# Final evaluation of Building Healthier, More Equitable Communities

Mt. Auburn Associates, Inc.

MAY 2025

Support for this publication was provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Mt. Auburn Associates would like to extend our sincere thanks to all who contributed their time, support, and insights to inform this evaluation. We are especially grateful to the Building Healthier, More Equitable Communities (BHEC) site team participants, state advisors, and other New Jersey stakeholders who generously shared their insights and time to help shape this evaluation. We offer a particular appreciation to the site leads and BHEC coordinators for their openness in sharing their perspectives on their experience participating in this initiative.

This report would not have been possible without the significant contributions of many individuals whose time, research, and wisdom informed its content and findings. In particular, Amy Gillman, Maryam Khojasteh, and Marco Navarro from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation provided thoughtful leadership and oversight of the BHEC initiative and the evaluation.

We also sincerely appreciate the collaboration of the entire Reinvestment Fund team—Jennifer Fassbender, Jacob Kraybill, Leah Rusenko, and Sara Vernon Sterman—as well as the BHEC city team liaison, Paul Weech. Their partnership throughout the evaluation process and the critical data and insights they provided were invaluable. Special thanks to Amanda High, who was an essential contributor from Reinvestment Fund in the early days of the initiative.

This report would not have been possible without the contributions of Beth Siegel, Alyssa Saunders, and Patricia Voltolini from the Mt. Auburn team, whose tireless research and analysis provided rich data that formed the foundation of the report. We are also grateful to Mt. Auburn team members Aaliyah James and Mikael Morelión for their additional support during key phases of the evaluation. Finally, we want to thank Judi Luciano of Mt. Auburn for leading the administrative and editing efforts with care and attention to detail.

The icons used on the cover of this report are sourced from www.flaticon.com and are attributed to the following creators:

- Apartment icons by Rasama Studio from www.flaticon.com
- Property icon by Pojok d from www.flaticon.com
- Row house icon by Umeicon from www.flaticon.com
- Supermarket icon & store icon made by Justicon from www.flaticon.com
- Village icon by Freepik from www.flaticon.com

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS** ..... ii

**INTRODUCTION** ..... 1

History of BHEC ..... 1

Initiative design ..... 2

Theory of change ..... 4

Evaluation methods ..... 6

**SITE-LEVEL ACHIEVEMENTS** ..... 7

Teams' vision and approach ..... 7

Team achievements ..... 9

Factors influencing site achievements ..... 24

**STATE-LEVEL ACHIEVEMENTS** ..... 33

Vision and approach to New Jersey state influence ..... 33

New or revised statewide programs and policies ..... 34

Changes in mindset and organizational approach ..... 37

Development of new or strengthened relationships ..... 39

Factors related to state-level outcomes ..... 40

**CONCLUSION** ..... 43

Major takeaways ..... 43

Implications for intermediaries and funders ..... 44

**APPENDIX** ..... 47

BHEC advisors ..... 47

# INTRODUCTION

## History of BHEC

In 2016, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), in partnership with Reinvestment Fund, launched Invest Health, a national initiative to improve health equity outcomes in 50 small and midsize cities. Reinvestment Fund, a community development financial institution (CDFI) based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, administered the initiative. As RWJF tracked the progress of the Invest Health cities, its staff became increasingly interested in the potential benefits of launching a similar multisite initiative focused within a single state. This approach offered the opportunity not only to generate city-specific outcomes but also to influence state-level policies, practices, or other system changes that advance health equity. At the same time, RWJF recognized an opportunity to build on its longstanding investment in its home state of New Jersey. This laid the groundwork for the *Building Healthier, More Equitable Communities initiative (BHEC)*, which is focused on New Jersey.

RWJF once again turned to Reinvestment Fund to develop and administer BHEC, starting with a year-long planning phase in 2019. During this phase, Reinvestment Fund and RWJF staff conducted extensive research, including an assessment of New Jersey's broader community development landscape, along with interviews and listening sessions with over 150 local leaders. Reinvestment Fund also identified ten cities it believed were well-positioned to reshape views on equity, align resource and subsidy flows that might improve social drivers of health, and tackle barriers within the community investment system that limit growth and opportunities. These cities demonstrated an existing set of organizations and institutions capable of attracting capital, organizing data, engaging residents, and accessing other supportive services. Additionally, these cities had an engaged healthcare anchor, a strong community development corporation, and a workable enabling environment.

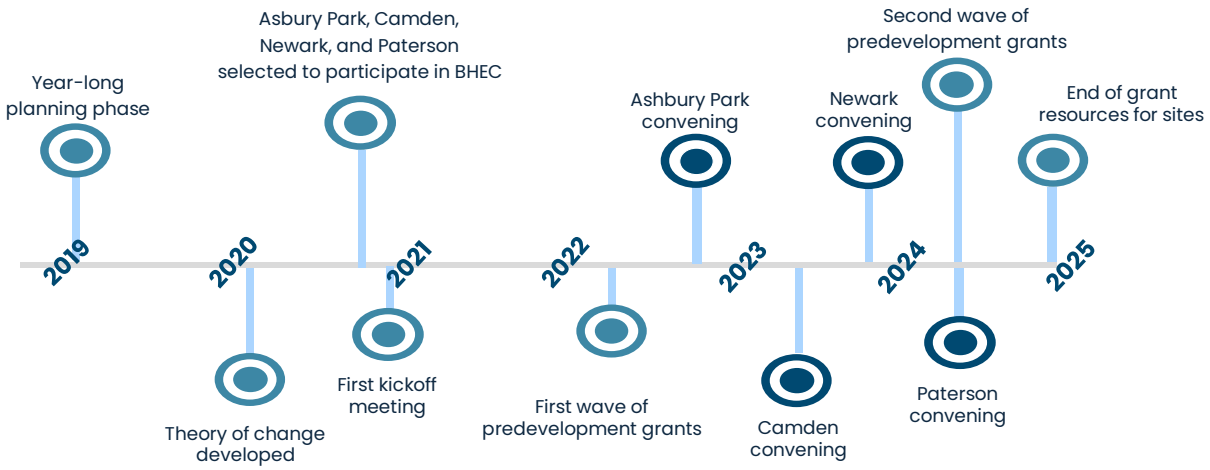
In early 2020, Reinvestment Fund invited these ten eligible cities to submit an Expression of Interest (EOI) to participate in BHEC. The intent was for applicants to form cross-sector teams focused on achieving positive changes in the built environment and the community development system over a three-year period. In response, 23 teams across the ten cities submitted an EOI.

After review, Reinvestment Fund invited 14 applicants to submit a full application. In some cases, applicants from the same city decided to apply jointly or opted not to apply, resulting in 11 full applications. The review team, comprising Reinvestment Fund staff and external experts, evaluated applications using both quantitative scores and qualitative assessments. Reviewers sought to select teams from four different cities that exhibited a strong, multisector collaborative with a history of working together, experienced leadership, community development expertise, and a shared vision centered on system change to build healthier communities. In late 2020, Reinvestment Fund selected cross-sector stakeholder teams from Asbury Park, Camden, Newark, and Paterson to participate in this multi-year initiative.

Reinvestment Fund virtually convened the four teams in a kickoff meeting at the end of 2020. Originally designed as a three-year initiative set to conclude in 2023, city teams experienced a slow start given the context of COVID-19. In response, RWJF granted a one-year extension, extending the grant period through December 2024.

Following the conclusion of the initiative, RWJF has remained in direct contact with the teams to explore potential follow-on funding to support select activities. However, as of the publication of this report, RWJF had not awarded any additional follow-on grant awards.

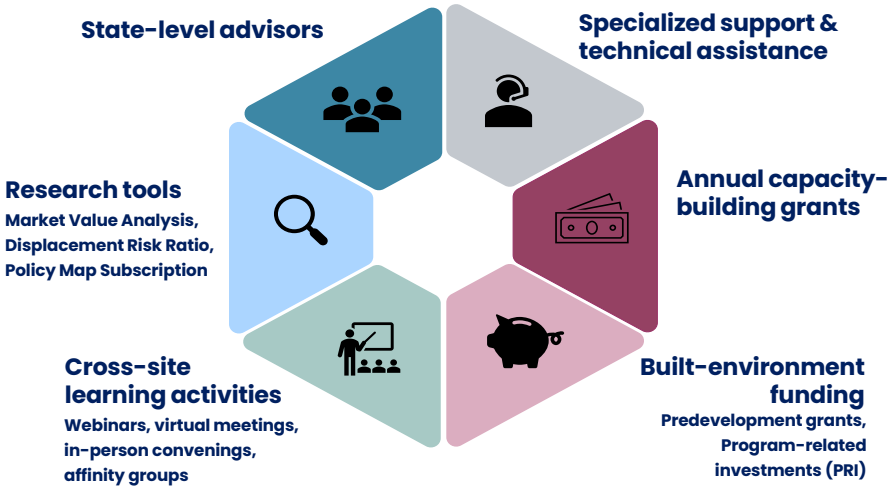
**Figure 1. BHEC Timeline**




# Initiative design

While some initiative supports mirrored those of Invest Health, Reinvestment Fund refined its approach based on Mt. Auburn Associates' evaluation of the initiative. The BHEC interventions include the following:

**Figure 2. BHEC Interventions**



1. **Specialized support and technical assistance:** In July 2021, Reinvestment Fund hired a BHEC city team liaison to provide specialized support and technical assistance to teams on a part-time basis (34 hours per month). Working on behalf of the Reinvestment Fund team, the liaison supported each BHEC site in its on-the-ground efforts. Additionally, Reinvestment Fund staff held periodic calls with site teams a handful of times during the initiative's first year and less frequently thereafter. The number of BHEC team members engaged in these site calls varied widely.

