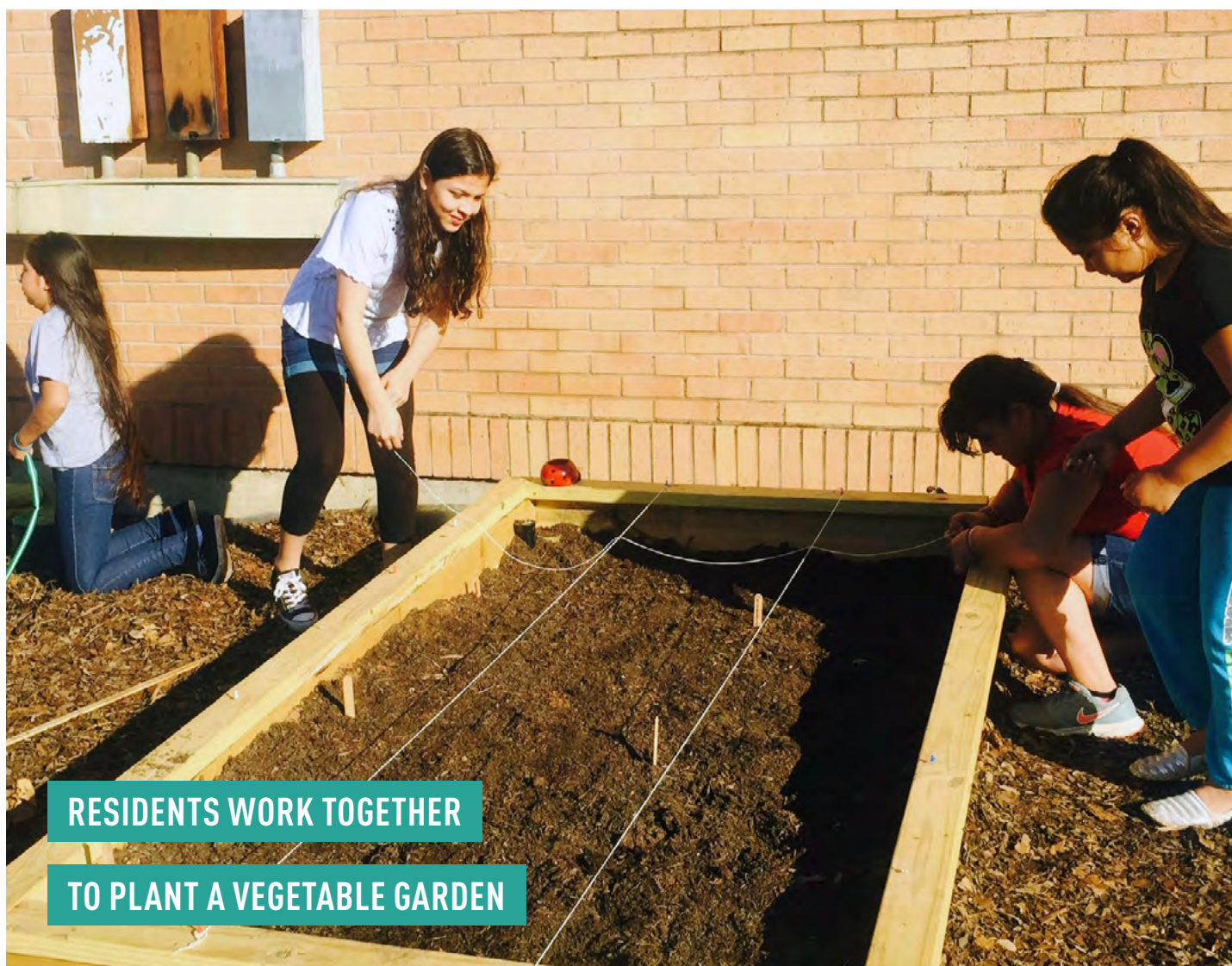
SECTION TWO

A significant part of realizing self-determination came from micro-organizing. Because people are more likely to care most about the issues that affect their geographic area, it's more effective to create small purpose-built teams based on a specific neighborhood or shared belief in a cause.

