Final evaluation of Building Healthier, More Equitable Communities: Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document provides a high-level summary of the evaluation of the Building Healthier, More Equitable Communities (BHEC) initiative—a multi-year effort supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and led by Reinvestment Fund, a Philadelphia-based Community Development Financial Institution. BHEC's goal was to build more resilient and healthier communities by improving the social, economic, and environmental conditions that enable all residents, especially low-income residents and residents of color, to achieve their best possible well-being. The theory was that BHEC initiative interventions would lead to:

- **outcomes in each of the four selected cities,** including leveraging resources, advancing built-environment projects and programs with equitable outcomes, and enhancing community capacity to implement shared priorities; and
- **outcomes in the state of New Jersey,** including increasing state-level actors' engagement and understanding of BHEC site work; broadening awareness of statewide system challenges related to community development; aligning state, philanthropic, local, and private resources to address community priorities; changing state policies, practices, and programs to address identified challenges; and disseminating learning to better position other New Jersey cities to benefit from improved resource alignment and statewide system changes related to equitable development.

This executive summary highlights the BHEC interventions, their impacts, and the factors influencing these outcomes.

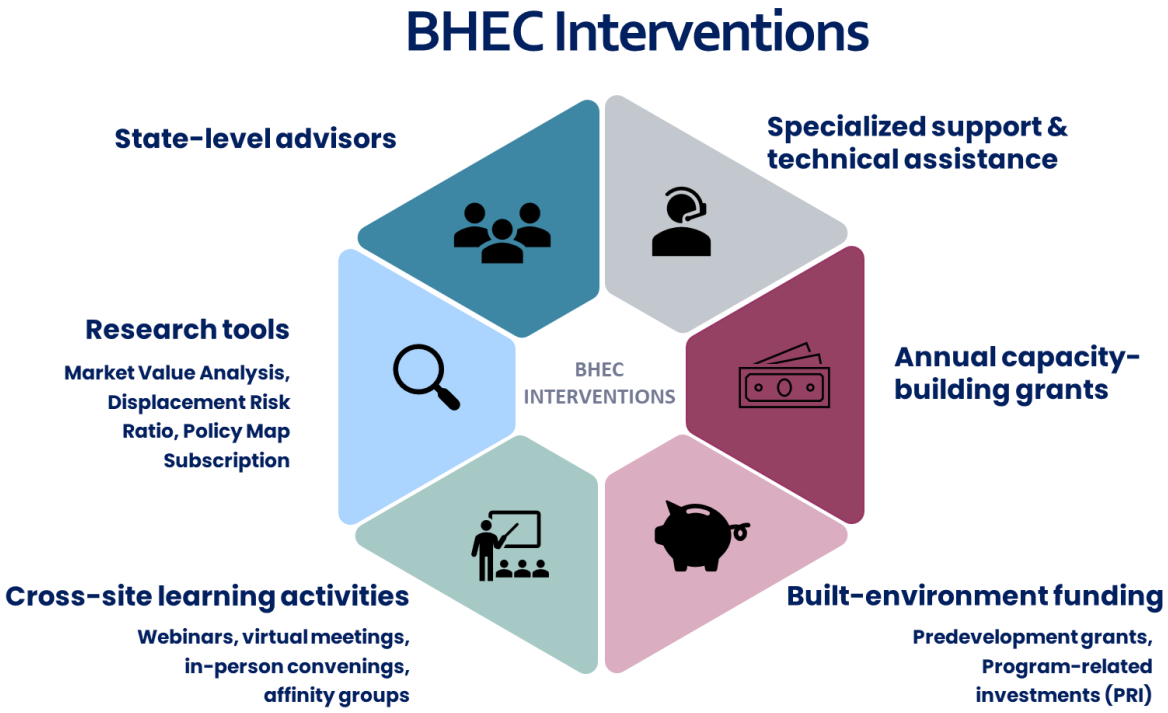
What was BHEC all about?

In 2016, RWJF, in partnership with Reinvestment Fund, launched Invest Health, a national initiative to improve health equity outcomes in 50 small and midsize cities. Recognizing the potential for achieving site-specific outcomes *and* statewide outcomes by focusing on a single state, RWJF piloted a similar initiative in its home state of New Jersey, leading to the creation of BHEC. Once again, RWJF partnered with Reinvestment Fund to manage the initiative. The core idea behind BHEC was that focusing on the built environment and strengthening local and statewide systems would lead to healthier, more equitable communities.