2. **Annual capacity-building grants:** Each team received $400,000 ($100,000 per year) in flexible operating grant funds. Teams primarily used these funds to support a BHEC coordinator. However, smaller portions of these funds also supported other uses, including specialized consultants, outreach, training, local produce for food pantries, and, in some cases, compensation for time spent by key team members.

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

    - *Predevelopment grants:* In March 2021, Reinvestment Fund provided teams with eligibility guidelines to apply for predevelopment loan funds for projects connected to the BHEC city team. Reinvestment Fund structured these funds into two categories: Stage I Predevelopment loans (up to $50,000) for early-stage costs and Stage II Predevelopment loans (up to $150,000) in instances where "project feasibility was well established and a clear path to closing exists, but the borrower needs to spend additional funds to get to the project construction closing." To qualify, projects needed to 1) be located in the BHEC priority neighborhood, 2) demonstrate a clear way to positively impact social determinants of health (SDOH), 3) align with the goals of the BHEC city team, and 4) fall within the eligible asset classes, which included housing, healthcare, education (including daycare), community facilities, food systems and access, community facilities, commercial real estate, and mixed use development. Given the context of COVID-19 and RWJF's strong interest in distributing funds to sites, Reinvestment Fund converted these loan funds into grants. In 2022, initial grants of up to $125,000 were made available to sites specifically for predevelopment funding. Following a rebudgeting process later in the initiative, Reinvestment Fund offered sites a second grant opportunity in 2024, allowing sites to apply for up to $55,000 for predevelopment or technical assistance. Any site that did not take advantage of the initial 2022 grant opportunity was eligible to receive up to $180,000 in grant funds in 2024. In total, over the course of the initiative, each site received $180,000 in grant funds to support predevelopment or technical assistance.

    - *Program-related investments (PRI):* In 2008, well before the BHEC initiative, RWJF provided Reinvestment Fund with a $10 million PRI to support New Jersey communities. These funds were committed to a range of projects, and as loans were repaid, the recycled funds became available for use in other projects in New Jersey. RWJF hoped that projects emerging from BHEC would be strong candidates for these recycled PRI funds, though the investments were not limited to BHEC initiative projects. RWJF expected these PRI funds to leverage government and private-sector investments for BHEC-related development activities, such as affordable housing and healthier food retail options. RWJF wanted all PRI funds to be distributed by the end of 2024.

4. **Cross-site learning activities:** A key aspect of BHEC was the diverse range of cross-site learning opportunities. These included:

- *Webinars and virtual meetings:* Reinvestment Fund hosted over a dozen virtual meetings with BHEC site participants. Early sessions provided sites with an opportunity to help shape the initiative's design. Later, virtual sessions focused on dreaming big to explicitly build more equitable systems locally, exploring the history of structural racism and inequality via the *Undesign the Redline* framework, thinking about trauma-informed approaches to community development, addressing the racial wealth gap, using and leveraging data for measuring equity impacts, case making, discussing catalytic housing and mixed-use development, understanding advocacy and lobbying rules for nonprofits, and exploring the use of New Markets Tax Credit (NMTC), among others. During the first year, when COVID-19 precautions were still in effect, there was a high frequency of virtual meetings. Over time, the number of virtual sessions decreased significantly.
- *Four in-person convenings:* Each site hosted one, two-day-long convening, which provided an opportunity for small panel presentations and rich discussions, as well as tours of local projects that address the SDOH.
- *Affinity groups:* Reinvestment Fund supported informal, ad hoc convenings for subsets of BHEC stakeholders working on common focus areas. These convenings provided a platform for targeted peer exchange and learning among stakeholders engaged in food systems and access, early childhood education, health systems, and housing policy. While most groups met only for a few sessions, the food systems and access group continued to convene beyond the initial meetings.

5. **Research tools** (Market Value Analysis[1] (MVA), Displacement Risk Ratio[2] (DRR), PolicyMap subscription): Reinvestment Fund's Policy Solutions team conducted research on each BHEC site, providing teams with a comprehensive MVA and DRR for each city. Reinvestment Fund also provided teams with a free subscription to PolicyMap, a mapping and analytics platform that offered access to a wide range of data to support their work and decision-making. Reinvestment Fund made the Policy Solutions team's research data available through the PolicyMap platform.
6. **State-level advisors**: At the start of the initiative, Reinvestment Fund convened approximately a dozen representatives from state-level government agencies, research institutions, and nonprofit advocacy organizations to guide the BHEC work and advise on political, technical, and financial issues, as well as policy change. Between August 2020 and the end of 2022, Reinvestment Fund engaged these advisors in quarterly virtual meetings. As the initiative progressed, Reinvestment Fund wanted to foster a closer connection between advisors and individuals from each BHEC site. To support this, Reinvestment Fund began convening advisors with team members via ad hoc virtual meetings—once in 2023 and once in 2024—and invited advisors to attend the four in-person convenings held in each BHEC city.

# Theory of change

In early 2020, RWJF engaged Mt. Auburn Associates as the BHEC learning and evaluation partner. At that time, Mt. Auburn Associates worked with stakeholders from RWJF, Reinvestment Fund, and select BHEC state-level advisors to articulate the intended theory of change that would guide the initiative.

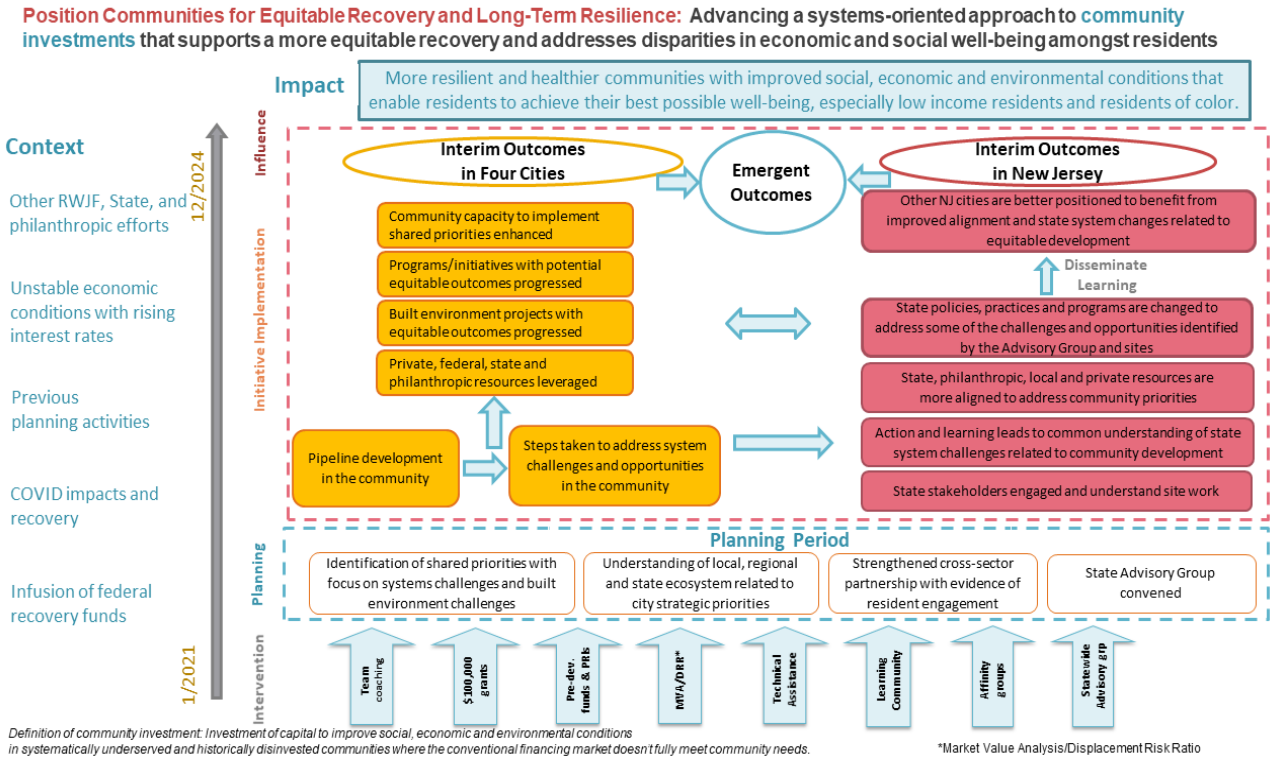
[1] https://www.reinvestment.com/research/market-value-analysis/
[2] https://www.reinvestment.com/insights/measuring-displacement-risk-in-gentrifying-neighborhoods/

Through this process, these stakeholders ultimately agreed that BHEC aimed to "Position communities for equitable recovery and long-term resilience: advancing a systems-oriented approach to community investments that supports a more equitable recovery and addresses disparities in economic and social well-being amongst residents." 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.