- **Issue-based teams:** These are teams formed around a shared concern, such as expanding the range of fresh fruits and vegetables available in corner stores or increasing physical activity offerings for children.
- **Geographic-based teams:** These teams form because they share common spaces. These groups may work together on projects like appealing to the city to install adequate lighting within a park or add speed bumps near a playground.

The job of the GAVA team was to “stand in the gap” and help coach teams, advise on action plans, and connect them with the funds and resources they needed to achieve their goals.

IDENTIFYING AND DEVELOPING LEADERS



RESIDENTS WORK TOGETHER

TO PLANT A VEGETABLE GARDEN



MY APPROACH WAS NOT TO ASSUME

people were without innate power, not already connected, or didn't have the tools and capacities within. Instead, I focused on strengthening what was already happening or connecting people who weren't already connected.

Alba Sereno

Innovation Catalyst, City of Austin Office of Innovation
Former Community Director, 78745, GAVA

SECTION THREE



IN COMMUNITY ORGANIZING, it's essential to include leaders at every level.

Fortunately, both ZIP codes addressed in the initial GAVA pilot were home to community leaders who were already actively seeking ways to improve residents' quality of life.

TO ENSURE THE PROGRAM'S SUCCESS, THE GAVA

TEAM IDENTIFIED THESE EXISTING COMMUNITY

LEADERS, SUCH AS THOSE WHO NATURALLY ROSE TO

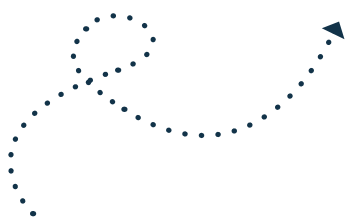
LEADERSHIP ROLES WITHIN EACH NEIGHBORHOOD.

Stakeholders also sought aspiring leaders and residents who were passionate about various causes, but not necessarily comfortable taking on leadership positions.

Houston Elementary received funding for improvements including building a soccer field and track for school and public access



SECTION THREE



*Carmen Llanes Pulido
talks with neighborhood
resident Bunmi*

Here are a few strategies GAVA stakeholders employed to find existing and aspiring leaders:

MEET PEOPLE

WHERE THEY SPEND TIME

Organizers were encouraged to ride local public transit lines and have conversations in parking lots, driveways, or apartment complex common areas. By making an effort to be present, it became easier to get to know residents and earn their trust.



HONE IN ON

EXISTING INITIATIVES

Organizers took the time to identify the projects residents were already working on, and focus areas they were addressing. For example, some residents were actively leading efforts to slow traffic in common play areas.

FIND OUT

WHAT PEOPLE ARE PASSIONATE ABOUT

Through ongoing conversations, GAVA stakeholders discovered what residents cared about most. Then, they connected them with fellow residents who shared those same passions and were interested in working on projects like, for example, setting up a community farm stand. In this way, GAVA acted as a conduit for community-building relationships.