BHEC kicked off with a planning phase in 2019, during which Reinvestment Fund and RWJF assessed the landscape in New Jersey and engaged with more than 150 local leaders. They identified ten cities that appeared ready to address these challenges. In early 2020, they invited these cities to apply, asking them to form cross-sector teams to drive positive change over three years. Ultimately, they selected four cities—**Asbury Park, Camden, Newark, and Paterson**—to participate. The initiative officially started at the end of 2020. Although initially envisioned as a three-year effort, RWJF extended BHEC by an additional year due to the challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The initiative concluded in December 2024.

What support did Reinvestment Fund provide?

The BHEC initiative provided several types of support to the four participating cities:



- **Specialized support and technical assistance:** Reinvestment Fund assigned a dedicated city team liaison to work part-time with each team, providing guidance and support. Reinvestment Fund staff also conducted periodic check-in calls with the teams.

- **Annual capacity-building grants:** Each team received $400,000 over four years ($100,000 per year) to support its work. Teams primarily used the funds to hire local BHEC coordinators and for other purposes such as hiring consultants, conducting outreach, and, in some cases, compensating key team members.

- **Built-environment funding:** BHEC teams were eligible to apply for two forms of financial support for their built-environment projects. These included:

- *Predevelopment grants:* Reinvestment Fund initially offered these funds as loans but later converted them to grants. Each site received $180,000 to support the initial planning and feasibility work for projects related to housing, healthcare, education, food systems, and other community facilities.

- *Program-related Investments (PRI):* Prior to BHEC, RWJF had provided Reinvestment Fund with a $10 million PRI to support New Jersey communities. These funds were committed to a range of projects to expand healthy food retail options. As loans were repaid, the hope was that BHEC projects would be good candidates for these recycled funds, which could help leverage further investment.

- **Cross-site learning activities:** BHEC facilitated numerous opportunities for the teams to learn from each other and experts in the field. This included webinars, virtual meetings, and four in-person gatherings hosted by each participating city. These events focused on topics such as structural racism and inequality, the racial wealth gap, trauma-informed community development, case making, catalytic housing and mixed-use development, data tools for measuring equity, federal tax credit programs, among others. Reinvestment Fund also facilitated informal "affinity groups" for BHEC participants working on shared focus areas like food systems.

- **Research tools:** The Policy Solutions team at Reinvestment Fund provided each site with a Market Value Analysis to guide community revitalization efforts and manage neighborhood change. The Policy Solutions team also assessed residential displacement pressure in the four cities using the Displacement Risk Ratio. Additionally, Reinvestment Fund offered city teams free access to PolicyMap, an online platform for exploring and analyzing data.

- **State-level advisors:** A group of about a dozen leaders from state government, research institutions, and nonprofits engaged in an advisory capacity, meeting regularly and connecting with the city teams.

What approach did each site take?

ASBURY PARK	The Asbury Park BHEC team focused on transforming the West Side neighborhood into a healthier, more sustainable community. Its vision emphasized preventing displacement while enhancing connectivity and improving quality of life. To actualize this, the team has advanced various built-environment projects, including mixed-use developments that feature affordable housing, an early childhood education center, and urban farming and community programming spaces in the neighborhood. Additionally, the team is cultivating transformative partnerships and pursuing efforts to strengthen local food systems.
CAMDEN	The Camden BHEC team's efforts centered on revitalizing the Parkside neighborhood through projects and activities that provide affordable housing, economic opportunities, and access to healthy food for residents. Its work focused on promoting housing stability and wealth-building for residents by developing quality affordable homes, revitalizing the commercial corridor along Haddon Avenue to benefit local entrepreneurs, and establishing a sustainable local food system.
NEWARK	The Newark BHEC team envisioned reshaping community development in the Fairmount neighborhood by integrating a health equity lens into local projects, programs, and collaborations. Its efforts focused on holistically addressing residents' needs by developing much-needed affordable housing and intentionally combining uses within built-environment projects that enhance resident health, alongside new or expanded programs to increase community access to healthy foods.
PATERSON	The Paterson BHEC team had a long-term vision to create a holistic model that combined built-environment improvements, such as affordable housing rentals, with supportive programming designed to help individuals break the cycle of poverty. The team intended to empower individuals and families living in poverty, particularly single mothers, to achieve housing self-sufficiency, defined as the ability to choose where, with whom, and how they live. Its primary BHEC-supported project centered on developing affordable housing paired with on-site childcare.