The RWJF/Reinvestment Fund team acknowledged that this work could also lead to other emergent outcomes along the way. The goal of the BHEC initiative was to contribute to more resilient and healthier communities, characterized by improved social, economic, and environmental conditions that enable residents, particularly low-income residents and those of color, to achieve their best possible well-being. The following graphic illustrates the theory of change.

## Figure 3. Theory of Change



# Evaluation methods

Mt. Auburn Associates adopted a developmental evaluation approach to its work. The Mt. Auburn team conducted interim research, developed related products, and facilitated "making meaning" sessions periodically throughout the initiative to inform its implementation. Soon after engaging in BHEC, Mt. Auburn worked with the RWJF and Reinvestment Fund program team to identify key learning objectives for the evaluation and drafted corresponding evaluation questions. These questions guided Mt. Auburn's interim research and products. In the final year of the initiative, the Mt. Auburn team revisited the original evaluation questions to determine whether they were still of interest to the program team. After some modifications, the team prioritized the following evaluation questions for this report:

- What did the sites achieve because of BHEC?
- How did the planning phase and the specific interventions influence BHEC-related achievements and progress?
- What was the role of different sector representatives and their contributions to progress within each site?
- How did political, economic, and other contextual factors at the state and local levels influence BHEC work?
- What has been the value-add of having multiple sites from one state participating in BHEC?

Mt. Auburn used the following methods to conduct research for the final evaluation:

- reviewed all prior BHEC documents, including Reinvestment Fund's feasibility planning report, EOI and application documentation, Reinvestment Fund's site call notes, grant and loan eligibility requirements and applications, all past RWJF/Reinvestment Fund BHEC program team call notes, and all past evaluation products;
- interviewed the BHEC program officer at RWJF, four Reinvestment Fund staff members engaged in the initiative, the BHEC city team liaison, eight BHEC advisors, and five to nine stakeholders from each participating BHEC site; and
- observed four in-person convenings, the BHEC breakfast convening at the 2024 Governor's Conference of New Jersey, and all virtual BHEC program offerings.

This report presents the Mt. Auburn team's research findings, including BHEC-related outcomes at both the site and state levels and the factors influencing these outcomes.

# SITE-LEVEL ACHIEVEMENTS

## Teams' vision and approach

Each team in the four cities participating in the BHEC initiative developed its own approach to leveraging BHEC resources to advance health equity in its community, as illustrated in the figure on the following page, which outlines the approaches of the BHEC sites. Reinvestment Fund encouraged teams to either create a shared vision or build upon prior planning processes that engaged neighborhood residents in setting community goals. While the primary focus was on built-environment projects, the broader intent of the BHEC initiative was to support activities that enhanced overall health equity within each city. Over time, many teams expanded their focus to include improving access to healthy foods as part of their efforts.

Reinvestment Fund envisioned the BHEC initiative as a pathway not only to advance local projects and programs but also to drive broader systemic changes at the state and local levels. While most local teams did not initially adopt explicit system-change strategies, the interactions and insights gained through participation in the BHEC initiative ultimately strengthened community development systems across the four cities.

This chapter highlights each site's specific accomplishments in advancing built-environment projects, promoting healthy and equitable food systems, and strengthening the local community development system. It also examines key factors that contributed to the teams' progress.

Figure 4. Team Achievements

## Figure 5. The Approach of the BHEC Sites

| | |
|---|---|
| **ASBURY PARK** | The Asbury Park BHEC team focused on transforming the West Side neighborhood into a healthier and sustainable community. Its vision emphasized preventing displacement and gentrification 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, reduce food insecurity, and create a healthier, more equitable community for West Side residents. |
| **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. Key built-environment projects include affordable housing units for both ownership and rental, as well as commercial spaces tailored for small businesses and emerging entrepreneurs. Additionally, initiatives promote community-grown, healthy foods through local markets, healthcare partnerships, and food pantries. |
| **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 intentionally combining uses within built-environment projects that enhance resident health, alongside new or expanded programs aimed at increasing community access to healthy foods. Key built-environment projects include mixed-use developments that integrate affordable housing units with accessible healthcare services, community spaces, and early childhood education facilities, as well as multipurpose community facilities offering health-promoting activities. |
| **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 goal is to empower families and individuals living in poverty to transition to a self-sustainable housing choice, defined as the ability to choose where they live, with whom they live, and how they live. The team's primary built-environment project under BHEC focuses on affordable housing coupled with childcare, specifically supporting single women with children. The team intends to use this effort as a proof of concept that can be replicated to foster healthier communities in Paterson and other cities across New Jersey. |

# Team achievements

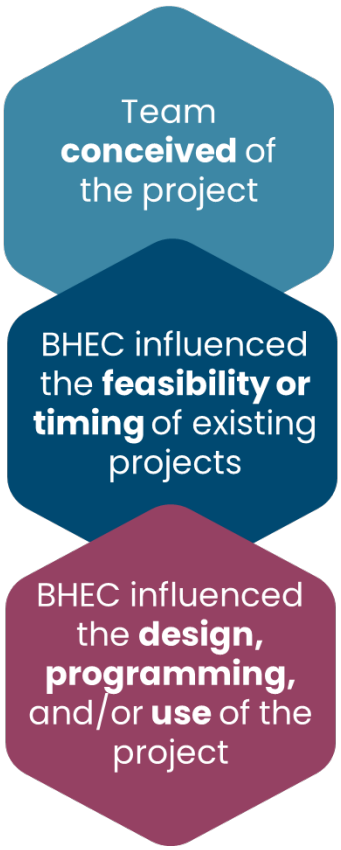
## Progress on built-environment projects

The BHEC teams have advanced 19 built-environment projects designed to promote equitable community development by addressing critical SDOH. Each project closely aligned with the team's shared vision, often building upon existing community plans and ongoing revitalization efforts. These projects leveraged BHEC resources, including funding, financing mechanisms, network connections, and technical assistance support. These physical improvements are laying the groundwork for more stable and healthier community conditions.

During the BHEC initiative, team members in each city were engaged in various projects related to health equity. In Asbury Park, Camden, and Newark, the teams used the BHEC initiative to support ongoing revitalization efforts in their communities. Many of these projects were already planned or in development; BHEC provided additional resources, enabling teams to complete a capital stack and refine project designs or programming components to better align with the initiative's health equity goals. Unlike the other three teams, the Paterson team did not consider each member organizations' significant preexisting development pipeline work to be part of the BHEC effort. Instead, the BHEC Paterson team collaborated to develop a shared concept for a new project that it believed would advance health equity, then focused its planning efforts on this specific project.

For this evaluation, the focus was on identifying the development activities in each city that were influenced in some way by the participation of team members in BHEC. The Mt. Auburn team designed a framework to assess BHEC influence on projects (Figure 6).

Figure 6. BHEC Project Framework




**The project was newly developed during the initiative, emerging directly from BHEC-related team activities and aligning with the team's shared vision.**

**The project was already planned and prioritized by one or more team members, but BHEC resources, such as predevelopment grants or increased staffing capacity, accelerated its progression or enhanced its feasibility.**

**The support, resources, or insights gained through BHEC prompted team members to adapt the project's design or programming to better align with health equity objectives.**

Generally, BHEC influenced project timing and feasibility primarily through the initiative's funding. It remains uncertain whether these projects would have advanced without BHEC resources; however, participants reported that the resources were essential to the progress achieved.

The 19 built-environment projects that BHEC advanced included **affordable housing, mixed-use developments, and commercial, retail, and community spaces**. Of

these, five[3] have been completed, six are currently under construction or nearing completion, and the remaining eight are in the predevelopment or planning phase. 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 SDOH, 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. Of these, only the Healthy Lifestyle Center has advanced past the predevelopment phase, a timeline consistent with the typically lengthy process from project conception to completion.

To date, built-environment projects across all BHEC sites have generated over $103 million in investments, including $4.68 million in direct BHEC funds for projects and more than $98 million leveraged from private, public, and philanthropic sources.[4] 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. In addition to these figures, 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.

The following three tables provide detailed descriptions of the projects teams advanced during the BHEC initiative. Organized by project type, the tables include key details such as project uses, progression during BHEC, organizations involved, and the specific ways BHEC influenced these projects.

[3] 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.

[4] Investments in built environment and leveraged funds were calculated for BHEC-influenced projects that were completed, under construction, or nearing the start of construction by the end of the initiative.