DEVELOP LEADERS

AND THOSE INTERESTED IN BECOMING LEADERS

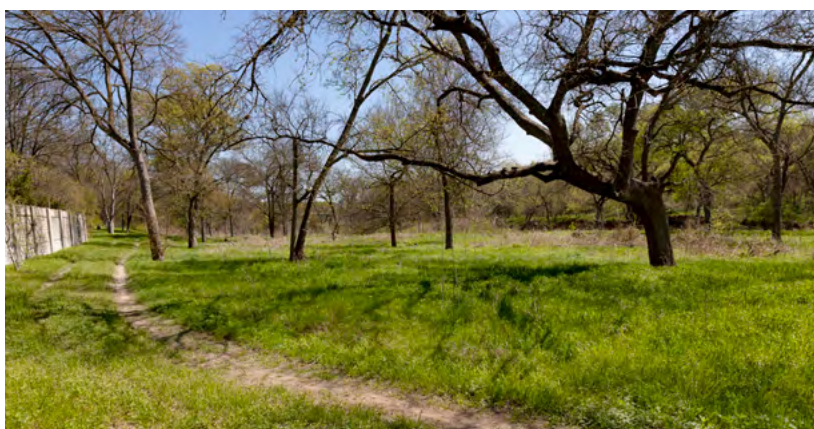
GAVA organizers offered training sessions and ensured everyone interested in leading found an opportunity to spearhead an initiative or event.

SECTION THREE

*Walking trail at the
Williamson Creek Greenbelt*



By nurturing leaders and connecting them with other like-minded community advocates, the organization ensured a steady flow of organizers to keep initiatives going — even after previous leaders left the neighborhood or moved on to other efforts.



Here is one example of a path to ascending levels of leadership, including a few activities residents took on to grow their experience:

LEVEL ONE

ATTENDING HOUSE MEETINGS

The first step for aspiring leaders and organizers is to attend meetings hosted by their neighbors. These meetings often center around one specific issue and allow potential organizers to hear the sorts of conversations happening within their community and add their voice.

LEVEL TWO

BRINGING PEOPLE TO HOUSE MEETINGS

The second step is for new organizers to seek out neighbors who share their passions around specific issues or are interested in driving change within the community. By having conversations with neighbors and inviting them to meetings, they begin to network and earn recognition.

LEVEL THREE

LEADING HOUSE MEETINGS

The third step is for aspiring leaders to organize and direct a meeting. This includes activities like hosting, preparing an agenda, and speaking in front of the group. Often, organizers will lead multiple sessions, which can act as practice for speaking in front of larger audiences.

LEVEL FOUR

SHARING EXPERIENCES

Next, leaders are encouraged to share their stories with city leadership. This may mean providing testimonials about their experiences within the neighborhood or sharing insights gleaned from activities like block walking.

For example, one resident leader attended a meeting with the Parks and Recreation Department and Austin Parks Foundation and shared photos of two parks — one in a high-income neighborhood with well-maintained grounds and facilities, and one in her community that lacked critical elements like adequate lighting — to illustrate the inequity in asset distribution within Austin.



MEASURING SUCCESS



COMMUNITY SPACES AT HOUSTON SCHOOL PARK



OFTEN, WHEN RESEARCHERS DO A STUDY

they don't necessarily do all the upfront work to develop and establish trust between the community and those coming from the outside. And if that trust is not there, it's difficult to really do anything worthwhile. With GAVA, we were there long enough to develop that trust. It takes time to develop relationships.

Sandra van den Berg, MPH, PhD

Associate Director, Michael & Susan Dell Center for Healthy Living
Professor, Health Promotion & Behavioral Sciences



FROM EARLY IN GAVA'S INCEPTION, it was critical to make ongoing evaluation results transparent and available to stakeholders and residents to help inform implementation and future efforts.

TO ENSURE A STEADY FLOW OF ACTIONABLE DATA,

IT WAS ESSENTIAL THE IMPACT AND PROCESS

EVALUATION WASN'T A ONE-TIME EXERCISE AT

THE END OF THE INTERVENTION, BUT AN

ONGOING ACTIVITY.

PROCESS EVALUATION

To guide implementation of GAVA's efforts and ensure the intervention was as powerful as possible, it was necessary to first evaluate the process along the way. Thus, the initiative invested in training implementation and evaluation personnel on a data system to track ongoing efforts and progress.

Plans were based on a list of evidence-based and evidence-informed strategies curated for each site type (such as schools, early childhood centers, parks and greenspace, food retail outlets, and more).