What was achieved at the local level?

The BHEC initiative led to significant progress in the four participating cities across several areas:

Progress on built-environment projects

For this evaluation, the focus was on identifying the development activities in each city that were influenced in some way by team members' participation in BHEC. The BHEC teams advanced **19 built-environment projects** designed to improve the physical environment in ways that promote health equity. These projects included **affordable housing, mixed-use developments, and commercial, retail, and community spaces**. Of these, five[1] have been completed, six are currently under construction or nearing completion, and the remaining eight are in the predevelopment or planning phase. BHEC influenced projects in different ways. While many of these projects were already in the works, there is evidence that in 11 projects, BHEC provided crucial resources that enhanced their feasibility or accelerated the development process. In six projects, the engagement in BHEC prompted developers to incorporate a stronger focus on health equity. For example, in one city, BHEC shaped the team's reorganization of its neighborhood plan around social determinants of health, which reframed how the team approached space use and project design across its pipeline. Three projects were directly conceived through BHEC**:** an affordable housing project in Camden (Walnut Street and Haddon and Princess avenues); a mixed-use development project in Paterson combining supportive, affordable housing for women and children with a training center for home-based daycare providers (the "Moms and Kids" project), and a Healthy Lifestyle Center in Newark.

Overall, BHEC helped generate over **$103 million in investments in built-environment projects**, including $4.68 million in direct BHEC funding and over $98 million leveraged from private, public, and philanthropic sources. This is a significant degree of leverage—for every $1 million invested, there was a nearly 20-fold increase in investment from other sources. Direct BHEC funding includes $720,000 in BHEC predevelopment and technical assistance funds and $3.96 million PRI. Beyond these figures, the Reinvestment Fund made an additional $6 million in PRI investments in BHEC-aligned projects within New Jersey, addressing the neighborhood conditions that impact health equity.

[1] Includes completion rates for multiphase projects, where one phase of the project was completed at the time of report publication, while the next phase is in construction or predevelopment.

Progress on advancing healthy and equitable food systems

While food access was not a central focus for most teams at the outset of the initiative, it emerged as a key area of work over time. The initiative was critical in helping **different organizations involved in food access connect and coordinate** their efforts to build a more integrated food system. In

Asbury Park, BHEC helped launch the Community Food Connection, the first county-wide food and farm coalition. In Camden, BHEC facilitated the Roots to Prevention merger with Pinelands Preservation Alliance, helping local growers sell produce directly to hospitals, food pantries, and small businesses. BHEC also supported efforts to **train residents to grow their own food,** expanded market connections, and played a key role in **improving food affordability by making farmers' markets more accessible.** These efforts included ensuring that markets accept SNAP and WIC benefits and could leverage the New Jersey Good Food Bucks Program to double the value of SNAP dollars. BHEC also helped participating organizations **secure funding** to expand and sustain food access efforts. Moreover, BHEC **elevated healthy food access as a priority** for a range of organizations, including Eva's Village in Paterson and the Jewish Family and Children's Service and Boys & Girls Club in Monmouth County.

Progress in strengthening local community development systems

Beyond deliberate strategies teams pursued in built-environment projects and healthy food access, BHEC significantly strengthened local community development systems in the four cities. The initiative built *system* capacity and strengthened *organizational* commitment to health equity in community development.

In terms of building system capacity, in each of the cities BHEC **fostered greater collaboration and alignment** among community development initiatives by breaking down silos and supporting new

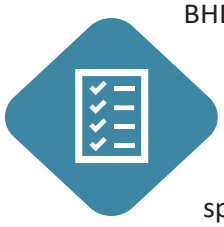
partnerships. BHEC interventions also **increased the organizational capacity** of several of the participating groups, which, in some cases, enabled them to secure significant additional funding. This combination of increased organizational capacity and new strategic connections **enhanced the ability of some organizations to attract additional resources, broaden their impact, and advance their community development work**. While limited, BHEC also **supported local policy change**, notably the passage of a new ordinance in Asbury Park to allow for the creation of accessory dwelling units to expand affordable housing options, and a streamlined tax lien sales process in Camden.