## Figure 7. Affordable Housing

| Project Name | Project Description | Progress throughout BHEC | BHEC influence | BHEC investment |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 810 Fourth Ave., Asbury Park | A 26,000 square-foot project by Interfaith Neighbors with 23 affordable rental units, 18 of which will be permanent supportive housing units. Four will be artists' live-work units, deed-restricted as affordable. The development will be the only 100% affordable housing development on the east side of the railroad tracks in the city's history. | During BHEC, the project transitioned from early planning to predevelopment, with the completion of project feasibility and conceptual design plans. | Influence on feasibility or timing of existing project | $55,000 predevelopment grant |
| New Community Homeownership Project, Newark | An affordable housing project by New Community Corporation with 11 two-family homeownership units in scattered sites. | During BHEC, the project completed its predevelopment phase, with construction set to begin in the spring of 2025. | Influence on feasibility or timing of existing project<br><br>Influence on design, programming, and/or use of existing project | $50,000 predevelopment grant |
| Haddon, Walnut & Princess Ave. Project, Camden | A new residential scattered site development project by Parkside Business & Community in Partnership (PBCIP) and Camden Redevelopment Authority (CRA) of 28 properties, including existing vacant lots and existing residential structures, will result in approximately 40 new housing units at a key intersection in the neighborhood. | The project emerged through the collaboration of two team members, the CRA and PBCIP. The CRA, which owns the properties, saw an opportunity to support the Parkside community more intentionally. PBCIP invited them to be partners in the project, which is currently in the predevelopment phase. | The BHEC team conceived the project | No direct funding |
| Scattered-site, single-family affordable housing, Camden | PBCIP's scattered-site residential development of 50 for-sale housing units. | Scattered-site residential developments are part of PBCIP's ongoing portfolio of projects aimed at revitalizing the neighborhood. During BHEC, 10 units moved from predevelopment to completion in the fall of 2024. Ten additional units moved from predevelopment to construction, and 15 moved from planning to predevelopment. | Influence on feasibility or timing of existing project | $1,473,750 from RWJF PRI |
| The Heights Phase II/ Fairmount Homes Phase II, Newark | An affordable housing project by Urban League of Essex County (ULEC) of 10 two-family homes, totaling 20 units/ residential duplexes: 10 for rental and 10 for homeownership. | During BHEC, the project transitioned from predevelopment to construction, with 8 houses completed in September 2024 and 2 more to be completed by Q1 2025. Through BHEC, the team gained a deeper understanding of the use of NMTC in affordable housing development and successfully applied this knowledge to secure NMTC financing for this project. | Influence on feasibility or timing of existing project | $75,000 predevelopment grant;<br><br>$990,000 from RWJF PRI |

## Figure 8. Mixed-Use Development

| Project Name | Project Description | Progress throughout BHEC | BHEC influence | BHEC investment |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Fairmount Commons, Newark | A mixed-use project by ULEC and RPM developers that includes 70 units of for-sale housing, 9,000 square feet of space for a Literacy Center, and space for a community café. Initially planned to host an early childhood development center, the project pivoted to address a newly identified urgent community need. | During BHEC, the project transitioned from predevelopment to construction, with completion expected in January 2026. | Influence on design, programming, and/or use of existing project | No direct funding |
| Georgia King Village, Newark | A project by L+M, Type-A projects, University Hospital, and ULEC. It combines 78 units of affordable housing, 16 of which are supportive units serving unhoused individuals, with an 8,000-square-foot full-service primary care clinic featuring a dedicated community space where BHEC partners conduct joint programming. | During BHEC, the project moved from construction to completion in the fall of 2023. | Influence on design, programming, and/or use of existing project | No direct funding |
| 1301 Haddon Ave. Mixed-use, Camden | A mixed-use project combining 51 affordable rental units for families with commercial and community space on the first floor. Partners include PBCIP and Conifer LLC. | During BHEC, the project moved from planning to predevelopment. PBCIP owned the site and needed a developer partner for the project. BHEC supported PBCIP in connecting with potential partners. | Influence on feasibility or timing of existing project | No direct funding |
| Marmora Family Community and Education Center, Asbury Park | A mixed-use 31,000 square-foot project by Interfaith Neighbors will include a permanent location for the Asbury Park Museum, IFN administrative offices, tenant space for other area nonprofit organizations, eight affordable housing rental units, and a fitness center for building occupants. | During BHEC, the project transitioned from the predevelopment phase to finalize its financing, with an estimated start date for construction in the summer of 2025. | Influence on feasibility or timing of existing project<br><br>Influence on design, programming, and/or use of existing project | $125,000 predevelopment grant;<br><br>$1.5M from RWJF PRI |
| "Moms and Kids" Project, Paterson | A project by Eva's Village, Habitat for Humanity of Passaic County, and Oasis. It combines supportive, affordable housing for women with children and a training center for home-based daycare providers in the same building. | During BHEC, the team developed the project through community engagement to identify local needs. After initial planning, the team selected a site and completed preliminary project designs. Although the process experienced delays due to challenges in finding a suitable location and adjustments in the daycare delivery approach, the team has now secured the site. It is currently refining and finalizing the architectural designs. | The BHEC team conceived the project | $180,000 predevelopment grant |

## Figure 8. Mixed-Use Development

| Project Name | Project Description | Progress throughout BHEC | BHEC influence | BHEC investment |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Parkside Place I and II, 1484-92 and 1410-16 Haddon Ave., Camden | A mixed-use development project on Haddon Avenue by PBCIP and Cinnaire Solutions. It will include 30 affordable housing units and commercial space. Parkside Place I comprises 24 affordable housing units and 26,283 square feet of commercial space, including a federally qualified health center, Osborn Family Health Center. Parkside Place II will have 6 affordable housing units above a 4,481-square-foot retail and office space. | During BHEC, the project's cost increased from $20 million to $35 million, so PBCIP and Cinnaire had to find additional funding. Throughout the initiative, the team successfully rebuilt its capital stack, which included securing Aspire tax credits—a historic achievement for a neighborhood development organization in the state. Construction is scheduled to begin in the summer of 2025, with an expected completion by the end of 2026. | Influence on feasibility or timing of existing project | $125,000 predevelopment grant |
| West Market Development, Newark | A ULEC-led project that will include diverse housing types and a minimum of 40,000 square feet of space for retail/commercial and community uses. The site is currently occupied by a series of container spaces, featuring local small businesses and entrepreneurs as a pop-up market. The vision is for at least some of these businesses to occupy the new retail spaces in the project. | The project is situated on a 4-acre site that ULEC acquired through an environmental justice/community benefits agreement with PSEG. During BHEC, the project transitioned from early planning to predevelopment. ULEC, the site owner and project lead, is in the process of selecting a co-developer for the project. | Influence on design, programming, and/or use of existing project | No direct funding |
| 1250 Haddon Ave., Camden | A mixed-use project with one residential unit on the 2nd floor and 1,700 square feet of ground floor retail space for a bakery (Glassy Brown Cookies) that wanted to relocate to the neighborhood's commercial corridor. Project partners include PBCIP and LAEDA. | During BHEC, the project moved from predevelopment to completion. PBCIP owned the site and required a commercial or retail tenant to proceed with construction. Latin American Economic Development Association's (LAEDA) recruitment of a local entrepreneur willing to participate in the neighborhood's revitalization enabled the project to proceed, with an anticipated completion date in the spring of 2025. | Influence on feasibility or timing of existing project | No direct funding |
| 1100 Block of Haddon Ave., Camden | A multiphase mixed-use development project by PBCIP and Conifer LLC combines homeownership housing units and commercial space. | During BHEC, PBCIP partnered with Conifer LLC to pursue this project. The project is currently in the predevelopment phase, with conceptual drawings and schematics being developed. The BHEC-supported project manager is working on advancing this project. | Influence on feasibility or timing of existing project | No direct funding |

## Figure 9. Commercial, Retail, and Community Spaces

| Project Name | Project Description | Progress throughout BHEC | BHEC influence | BHEC investment |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1327 Haddon Ave., Camden | Redevelopment of a 2,020-square-foot retail/commercial space that sat vacant for over a decade at the center of the Haddon corridor. Project partners include PBCIP and LAEDA. | During BHEC, the project moved from predevelopment to completion in the summer of 2023. PBCIP and LAEDA have recruited a tenant, Curate Noir, a Camden-based socially minded enterprise that supports Black entrepreneurs by providing space in its retail stores, marketing support, and mentorship. BHEC annual grants supported LAEDA's and the project manager's work in advancing the project. | Influence on feasibility or timing of existing project | No direct funding |
| Dr. Lorenzo Harris Early Childhood Learning Center, Asbury Park | A 4,200-square-foot project by Interfaith Neighbors for an early childhood development and learning center for children aged 3 months to 5 years. | During BHEC, the project transitioned from predevelopment to completion in September 2023. | Influence on design, programming, and/or use of existing project | No direct funding |
| Food Business Development Center, Camden | A 7,000-square-foot facility featuring three hot kitchens, one baking kitchen, storage (freezer, refrigerated, and dry), loading docks, and designated parking with secure overnight spaces for food trucks. This facility aims to support food truck operators, caterers, and food product developers by providing consistent access to a commercial kitchen and a stable, professional environment that fosters business growth. Project partners include PBCIP and LAEDA. | The project is part of LAEDA's and PBCIP's vision to support local entrepreneurs. During BHEC, the project transitioned from vision to planning, facilitated by BHEC's technical assistance in defining the scope for a feasibility study/plan. | Influence on feasibility or timing of existing project | No direct funding |
| Healthy Lifestyle Center, Newark | A ULEC multipurpose facility project to convert its food pantry and construction training facility into a Healthy Lifestyle Center featuring a commercial kitchen, an upgraded food pantry, and a community café. It will also offer cooking classes and healthy lifestyle programs. | The project was conceived during BHEC through team conversations about how to promote healthier living conditions in the neighborhood. As of Q1 2025, it is in the construction phase. | The BHEC team conceived the project | $55,000 predevelopment grant |
| Kula Urban Farm Expansion, Asbury Park | An Interfaith Neighbors' project to allow Kula Urban Farm to accommodate its growing operations, expand seasonal farming beds, and build a 3-season pavilion to host community workshops, events, and educational initiatives, including youth STEM programs. | During BHEC, the project moved from predevelopment to construction, with an expected completion date in Q3 2025. | Influence on design, programming, and/or use of existing project | No direct funding |

## Progress on advancing healthy and equitable food systems

In the original BHEC applications, most teams had a limited focus on addressing challenges and opportunities related to healthy food access. However, as the initiative progressed, teams increasingly recognized healthy food access as a vital aspect of their efforts. Through their engagement with BHEC, many organizations deepened their commitment to improving community access to nutritious foods. Understanding that true food security involves more than merely providing food, these organizations strengthened their efforts to ensure that the food available to residents was both accessible and nutritious. This evolution led to the expansion of programming designed to prioritize healthy food options and promote improved eating habits among community residents. Beyond specific programs, some BHEC teams were involved more broadly in food access initiatives to strengthen local food systems.