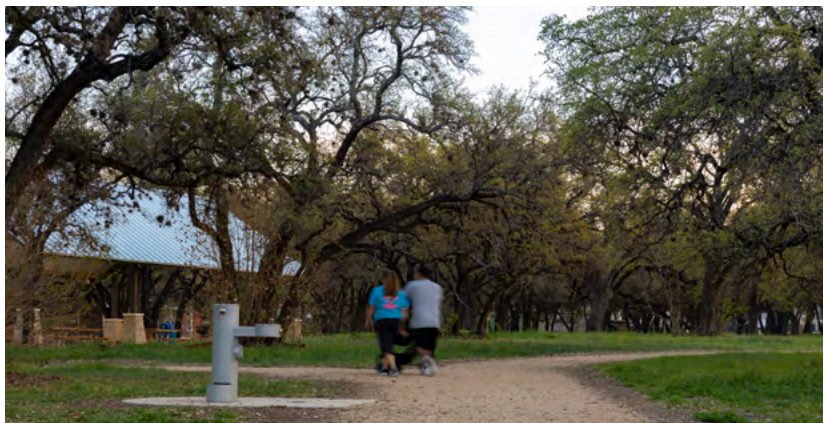
SECTION FOUR

GAVA residents now have access to improved physical activity spaces throughout their neighborhoods

Contact information for all participating GAVA residents and resident membership across various implementation teams was managed, and activity data such as key wins and action plans was cataloged. “Key wins” refers to accomplishments in sustainability, access, and utilization that contribute to the overall objective of the work. At the beginning of each year, or whenever a new team formed, site-based teams prepared site plans and updated them quarterly.

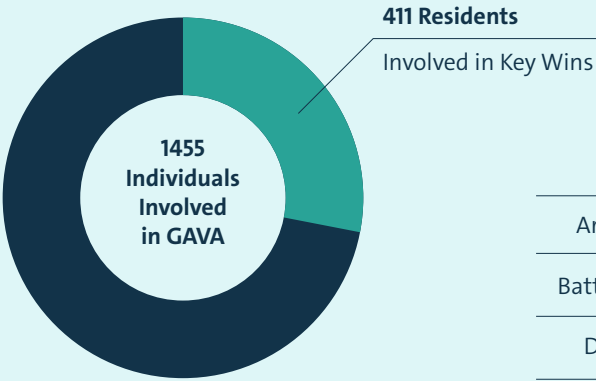
The community directors managed dashboards for each micro-neighborhood (areas where smaller geographic-based teams worked together on projects affecting their specific area) to track teams’ implementation strategies, impact score, intervention category, outcome category, number of active individuals, and key wins.

Visual dashboards enabled deep-dive discussions on community data, which community directors took back to their sector leadership meetings to prioritize action.



SECTION FOUR

Strategy	Site	Potential Reach	Potential Impact
Activate community green spaces, local parks, playgrounds, and recreation facilities	FC Trails at the Park Campus	●	●
Increase access to healthier food and beverage options in existing neighborhood stores	Lucky Food 1	●	●



- List of Sites**
- Armadillo Park
 - Battle Bend Park
 - Dittmark Park



Examples of views available in the dashboard

Dashboard views also allowed the community director and GAVA implementation teams to monitor multi-component interventions with clarity and visualize gaps in geographic coverage, which assisted with organizing and recruitment.

Map visualizations helped those on the ground identify barriers residents found in particular sites (such as a lack of adequate lighting in greenspaces or a lack of high quality healthy foods at nearby corner stores), what sorts of access improvements were needed, and where utilization of healthy access had increased.

SECTION FOUR



For example, residents near one corner store reported low availability of healthy fruits and vegetables while residents near another corner store reported availability of fruits and vegetables, but noted they were of poor quality or too costly. Although the two corner stores were close in proximity, they required different implementation plans.

*GAVA neighborhood residents
at a local farm stand*



Street-level views helped support the micro-neighborhood focus and provided the standard structure that makes place-based initiatives replicable.