In terms of strengthening organizational commitment to health equity in community development, participation in BHEC contributed to a **renewed focus on engaging historically marginalized residents** in development projects and programs in some of the cities. It also led a few of the organizations engaged in BHEC to **embed social determinants of health considerations into their projects, programs, and internal practices** and **to integrate supportive wraparound services for vulnerable populations**, recognizing that addressing needs and advancing equity requires more than providing housing.

What was achieved at the state level?

A key goal of BHEC was to influence systems change at the state level. While acknowledging that BHEC was often one of several contributing factors, interviews with state-level BHEC advisors provided evidence that the initiative played a meaningful role in shaping and refining several statewide programs and policies, shifting mindsets and organizational practices, and strengthening relationships:

New or revised statewide programs and policies



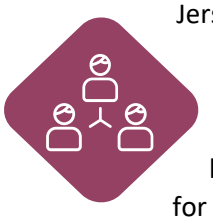
BHEC contributed to the creation of the **New Jersey Economic Development Authority (NJEDA) Emerging Developers Grant Program**, a $20 million program to support smaller developers—a departure from the agency's traditional focus on large-scale developers. BHEC also influenced **modifications to NJEDA's Aspire program**, including expanding eligibility and increasing tax credits. Conversations sparked by BHEC influenced the **development of NJEDA's grant program to address food insecurity** and contributed to the design of the **Affordable Housing Support Initiative**, ensuring it met the needs of community developers tackling local housing challenges.

By highlighting the barriers local community developers face in assembling capital stacks for their projects, BHEC contributed to **increased access to the 9% Low-Income Housing Tax Credits in financially constrained communities** through the Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency's (HMFA) **Qualified Allocation Plan**. In addition, BHEC discussions influenced HMFA's **modifications to its Foreclosure Intervention Program's legislation and guidelines,** making it easier for nonprofits to acquire properties through direct negotiations with municipalities. The initiative also helped shape the programs offered through the **New Jersey Social Impact Investment Fund** and **catalyzed increased momentum on passing a state right of first refusal policy** for nonprofits to acquire publicly disposed properties.

Changes in mindset and organizational approach

BHEC helped **shift the strategic orientation of several state agencies**. The New Jersey Department of Community Affairs (DCA) reported adopting a more intentional and holistic neighborhood investment approach. The New Jersey Department of Health Office of Minority and Multicultural Health noted that it had strengthened its social determinants of health framework. NJEDA incorporated a stronger equity orientation into its programs, making them more accessible to smaller cities and under-resourced communities. BHEC also increased HMFA's responsiveness to community needs, influencing its efforts to explore new ways of supporting smaller projects and developers. Additionally, BHEC inspired HMFA to encourage developers to consider food-related spaces in commercial properties as a strategy to address food deserts.

Development of new or strengthened relationships



BHEC facilitated **improved coordination among state agencies** like DCA, HMFA, NJEDA, and the New Jersey Redevelopment Authority. By coming together regularly as part of BHEC, partners could share updates on their agency's current activities and programs, which enabled them to enhance their coordination of program offerings. The initiative also **fostered and strengthened relationships between advisors and BHEC cities**, leading to tangible benefits such as connections to new funding sources and identifying available properties for development.

What factors influenced BHEC's success?

Several factors contributed to the achievements of the BHEC initiative at both the local and state levels:

	Supporting Factors	Limiting Factors
City Outcomes	▲ Having a planning phase that allows the intermediary to identify cities with capacity ▲ Drawing on evidence from previous initiatives ▲ Providing flexible operating grants ▲ Offering predevelopment grants ▲ Delivering supportive technical assistance ▲ Networking and learning through in-person convenings ▲ Holding convenings in each city with active participation of team members ▲ Making project financing available through PRIs ▲ Engaging strong, well-established community organizations to lead efforts ▲ Having strong site coordinators to maintain progress and momentum ▲ Adopting a flexible approach that allows teams to pursue their own priorities and leverage appropriate resources	▼ Neighborhood focus sometimes limited city-level engagement ▼ Lack of clarity around team member roles led to uneven engagement ▼ Uneven awareness of available resources may have limited usage ▼ Some participants felt the convenings and webinars lacked sufficient depth or tailored content ▼ Underestimating the time needed to advance complex projects from concept to closing ▼ Limited use of data and tools provided ▼ Perception of a static team composition limited some of the teams ▼ Underutilization of team members not directly involved in development projects ▼ Limited or ineffective engagement of city staff and political leaders ▼ The initiative's launch during COVID-19 and a period of rising construction costs
State Outcomes	▲ Having a state advisory group with diverse and strong leadership ▲ Exposing advisors to site-level activities ▲ Involving multiple New Jersey cities through BHEC to surface common challenges ▲ Immersing Reinvestment Fund into the New Jersey landscape and engaging state-level actors via frequent, informal contact to build relationships and credibility ▲ Operating in a state policy environment supportive of equitable community development ▲ Building on previous investments in neighborhood planning ▲ Having multiple New Jersey cities aligned around common issues	▼ Lack of clarity on the role of advisors and the desire for BHEC to drive state-level policy change ▼ A disconnect between BHEC's policy efforts and other ongoing efforts in New Jersey related to land use policy change ▼ Not taking advantage of the full potential of affinity groups