### 1. Supporting and training residents to grow culturally appropriate food

BHEC-supported efforts have helped train and support local growers, enabling residents to cultivate and sell fresh, culturally appropriate food while increasing their economic stability. In Camden, the Roots to Market initiative, led by Parkside Business & Community in Partnership (PBCIP), provided residents with resources such as free soil testing, raised beds, fresh soil, seeds, and seedlings to help them grow and sell produce. Also in Camden, BHEC helped establish partnerships with New Jersey farmers to train younger and disadvantaged farmers in sustainable food production. In Asbury Park, Interfaith Neighbors leveraged BHEC funding to purchase local produce from small-scale farmers, providing an economic boost to local growers while ensuring that culturally relevant foods were available in food pantries and distribution sites.

### 2. Coordinating organizations involved in food access

A significant outcome of BHEC's work has been connecting the many organizations involved in food access—food pantries, farmers, farmers' markets, and hospitals—to create a more integrated food system. In Asbury Park, the work of the BHEC coordinator helped launch the Community Food Connection, the first county-wide food and farm coalition, which brought together food pantries, farmers, and community organizations to ensure a steady supply of fresh food at over 35 distribution sites. Similarly, in Camden, BHEC played a critical role in facilitating the merger of Roots to Prevention (RTP) with Pinelands Preservation Alliance (PPA), helping local growers sell produce directly to hospitals, food pantries, and small businesses. PPA became an intermediary buyer that aggregated produce, ensuring local farmers had guaranteed access to institutional buyers while improving the availability of fresh food for residents. With BHEC support, Camden also expanded fresh food distribution by establishing a farmers' market at Cooper Hospital and launching a mobile market van to reach underserved neighborhoods.

In Paterson, several members of the BHEC team collaborated to apply for an EDA grant focused on addressing food deserts. The grant supported a feasibility study to develop a grocery store in Paterson's North Ward. Though the study concluded that a grocery store was not feasible at the proposed location, the collaboration among local organizations on healthy food access has sparked ongoing efforts, such as CUMAC starting a mobile grocery, to address food insecurity in the neighborhood.

### 3. Facilitating the use of SNAP and WIC benefits at farmers' markets

BHEC has significantly improved food affordability as teams worked to ensure local farmers' markets could accept and double SNAP and WIC benefits. In Asbury Park, BHEC supported the launch of SNAP with Asbury Fresh, allowing residents to use their benefits at the Kennedy Park Farmers' Market. The New Jersey Good Food Bucks Program further enhanced the program, doubling the value of SNAP dollars, making fresh food purchases more accessible. Before BHEC, no farmers' markets in Monmouth County accepted SNAP benefits. Today, three markets participate, generating $8,000 in SNAP revenue for local farmers. Similarly, in Camden, PPA became the state benefit processor, allowing residents to use SNAP and WIC at farm stands while guaranteeing immediate payments to farmers. This initiative removed financial barriers to fresh food access while providing growers with a reliable income stream.

### 4. Offering complementary healthy food programming to promote fresh food consumption

In addition to increasing food access, BHEC has also promoted healthy eating habits through educational programming in Asbury Park. In collaboration with Community Food Connection, Interfaith Neighbors introduced Healthy Inclusive Eating Workshops to educate families on the benefits of plant-based meals and fresh food consumption. Additionally, fresh produce distribution sites—such as the Early Childhood Learning Center—began sharing weekly plant-based recipes with families, reinforcing healthy eating habits at the community level.

### 5. Securing funding to sustain and grow local food systems

The BHEC initiative has helped participating organizations secure significant funding to expand and sustain food access efforts. In Asbury Park, Interfaith Neighbors leveraged BHEC funding to purchase fresh produce for food distribution sites, while also securing $170,000 from the Community Food Bank of New Jersey and an additional $125,000 in grants to support farm-to-food pantry programs. In Camden, the RTP collaborative secured $1.1 million in USDA grants to support food system planning and farmers' market expansion, although the funding was later rescinded under the new federal administration. Additionally, PPA's involvement provided financial stability to Camden's food initiatives, enabling key staff to be salaried rather than reliant on short-term grants, ensuring long-term sustainability. Through stakeholder coordination, expanded food benefits, training residents to become farmers, educational programming, and sustainable funding, BHEC helped build more equitable and resilient local food systems in Asbury Park and Camden. By fostering cross-sector collaboration and long-term investment, these efforts not only expanded fresh food access for low-income communities but also strengthened economic opportunities for local farmers, creating lasting change in the regional food landscape.

### 6. Elevating healthy food access as an organizational priority

In Paterson, Eva's Village has realigned its strategic priorities to place housing and food security at the forefront of its work. This marked a significant shift from its previous focus, which was primarily on behavioral health and social services. Leadership at Eva's Village now views housing and food as foundational elements of health and well-being, integrating them as central components of the organization's future strategy. In addition to reimagining its operational approach, Eva's Village has

adopted a more collaborative model, actively seeking partnerships when applying for funding opportunities. The organization has also leveraged insights gained through BHEC to apply for a state grant to support a proposed culinary school social enterprise, further expanding food access and economic opportunities in the community.

In Asbury Park, following collaboration with the BHEC coordinator, the Jewish Family and Children's Service (JFCS) improved its food pantry operations by sourcing organic and locally grown produce during the growing season. By partnering with Fernbrook Farms, JFCS significantly improved the quality and desirability of its food offerings. As a result, the number of individuals utilizing the food pantry surged from approximately 40 to 300 clients per week. JFCS staff credit this increase, in part, to the high-quality, fresh produce now available, which provides families with greater choice and more nutritious options than the organization's previous food sources. Similarly, because of working with the BHEC coordinator, the Boys & Girls Club of Monmouth County implemented several key changes to enhance the nutritional value of the food provided to students and their families. With support from BHEC and its coordinator, the organization transitioned to a healthier food vendor, offering more nutritious snacks and dinners to approximately 300 students daily in after-school programs. Additionally, the club began offering weekly farm shares from Fernbrook Farms during the growing season, supplying students and their families with fresh, local produce and accompanying recipes. These changes have reinforced a culture of healthier eating within the organization and the families it serves, while also strengthening Fernbrook Farms with guaranteed buyers.

In Newark, BHEC played a key role in expanding food access initiatives and introducing new healthy food education programs. With leadership from the BHEC team coordinator, the Urban League of Essex County (ULEC) broadened its focus on food security by forming strategic partnerships that enhanced its ability to provide fresh, nutritious food to the community. Through collaborations with Newark's Urban Agriculture Cooperative and MEND, a regional food access network, ULEC increased the supply of fresh food available in its local pantry, allowing for greater distribution capacity and improved food quality. In addition to distribution, ULEC has also launched healthy food programming to educate local residents and pantry users on nutrition and wellness, reinforcing long-term healthy eating habits in the community.

## Progress in strengthening local community development systems

Building on the deliberate strategies teams pursued in built-environment projects and healthy food access, the BHEC initiative significantly strengthened local community development systems by:

1. **Building *system* capacity**—fostering collaborative practices among diverse stakeholders, improving coordination of existing activities and services, and building the organizational capacity of community nonprofits.
2. **Strengthening *organizational* commitment to health equity in community development**—aligning BHEC-oriented organizational efforts and collaborative practices more intentionally toward advancing health equity.

Following are specific ways BHEC contributed to creating stronger, health equity-oriented community development systems across the four cities.

## Building system capacity

BHEC's emphasis on cross-sector collaboration encouraged participating organizations, working in teams, to learn from each other's work and explore new partnership opportunities. Facilitated convenings and site visits brought participants from different cities together to share experiences, exchange insights, and learn from one another's successes and challenges. Through this process, groups built stronger relationships, identified new avenues for collaboration, and aligned their efforts. More than just fostering connections, BHEC's financial and technical support enhanced the organizational capacity, credibility, and visibility of participating organizations, enabling them to further advance projects, develop programs, and secure additional resources. Ultimately, BHEC strengthened local community development systems in sites by increasing collaboration and alignment, expanding organizational capacity, securing project resources, and supporting local policy changes that contribute to community development goals.