IMPACT EVALUATION

UTHealth School of Public Health in Austin conducted an independent impact evaluation. Like the GAVA initiative as a whole, the evaluation was designed to be comprehensive, flexible, and to accommodate changes on-the-ground while still following the structure of the implementation. This evaluation plan consisted of several sub-studies and used mixed methodologies.

THE EVALUATION PLAYED AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN

THE HISTORY OF THE PROJECT, AS THE RESULTS

SHOWCASED THAT THIS COALITION-LED HEALTH

INITIATIVE SUCCESSFULLY FLATTENED ADULT

OBESITY RATES IN 78744 AND 78745.

In the five-year longitudinal cohort sub-study, the research team followed 150 families living in the GAVA community and 150 families living in socioeconomically similar communities outside the GAVA community. They reported respondents' behaviors, awareness, attitudes, and perceptions of the physical activity and healthy eating opportunities provided in their community, and physical activity and dietary behaviors.

SECTION FOUR



Additionally, the team tracked body mass index (BMI) data from study participants over the five-year period. Data comparing intervention families to control families helped stakeholders and residents determine the overall impact of GAVA on child and parent outcomes.

The study was also supplemented with a cross-sectional door-to-door (D2D) survey of approximately 300 people living in GAVA communities each year.

Participants from these surveys self-reported many of the same behaviors, awareness, attitudes, and perceptions as cohort participants, but this was limited to adult data. The team also obtained and geocoded cohort and D2D participants' addresses to examine place-based intervention effects.

Additionally, evaluation teams conducted annual interviews with school principals, key stakeholders such as leaders of nonprofits and city-based organizations, and community residents.

Through these interviews, the teams observed both community readiness and assets — measuring readiness to engage in activities that could change the community and identifying changes in the quality of assets over the evaluation period.

SECTION FOUR



Improvements to Kendra Page Park included more playground equipment, volleyball nets, and fresh drinking water

Cohort and D2D survey data was compiled each year and summarized for implementation teams to monitor progress and inform redirection of resources to areas of high need or low impact.

It helped determine specific actions that would strengthen implementation and address access and quality gaps in healthy food and physical activity, and also served as a tool for GAVA leaders in pursuing funding and engaging in advocacy.

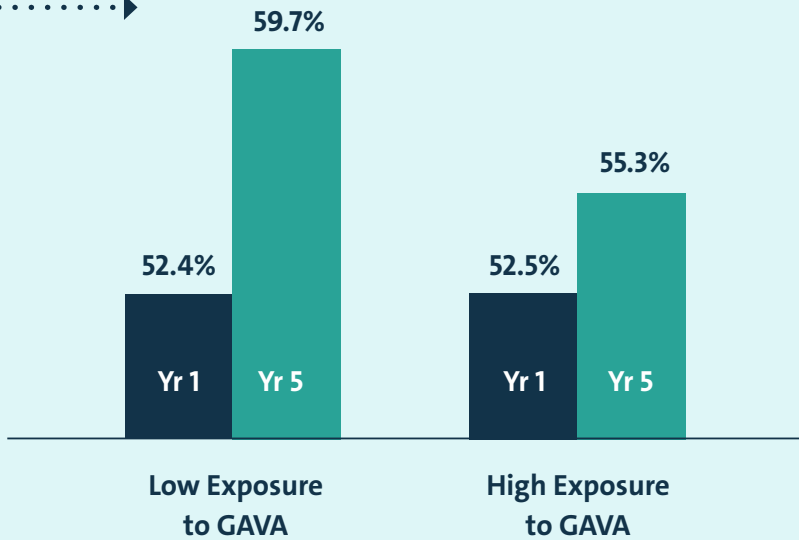
BMI was objectively obtained (measured height and weight) in the cohort.

SECTION FOUR

CHANGE IN % OBESE

Among low exposure and high exposure parents over the five-year intervention.