What are the key takeaways?

The evaluation of the BHEC initiative highlights several key takeaways that offer valuable insights into its implementation and impact:

1 BHEC influenced the development of several built-environment projects, leading to substantial investment in projects with a health equity focus.

While many projects might have moved forward eventually, BHEC accelerated their progress and strengthened their alignment with health equity goals. The flexible financial resources provided by BHEC were significant factors driving the progress of these built environment projects.

2 BHEC enhanced the community development infrastructure, embedding a stronger focus on health equity.

The initiative fostered greater collaboration, improved coordination, and built organizational capacity. By prioritizing social determinants of health, BHEC successfully aligned built environment projects and programmatic efforts, such as improving food access, with health equity goals. By influencing cities' community development systems, BHEC will likely leave a lasting impact on how participating partners approach their work.

3 BHEC demonstrated that a collaborative team structure can take various forms and still advance work on the ground.

Although specific team configurations and partner engagement varied across the cities, each site achieved significant progress by establishing a structure tailored to its needs, prioritizing the development of relationships with relevant local stakeholders. Central to this success were two key elements: strong leadership from a community development organization and dedicated funding to support a local BHEC coordinator.

4 BHEC showed that implementing a multisite initiative within a single state can have a significant impact on statewide policies and approaches to community development.

While BHEC has not yet led to sweeping statewide policy changes, it has successfully influenced the perspectives and approaches of key decision-makers by engaging them as initiative advisors. This influence led to tangible changes in statewide programs and policies and created ongoing opportunities for collaboration. Contributing factors included a supportive statewide policy environment, Reinvestment Fund's early and intentional planning efforts, and the initiative's approach to engaging a diverse and well-connected group of state-level advisors.

What does this mean for future efforts?

The experience of BHEC offers valuable lessons for intermediaries and funders looking to support similar health equity initiatives in the future:

1. **TIMELINE IS CRUCIAL:** Initiatives aiming for systemic change and built-environment projects need realistic timelines, potentially spanning a decade or more.

2. **FLEXIBILITY IS KEY:** Initiative designs should be adaptable to changing contexts and emerging local priorities.

3. **DUAL FOCUS ON PROJECT DEVELOPMENT AND BROADER SYSTEM CHANGE REQUIRES DIVERSE EXPERTISE:** Advancing both built-environment projects and system change requires engaging individuals with different skills and recognizing that these are distinct types of work.

4. **ALIGNMENT ACROSS MULTIPLE COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS IS ESSENTIAL IN SMALLER CITIES:** Connecting initiative activities with existing state and local efforts maximizes impact and promotes sustainability.

5. **STRATEGIC PARTNERS ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN A RIGID "TEAM":** Focus on engaging key organizations and individuals throughout the process rather than strictly defining an initial core team.

6. **SUSTAINABILITY REQUIRES INTENTIONAL PLANNING FROM THE START:** Funders and intermediaries should plan early for how to sustain progress beyond the grant period. This includes developing an exit and sustainability strategy that connects grantees to follow-on funding, works with sites to encourage engagement of organizational leadership, and leverages funders' and intermediaries' influence to build broader support and maintain momentum.

Overall, the Building Healthier, More Equitable Communities initiative demonstrated the potential of a focused, collaborative effort to advance health equity through built environment projects and impacts on the community development system at both the local and state levels in New Jersey. The lessons learned from BHEC can inform and strengthen future initiatives aimed at creating healthier, more equitable communities.