### 1. Increased local collaboration and alignment of community development initiatives

Through the BHEC initiative, organizations in Asbury Park, Camden, Newark, and Paterson forged new partnerships and broke down traditional silos, enabling more effective collaboration to address critical community need. Some teams launched joint initiatives, while others aligned their existing work to maximize impact. In Paterson, for example, a core group of nonprofits—including Habitat for Humanity, the Health Coalition of Passaic County, Oasis, United Way, and a local hospital—deepened their level of collaboration through BHEC. This strengthened relationship led them to apply for funding to conduct a study on food deserts, bringing them together to assess local challenges and refine potential solutions. Additionally, the Health Coalition of Passaic County secured a grant that enabled Oasis to join as a subrecipient, expanding maternal health resources for pregnant and postpartum women in the community.

In Camden, organizations interested in food entrepreneurship leveraged BHEC-fostered connections to collaborate on new initiatives. For example, PBCIP partnered with African Link to develop *Root Camp 101*, an introductory agribusiness course with a March 2025 launch date. Graduates of this program will have the opportunity to advance to LAEDA's comprehensive food business training program, demonstrating how these collaborative efforts are expanding pathways for economic development and community empowerment.

BHEC partners in Newark, including New Community Corporation (NCC), University Hospital (UH), and ULEC, have strengthened their collaborative relationships, resulting in more coordinated and accessible services for residents. For example, mid-level leadership and staff at UH have become more aware of local resources and are actively educating patients about available community supports. This collaboration led UH to sponsor a new referral app that helps residents and patients easily identify and access services provided by local organizations, including BHEC partners. The app is actively promoted through community networks and events, expanding its reach and impact. Additionally, ULEC now offers programming within UH's new healthcare center at Georgia King Village, further aligning services with community needs. These strengthened relationships have enhanced mutual understanding among partner organizations and improved residents' access to critical local services.

In Asbury Park, local stakeholders, spurred by the local BHEC coordinator, established a countywide Food Access Working Group (FAWG) in collaboration with Monmouth County ACTS (Assisting

Communities Through Services). This significant outcome represents a systemic change, creating new infrastructure for coordinated food policy at the county level. Before FAWG's formation, Monmouth County was one of nine New Jersey counties without formal county-level food security coordination, leaving it absent from critical state-level policy and resource distribution conversations. Through relationships developed between food system advocates and government leaders, FAWG now serves as a dedicated platform to elevate local food access issues and advocate effectively for countywide solutions and resources.

Additionally, in Asbury Park, BHEC facilitated a significant partnership between local stakeholders and Rutgers University. The BHEC coordinator at Interfaith Neighbors connected with a Rutgers professor and sustainability practicum students, who supported a food system assessment at the Boys & Girls Club and analyzed effective food policy strategies from other states to inform FAWG's work. This collaboration resulted in a Rutgers student serving as a food policy intern at Interfaith for spring 2025 and the development of a workshop for nonprofit and community leaders focused on sustainable, cost-effective food management. Inspired by this work, the Rutgers professor and students have expanded their research on social impact networks influencing food justice, while facilitating new university-community learning opportunities.

Across cities, these new and stronger alliances have enabled nonprofits, academic institutions, hospitals, and government agencies to align their missions, share resources, and leverage each other's strengths. By deepening relationships, building mutual understanding, and exploring joint opportunities, BHEC participants have reduced competition and built a collective momentum that not only aligns and expands local programming but also enhances the overall well-being of the communities they serve.

### 2. Strengthened organizational capacity of participating organizations

One of the more significant outcomes of the BHEC initiative has been strengthening the organizational capacity of participating organizations across all sites. BHEC achieved this through a multifaceted approach, providing targeted training and peer-learning opportunities, facilitating direct connections to relevant state-level agencies, offering technical assistance, and delivering flexible financial resources to support both existing projects and new programmatic efforts. Core team members emphasized the initiative's role in fostering strategic relationships with key stakeholders, including local and state political leaders, philanthropic partners such as RWJF, and influential state-level BHEC advisors. These relationships enabled some BHEC partners to leverage connections with BHEC advisors and access funding opportunities, including the New Jersey Economic Development Authority's (NJEDA) Aspire program. Additionally, targeted BHEC training and peer-learning opportunities enhanced organizations' expertise, enabling them to secure funding sources, such as NMTC. Moreover, BHEC funds enabled organizations to hire dedicated coordinators and project managers, significantly contributing to their operational capacity and ability to accelerate key projects and programs.

In Camden, PBCIP enhanced its project-development capacity, supported by BHEC funding, which enabled the hiring of a skilled project manager with construction expertise. This new staff position significantly improved PBCIP's ability to manage multiple built-environment projects concurrently, streamline contractors and regulatory compliance processes, and successfully assemble project financing. As a direct result, PBCIP secured a substantial NJEDA Aspire award of $17.7 million—an unprecedented achievement for a nonprofit of its scale. Additionally, BHEC strengthened PBCIP's

credibility and visibility, enabling the organization to secure an additional $2 million legislative appropriation for a subsequent project.

Another Camden organization, the Latin American Economic Development Association (LAEDA), reported increased capacity and credibility through its participation in BHEC. It successfully replicated effective strategies and collaborative models developed in partnership with PBCIP in other communities, such as Atlantic City and Bridgeton. LAEDA emphasized that its participation in BHEC not only expanded its organizational skills but also enhanced its credibility and trustworthiness as a partner for similar collaborations elsewhere.

In Newark, ULEC expanded its organizational expertise through participation in BHEC. ULEC leveraged new knowledge about NMTC financing mechanisms, directly applying this learning and securing funding for one of its affordable housing projects. Additionally, BHEC-supported connections enabled ULEC to significantly expand its food access initiatives and deepen partnerships with anchor institutions, notably UH, enhancing its ability to meet community needs.

In Asbury Park, Interfaith Neighbors, supported by BHEC funding, hired a coordinator whose leadership substantially advanced the organization's community wellness and food justice initiatives. Her efforts notably increased Interfaith's credibility and visibility, leading to additional funding for the Mayor's Wellness Initiative, the creation of the Monmouth County Food Access Working group (which she co-chairs), and successful coordination of a coalition of local food pantries. These accomplishments significantly expanded Interfaith Neighbors' community influence within and beyond Asbury Park. In addition, the favorable terms of the PRI offered as part of the BHEC initiative influenced Interfaith's risk tolerance for debt, a financial strategy the organization had previously been hesitant to pursue. This organizational practice change has expanded Interfaith's capacity to access funds to accelerate projects.

While these organizations were already strong before BHEC, the initiative helped them expand their work, broaden their reach, and deepen their impact.

> *"BHEC gave us the opportunity to bring in the project management support we need to really create a pipeline of development projects. Having that increased capacity allowed us to be more focused and intentional, which has been truly priceless." – BHEC participant*

### 3. Enhanced ability to attract financial resources for local community development initiatives

The increased organizational capacity and new strategic connections developed through the BHEC initiative significantly enhanced the participating organizations' ability to attract additional resources, expand their impact, and advance their community development work. Direct BHEC funding for built-environment projects and project coordinator positions enabled organizations to leverage over $98 million in public, private, and philanthropic investments. These funds supported critical developments, including affordable housing, commercial spaces, and community facilities, which contributed to tangible improvements in neighborhood conditions.

## 4. Facilitated new partnerships, increasing access to research and learning

Along with financial support, BHEC facilitated critical partnerships with governmental and academic institutions, generating attention, expertise, and influential research essential to addressing community challenges and informing decision-making processes.

In Camden, the BHEC initiative facilitated further collaboration among the Camden Community Development Association, PBCIP, and Rutgers-Camden's Center for Urban Research and Education. This collaboration has provided PBCIP and other community development corporations in the city with an essential new resource: rigorous research and data that can drive meaningful local policy change. The *Hidden Hands: Property Ownership in Camden* report series aims to influence citywide decisions on property ownership, disposition, and equitable land use policies. The first report, published in spring 2025, offers key insights and recommendations that strengthen community organizations' collective advocacy and strategic planning efforts.

In Asbury Park, BHEC facilitated a partnership between Interfaith Neighbors and Rutgers University. Interfaith Neighbors gained significant new resources through collaboration with Rutgers faculty and sustainability practicum students, including detailed assessments of local food systems and analyses of food policy strategies from New Jersey and beyond. These efforts provided essential insights to inform and shape the ongoing work of the countywide FAWG.

## 5. Supported local policy change

Although changes to city policies related to community development were one of the types of system change RWJF aimed to achieve through BHEC, significant progress in this area was limited. However, there were two notable exceptions: first, the advancement of accessory dwelling units (ADUs) as a strategic tool to increase affordable housing opportunities in Asbury Park; and second, the BHEC partner's collaboration with the city of Camden to streamline the timeline of its tax lien sales process.

In Asbury Park, Interfaith Neighbors collaborated with Michele Alonso, the city's director of planning and redevelopment, to successfully advocate for the passage of a new ADU ordinance, which was approved in April 2024. BHEC contributed significantly to this policy advancement by facilitating broader conversations about ADUs as a potential tool to generate affordable housing, providing a displacement risk ratio analysis that supported the ordinance, funding a dedicated program coordinator at Interfaith Neighbors who worked closely with city officials, and delivering technical assistance that introduced local stakeholders to best practices from other municipalities and supported the development of the legislation. Interfaith Neighbors is now monitoring the implementation and community uptake of the new ADU ordinance. Additionally, the organization is exploring partnerships with financial institutions, including Ocean First Bank, to develop specialized financing programs. These programs would aim to support current homeowners, particularly older residents in West Asbury Park, in financing and constructing ADUs. These developments have the potential to generate revenue streams, helping homeowners to age in place.