While the increase in obesity in the low exposure group was statistically significant, the increase in the high exposure group was not, indicating no meaningful increase.



AND OTHER

IMPROVEMENTS

88% ▲

increase in moderate physical activity

22% ▼

decrease in reporting of community physical activity assets as being difficult to access or of poor quality

59% ▲

increase in reporting use of retail outlets to buy fresh fruits and vegetables

68% ▲

increase in reporting use of corner and smaller stores to buy fruits and vegetables

12% ▲

increase in those eating one cup or more of vegetables daily

KEY WINS AND OUTCOMES



WILLIAMSON CREEK GREENBELT WAS BEAUTIFIED

TO ENCOURAGE OUTDOOR ACTIVITY



WE ALL HAD AN OPPORTUNITY

TO VOICE OUR THOUGHTS.

We went in front of the city council three or four times. For a community member, that's a wonderful, uplifting, empowering moment — even if the result didn't happen the way we wanted. Because we knew we're a force here, we have opinions, and we care about what's going on in our neighborhoods.

Amy Lloyd

Managing Director, Ten Thousand Villages

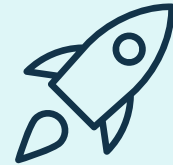
Retired Austin ISD Principal, President and Board of Directors, GAVA

SECTION FIVE

IN ADDITION TO THE RESULTS SHARED in the impact evaluation, residents' work during these five years led to many other key wins, including these below.



**FUNDING
AND GRANTS**



**POLICY
PROGRESS**



**RESIDENT
LEADERSHIP
BUILDING**



**NETWORKS AND
ORGANIZATIONS**



**INFRASTRUCTURE
IMPROVEMENTS**



**SAFETY
IMPROVEMENTS**



TRAINING



OUTREACH



KEY WINS ONE AND TWO

FUNDING, GRANTS, AND POLICY PROGRESS

Communities won grant awards and leveraged hundreds of thousands of dollars in funding towards lighting, school and district-wide nutrition efforts, and other improvements their residents needed most.

- Advocates successfully increased the Austin Parks and Recreation departmental budget by \$115,000 to improve lighting in parks.
- Woodway Village apartment complex installed a playground shade cover so children could get outdoor physical activity and learning during the hottest months.
- Houston Elementary received \$90,000 for their soccer field, \$100,000 for a pavilion, and \$190,000 to reconstruct a track for school and public access.
- Austin ISD leveraged a \$50,000 grant for nutrition education; six schools and early childhood centers leveraged smaller grants for on-site gardens.
- Residents spoke with city council members and testified during budget hearings to voice support for healthy food access, successfully securing \$100,000 into the general city budget. The resulting “Fresh for Less” program funded GAVA partners to increase healthy food options at community farm stands, corner stores, and mobile markets in GAVA neighborhoods.





KEY WIN THREE

RESIDENT LEADERSHIP BUILDING

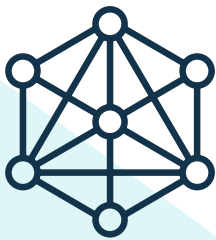
- Residents adopted eight city-owned parks and stewarded four stretches of greenbelt along Williamson Creek, including the first-ever participation in the Adopt-A-Park program by school park leaders. This activation paved the way for a new group of resident leaders to access tools to make change for their own parks, advocate for improved funding and maintenance, host hundreds of community work days, and leverage grants and in-kind support.
- GAVA supported the formation of a resident team at Foundation Communities' Sierra Ridge and Sierra Vista apartments. "La Voz de San Elmo" successfully advocated for improved pedestrian crossings between apartments and the Learning Center, playground amenities, the first resident-run produce stand supported by Sustainable Food Center, and the FarmShare Austin local teaching farm.