In Camden, the BHEC team engaged the city to help reduce the timeframe of the tax lien sales process and successfully shortened it from nine months to three months for select projects. PBCIP's efforts to shape the acquisition approach for these projects also informed the broader citywide tax lien sales process. Streamlining this timeline has helped facilitate overall development in the city.

## Strengthening organizational commitment to health equity in community development

Participation in BHEC strengthened organizations' commitment to equity by deepening their community engagement efforts and providing resources to better involve residents in development projects. It also heightened awareness among organizations and their partners about the link between community development and SDOH, leading them to integrate SDOH considerations into their projects, programs, and internal practices. Finally, some teams engaged in efforts to improve services for vulnerable groups.

### 1. Renewed focus on engaging historically marginalized residents

Participation in BHEC reinforced organizations' commitments to equity, particularly by enhancing their intentional efforts to engage residents in shaping development projects and programmatic activities. While these organizations had existing community engagement practices, BHEC provided additional resources, guidance, and motivation for them to deepen and expand this work.

For example, in Newark, the BHEC initiative played a crucial role in helping ULEC rebuild and strengthen its relationship with the Fairmount Neighborhood Association (FNA), a grassroots, resident-led group in Fairmount Heights. ULEC's program coordinator actively engaged FNA in a variety of programmatic initiatives and facilitated discussions with residents about neighborhood development projects, including gathering input on the new Literacy Center.

As a result, residents became more aware of and engaged in community development activities within their neighborhood. To sustain this momentum, ULEC introduced new quarterly meetings that now bring together BHEC partners, such as UH, and neighborhood residents to share updates, discuss available services, and gather community feedback on a regular basis. BHEC's support was instrumental in this process, mainly through funding the program coordinator position, which enabled a more direct and effective approach to resident engagement. The coordinator, eager to enhance community involvement but uncertain about the best approach, leveraged insights from other BHEC teams, especially in Camden, to successfully implement similar strategies in Newark, fostering deeper resident participation and collaboration.

In Camden, PBCIP, a community-led organization, has long maintained strong engagement with residents through various platforms, including community meetings, newsletters, surveys, and focus groups. The flexible funding BHEC provided was instrumental in sustaining and expanding these efforts, allowing PBCIP to shift its focus from basic outreach and engagement to more strategic community organizing and power-building.

In 2024, PBCIP launched training programs for community ambassadors to enhance their advocacy skills, empowering residents to effectively voice their needs in local, county, and state-level policy discussions. Building on this momentum, the organization is now focused on hiring permanent organizing staff to support and institutionalize this shift toward deeper resident leadership and policy influence.

## 2. Facilitated the integration of SDOH into organizations' built-environment projects, programs, and operations

Participation in BHEC increased awareness among a broader range of stakeholders about the critical connection between community development and SDOH. Throughout the initiative, participating organizations, as well as external partners attending select BHEC activities, gained a deeper understanding of this relationship, recognizing both its significance and their organizations' potential roles in advancing health equity. Inspired by BHEC's work and examples, many participating organizations and partners have successfully integrated SDOH considerations into their built-environment projects, programming strategies, and internal organizational practices.

For example, in Newark, ULEC leveraged BHEC to update the Fairmount Neighborhood Strategic Plan, ensuring that health equity considerations were central to the planning process. By convening community stakeholders and residents, ULEC incorporated broader perspectives on how neighborhood development impacts community well-being. Similarly, NCC enhanced its built-environment projects by integrating green design principles, such as incorporating green spaces for community gardening and prioritizing energy-efficient appliances in new developments, both of which contribute to long-term health and environmental benefits. In Asbury Park, Interfaith Neighbors has adopted a more intentional approach to integrating SDOH into all aspects of its work. Through internal workgroup meetings, the organization is developing policies and procedures that align with SDOH principles. One key initiative is exploring ways to connect its Launch Center workforce development site with BHEC's food justice efforts, recognizing an opportunity to introduce health and equity discussions into workforce training. Additionally, Interfaith Neighbors is considering an internal nutrition policy to guide food-related donations, ensuring alignment with broader health and equity goals.

> *"If it wasn't for BHEC, I don't think we'd be expanding out as much. We definitely wouldn't have been thinking about the social determinants of health broadly in the neighborhood nor expanding our food work." – BHEC participant*

Furthermore, Asbury Park's BHEC coordinator played a pivotal role in embedding food justice initiatives and a SDOH framework into the work of the Mayor's Wellness Committee. Leveraging her position as chair, she aligned the committee's monthly programming with BHEC's mission, ensuring a stronger focus on addressing food insecurity and community health. This led to the launch of several impactful initiatives, including a community fridge program at the Asbury Park Library, food justice classes in collaboration with Project Write Now, and the creation of a seed library to encourage sustainable local food practices. Additionally, the committee introduced a "pop-up" site where children could engage in food-related games, receive healthy recipes, and experience firsthand how a corner store could offer fresh, organic, and locally sourced produce. This has strengthened Interfaith Neighbors' collaboration with city agencies, including planning, the library, social services, and finance, while increasing these agencies' exposure to SDOH considerations.

### 3. Enhanced integration of supportive and wraparound services for vulnerable groups

The BHEC initiative encouraged participating organizations and partners to rethink how to best support vulnerable and disadvantaged residents. Rather than focusing solely on housing, some organizations have expanded their approaches to include comprehensive, integrated services tailored to residents' diverse needs. Through partnerships, they enhanced service accessibility and effectiveness, ensuring that support extended beyond physical spaces into meaningful, life-enhancing programs. Below are key examples of how organizations modified their practices based on BHEC learnings.

The Asbury Park Housing Authority (APHA) shifted its service delivery model and mission, moving toward a more resident-focused approach. Through insights gained from BHEC convenings—particularly in Newark and Paterson—APHA recognized that housing alone was insufficient in supporting families. Inspired by BHEC, APHA redefined its mission to be explicitly people-centric, introducing PACT (People Are the Assets, Community Transformation) to shift the organization's focus from buildings to the residents it serves. APHA leadership described this transformation as moving from viewing buildings as assets to recognizing people as the true assets, prioritizing resident development over infrastructure.

A direct outcome of this shift was a new approach to resident support services. Initially planning to hire one family self-sufficiency staff member, APHA instead partnered with a third-party organization that collaborates with multiple service providers. Rather than relying on one or two resident service coordinators to assist 600 households, APHA now works with a partner that connects residents to 15–20 organizations, significantly expanding access to resources and increasing service effectiveness.

The Paterson BHEC team pursued an innovative approach to affordable housing that integrated supportive services for targeted populations. From the outset, its goal was to create a proof of concept—a replicable model that would serve various vulnerable groups across the city. After identifying single mothers with children as a priority population, the team conducted feasibility studies and focus groups to assess key needs. When securing a development site proved challenging, it partnered with Eva's Village, a community-based organization with available space and a shared commitment to supportive housing. The resulting Moms and Kids Project will provide affordable housing, on-site early childhood education, and a training facility for childcare providers. This project exemplifies the critical connection between the built environment and SDOH, demonstrating that housing solutions must encompass more than just shelter; they must include essential services that support long-term stability and well-being.

# Factors influencing site achievements

This section presents the evaluation team's reflections on the key factors influencing BHEC site progress across four cities. These factors fall into three broad categories:

1. **Initiative design:** How the planning phase, site selection process, and implementation of BHEC shaped progress.
2. **Team characteristics:** How leadership, collaboration, and internal capacities within each team shaped progress.
3. **External context:** How broader environmental factors outside individual organizations' control shaped progress.

## Initiative design

The initiative's design consisted of two key elements. The first focused on the phase preceding the sites' engagement with BHEC, including a planning period during which RWJF funded Reinvestment Fund to conduct extensive research on New Jersey cities, develop criteria for selecting eligible cities, and facilitate the site selection process. The second element encompassed the range of interventions that Reinvestment Fund designed and implemented throughout the initiative. This section examines how the BHEC initiative's design and implementation have influenced outcomes.

### Planning phase and site selection

One key evaluation question Reinvestment Fund and RWJF posed was how the planning phase influenced BHEC's achievements. During this phase, Reinvestment Fund conducted an extensive series of interviews with state and local community development staff and researched a broad range of New Jersey communities. This led to the identification of ten communities eligible to apply for BHEC. Reinvestment Fund received 11 full applications from these communities and underwent a rigorous selection process, involving external reviews and interviews, to select four teams from these proposals. This process had both positive implications and challenges.