GAVA residents worked to bring healthier food options that were easily accessible into their communities



SECTION FIVE

- GAVA built support and mentorship networks within family child care providers across neighborhoods and various settings including Child, Inc. and HeadStart centers, home-based and family-based providers, and pre-K educators — expanding access to bilingual tools and curricula, information, accreditation resources, and meal programs. Centers and informal care providers received awards to purchase refrigerators for fresh snacks and meals, outdoor learning kits, and gardening support. This support introduced new funding streams to home-based providers and networks, and gained several early educators local and statewide recognition, promoting best practices in early care and education.



KEY WIN FOUR

NETWORKS AND ORGANIZATIONS

- GAVA helped several institutions strengthen their internal efforts. This included supporting an internal leadership team within the Austin ISD to align their efforts in physical and health education, food services, nursing, family engagement, and social and emotional learning.
- GAVA introduced new partnerships with numerous organizations including Brighter Bites, FarmShare, and Urban Roots.

SECTION FIVE



.....↑
GAVA residents now have access to more physical activity amenities closer to their homes



KEY WINS FIVE AND SIX

INFRASTRUCTURE AND SAFETY IMPROVEMENTS

Community members leveraged millions of dollars of infrastructural improvements by advocating and walking their neighborhoods with representatives from Austin's various departments including transportation, public works, and parks and recreation.

- A playground, sidewalks, play courts, and picnic areas were built in the previously undeveloped Ponciana Park.
- Fitness equipment was added to Joslin Park and five other parks.

SECTION FIVE



- Trail entrances were beautified with signage and seating areas and a wildflower meadow at three entrances to the Williamson Creek greenbelt.
- Odom School Park gained a shade structure, picnic tables, an all-abilities swing set, and permanent soccer goals.
- Kendra Page Park received new ADA-compliant play equipment for all abilities and ages.
- New sidewalks, pedestrian lanes, and cleaned-up walkways opened up connectivity and walking opportunities in 10 neighborhoods across south and southeast Austin.
- Residents formed “Comunidad en Acción” or “Community in Action” and implemented the hiring of two crossing guards for their neighborhood school.
- New lighting in 10 parks made recreation accessible during evening park hours, dropping crime rates as much as 30%.



KEY WIN SEVEN

TRAINING

- Countless residents participated in team building with neighbors and learned to speak in public settings like testimonials for board, committee, and city council meetings, leading meetings with decision makers, and co-facilitating school and neighborhood meetings.

SECTION FIVE

- Park adopters learned to coordinate volunteer clean-ups, tree care, and beautification events that brought hundreds of neighbors together and increased activity in neighborhood green spaces.
- Childcare centers and AISD pre-K teachers were trained to incorporate brain building, early literacy activities, and the Coordinated Approach to Child Health-Early Childhood (CATCH-EC) into their curriculum.
- Principals and health educators from 5-10 area campuses gathered annually to share best practices and build support networks. As a result, GAVA played a leadership role in breakfast in the classroom, salad bars, and farm-to-school produce procurement scaling across GAVA schools and eventually across the district.

KEY WIN EIGHT

OUTREACH

- Residents block-walked, conducted community surveys, and knocked on hundreds of doors for efforts including Dove Springs' first resident-operated farm stand. Though the farm stand was open from 10:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m. on its first Saturday, all produce sold out in the first hour.
- Annual coalition meetings drew hundreds of school staff, parents, neighborhood leaders, church members, and partners together for celebration and workshops that strengthened community networks and advanced countless projects.



ENSURING SUSTAINABILITY



NEIGHBORHOOD RESIDENTS PLAY BASKETBALL

AT GEORGIAN ACRES NEIGHBORHOOD PARK



WHEN I LOOK BACK AT WHAT WE'VE DONE,

even if you were just to isolate every physical activity and nutrition-related activity of GAVA, you would still have a network of people who engaged to change things in their community. That inherently broadens and deepens the investment in that community, and it gives people more motivation to stay. So the methodology that's been applied to address those health issues can, in theory, be applied to addressing other issues, like gentrification and displacement.

Carmen Llanes Pulido

Executive Director, GAVA

SECTION SIX



TWO YEARS AFTER THE INITIAL FIVE-YEAR PILOT ENDED, GAVA is a 501(c)3 nonprofit and has grown into a coalition tackling many different issues throughout the Austin community.

GAVA's continued success can be primarily attributed to three foundational principles established from the program's inception (and which the organization continues to expand upon today):

PRINCIPLE ONE

FOCUS ON ENGAGING WITH AND BUILDING UP

COMMUNITY LEADERS, RATHER THAN ADOPTING

A DIRECTIVE, TOP-DOWN APPROACH.

*Residents learned more
about how they advocate
for their own communities*



PRINCIPLE TWO

**CREATE A RESIDENT-LED INITIATIVE ROOTED IN
COMMUNITY ORGANIZING STRATEGIES.**

*GAVA organizers held
neighborhood events to
engage with residents*



PRINCIPLE THREE

**ACKNOWLEDGE AND ADDRESS THE REAL PROBLEMS
PEOPLE FACE RATHER THAN BASING STRATEGIES ON
BROAD ASSUMPTIONS.**

SECTION SIX



By aiming for equity, communities can continue to improve health outcomes for children and adults alike.

While the goals and methods of GAVA were important to begin with, **the COVID-19 pandemic served to underscore critical inequities in access to healthy opportunities, rates of chronic disease, and baseline health that can set the stage for outcomes when facing a health shock.**

The disproportionate impact on underserved communities and communities of color further reinforced the importance of entities like GAVA. These entities increase the visibility of how social drivers of health affect opportunities to be healthy and identify community-driven solutions. Building this understanding can help ensure support is allocated to the communities that need it most in a way that serves them best.

FINAL THOUGHTS



GAVA RESIDENTS SPENT TIME IN THEIR COMMUNITIES

ADVOCATING FOR NEIGHBORHOOD SAFETY



THERE'S A REASON WHY THE WORLD

AROUND YOU LOOKS THE WAY THAT IT DOES.

Policy is not random, and it's not inevitable — there is a reason. Once you understand what policies have created the world in which you live, you can begin to imagine how that world might look different. Because you now know what tools and what levers you need to change that world.

Rhonda Mundhenk, JD, MPH

Chief Executive Officer, Clinical Health Network for Transformation;
Board of Directors, GAVA

CONCLUSION



**THE GAVA INITIATIVE DEMONSTRATED THAT
PLACE-BASED INTERVENTIONS CAN BRING ABOUT
IMPROVEMENTS AS LONG AS THEY EXPERIENCE A
SIGNIFICANT DOSE OF EXPOSURE.**

Moreover, it proved that health interventions are most successful when residents' voices inform strategies, and efforts are community led.

By rooting all work in community organizing principles, evolving community leadership through resources, and supporting resident efforts with funding and connections, GAVA stabilized obesity rates and set a new precedent for addressing health outcomes in underserved neighborhoods.

And while community needs and access levels vary, adopting a resident-informed approach can help to more successfully address inequities and promote a better distribution of resources no matter where interventions happen.

PUBLISHED PAPERS

Design and evaluation of a coalition-led obesity initiative to promote healthy eating and physical activity in low income, ethnically diverse communities: the Go Austin/Vamos Austin initiative. Archives of Public Health, May 2019.

Characterizing micro-scale disparities in childhood obesity: examining the influence of multilevel factors on 4-Year changes in BMI, healthy eating, and physical activity, among a cohort of children residing in disadvantaged urban enclaves. Frontiers Public Health, October 2019.

Factors associated with use of recreational facilities and physical activity among low-income, Latino adults. Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health, June 2020.

Outcomes of a community-wide obesity intervention in a low-income, primarily Hispanic community: the Go Austin/Vamos Austin (GAVA) initiative. Health Promotion Practice, October 2020.