**Figure 10. Planning Phase/Site Selection: Supporting Factors**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Experience from previous cross-site initiatives** | BHEC was informed by RWJF's Invest Health initiative, also led by Reinvestment Fund. Reinvestment Fund had five years of experience with Invest Health and the benefit of a developmental evaluation that provided valuable insights into best practices and challenges related to the design and implementation of cross-site initiatives. Multiple evaluation reports from Invest Health offered insights into effective strategies, potential pitfalls, and best practices that shaped BHEC's structure. These included understanding the importance of strong cross-sector collaboration, the necessity of flexible funding for local teams, and the role of technical assistance in capacity building. |
| **Planning phase laid the groundwork for strategic decision-making and initiative engagement** | The planning phase allowed Reinvestment Fund to develop a comprehensive understanding of New Jersey's economic, political, and social conditions. This informed the selection of cities with established community development infrastructures that could be leveraged. Additionally, early engagement with state officials helped build trust and provided Reinvestment Fund with critical insights into the state policy landscape, including key actors to involve more deeply throughout the initiative. By establishing these relationships early on, Reinvestment Fund laid the groundwork for future collaboration, facilitating active state agency participation in the initiative. |

## Figure 11. Planning Phase/Site Selection: Limiting Factors

| | |
|---|---|
| **Neighborhood-level focus limited citywide engagement** | While focusing on neighborhoods had advantages, it sometimes made engaging municipal governments more difficult. Some city-level stakeholders were reluctant to fully invest in projects that impacted only a small portion of their jurisdiction. In some cases, citywide policies and funding decisions did not align with the neighborhood-scale initiatives, limiting the potential for broader impact. |
| **Lack of clarity regarding team member roles, responsibilities, and expectations** | Although Reinvestment Fund emphasized the importance of cross-sector collaboration, many team members perceived their role narrowly, as supporters or task executors, rather than active collaborators responsible for shaping strategic direction and driving implementation. This ambiguity resulted in uneven engagement. Greater clarity and explicit communication about team members' roles and contributions could have enhanced engagement, promoted even greater collaboration, and expanded the overall impact. |

### Initiative interventions

As noted in the introduction, Reinvestment Fund provided teams with considerable funding, including an annual flexible grant for each team, a separate pool of funds for predevelopment costs related to built-environment projects, and access to financing through a PRI previously established by Reinvestment Fund in partnership with RWJF, specifically targeting New Jersey cities. By focusing on four cities, Reinvestment Fund was able to offer dedicated support to each community through a technical assistance consultant, known as the city team liaison. A key element of the initiative was the design of multiple networking and learning activities, including some virtual events and four in-person convenings, one in each of the four BHEC cities. Additionally, since all participating cities were located within the same state, Reinvestment Fund assembled an advisory group of state-level leaders, fostering both local and broader statewide impacts. This section examines how the various programmatic components of the BHEC initiative helped catalyze or, in some cases, posed limitations on teams' progress.

## Figure 12. Initiative Interventions: Supporting Factors

| | |
|---|---|
| **Flexible operating grants** | The annual operating grants provided to each team were highly valued by participants and perceived as critical to advancing their progress. Teams primarily used these funds to hire site or initiative coordinators, who played an essential role in maintaining momentum, advancing specific projects, and keeping team members actively engaged. Additionally, these grants allowed teams to hire specialized expertise as needed and leverage further resources for their projects and programmatic work. |
| **Supportive technical assistance** | Team members highlighted the technical assistance the city team liaison provided as an essential contributor to their progress. Teams viewed the frequent and informal nature positively, as it allowed teams to engage regularly and address emerging needs flexibly. Team members particularly valued the strategic guidance, research assistance, and sharing of best practices and successful models from other localities across the U.S. |
| **In-person convenings promoting formal and informal networking opportunities** | Team members highly valued the four in-person convenings, viewing them as important opportunities for both networking and learning. These gatherings facilitated meaningful connections among city representatives and state leaders, providing state actors with a deeper understanding of local community efforts. Team members particularly emphasized the value of informal networking opportunities, noting that they usually have limited chances to connect with colleagues from other cities. |
| **Convenings in each city, with the active participation of team members** | The actual planning of the convenings in each city served as a valuable opportunity for host city team members to collaborate and develop deeper bonds. Hosting these events also allowed teams to showcase their cities, highlighting innovative projects and best practices. These demonstrations not only fostered cross-city learning but also increased state policymakers' awareness of local opportunities and challenges. |
| **Availability of predevelopment grants** | The provision of dedicated funding for predevelopment activities—and the decision to offer these resources as grants—was identified as a significant factor enabling teams to advance their projects more rapidly. These grants were particularly beneficial for community-based nonprofits, supporting their ability to hire consultants, conduct due diligence and feasibility studies, and offset essential costs during the early stages of their projects. |
| **Availability of project financing through RWJF PRIs** | The availability of RWJF PRIs administered through Reinvestment Fund provided critical financing that allowed several projects to complete their capital stacks. Securing substantial PRI funding through this initiative was particularly significant for small nonprofits, representing a transformative opportunity. These PRIs offered sites substantial resources, greatly enhancing their capacity to undertake ambitious projects. The scale and accessibility of PRI financing thus stood out as a tangible and highly impactful benefit of participation in the initiative. |

## Figure 13. Initiative Interventions: Limiting Factors

| | |
|---|---|
| **Uneven awareness of available resources among team members** | Some local partners did not fully understand the types of technical assistance and support available to them through BHEC. One reason was that the types of resources available to teams shifted over the course of the initiative. For example, the initial predevelopment loan was converted to a grant, and a second round of grants, which were not initially planned, became available. Several participants indicated that if additional resources had been identified and communicated at the start of the initiative, they would have taken greater advantage of them to advance their projects. While the flexibility and emergence of the initiative had many benefits, the challenge of not being clear about available resources upfront led to a missed opportunity, underscoring the need for clearer ongoing communication about available resources throughout the initiative. |
| **Need for greater depth and tailored content in webinars and convenings** | Feedback from city team members and state-level advisors indicated that the webinars and in-person convenings did not sufficiently meet the learning needs of the BHEC stakeholders. Many participants felt that the content was overly basic and lacked the depth required to support the relatively sophisticated and advanced work that city teams were undertaking. Interviews highlighted the need for webinars and convenings to move past introductory-level discussions and instead offer more targeted, nuanced material directly relevant to each team's specific projects and challenges. Providing deeper, more customized content could have better equipped stakeholders to advance their complex, site-specific initiatives. |
| **Underestimating the time needed to advance complex projects from concept to closing** | The analysis of built-environment outcomes revealed that BHEC effectively accelerated projects already in progress, aligning them more closely with health equity goals. However, RWJF underestimated the timeline required to fully develop complex projects from initial concept to completion. For instance, the Eva's Village project in Paterson, initiated entirely through the BHEC team, required substantially more time than the BHEC initiative timeframe permitted. Critical steps, such as identifying and securing a site, designing the building with input from multiple stakeholders, securing financing, and finalizing the project, exceeded the initiative's designated timeline. In Paterson's case, this mismatch between the actual project timeline and BHEC's grant period rendered the project ineligible for Reinvestment Fund PRI financing, highlighting the need for more realistic expectations in future planning. |
| **Limited use of data and tools provided** | While the Market Value Analysis and the Displacement Risk Ratio provided valuable insights and stimulated productive conversations, all the cities struggled to translate the data into policy actions. Team members expressed that they received insufficient guidance on practically applying these analyses and developing effective strategies within their complex local political contexts. Municipal agencies, which are the typical users of MVAs and DRRs, can often integrate these tools more seamlessly into their work. However, BHEC partners, predominantly nonprofits, would have benefited greatly from more targeted support to bridge the gap between analytical insights and tangible policy implementation. Such guidance could have strengthened teams' ability to leverage these tools more effectively. |

## Team characteristics

The teams in the four cities varied in their composition, strategic approach to advancing the BHEC initiative, and how they worked together as a team. Evidence suggests that some team-related factors influenced outcomes, underscoring the importance of team dynamics and collaborative strategies. The following section identifies key factors contributing to or limiting the teams' progress. These factors played a critical role in determining the overall effectiveness, sustainability, and ultimate success of the initiative in each city.

### Figure 14. Team Characteristics: Supporting Factors

| | |
|---|---|
| **Leadership by strong, well-established community organizations** | In each city, leadership for the initiative involved a strong community-based organization. In the case of Paterson, Habitat for Humanity was not the official lead, but it played a leadership role in the site's primary built-environment project. Having a high-capacity nonprofit or community development corporation was a critical factor in the success of the sites in advancing their built-environment projects. These organizations had experience navigating funding streams, building coalitions, and engaging stakeholders, making them well-positioned to execute the BHEC initiative. |
| **Adopting a comprehensive and flexible approach to the initiative** | Teams that utilized BHEC to advance a comprehensive set of strategies experienced greater success than those focusing narrowly on a single program or project. When certain initiatives encountered obstacles, these teams were able to pivot effectively to other ongoing efforts. Additionally, having multiple interconnected projects under the BHEC umbrella enabled teams to leverage the full range of available supports more effectively. Some resources or supports that were not suitable for one project proved valuable for others, and partnerships that initially faced challenges were able to evolve productively. For instance, the ULEC partnership with UH, initially centered exclusively on the Georgia King Village and Community Health Workers, expanded into a broader collaboration to better coordinate social service delivery information and access, and increased hospital engagement in local neighborhood events. As a result, UH now has a more consistent and accessible presence within the community. |
| **Strong site coordinators** | The site coordinators played a crucial role in ensuring the momentum and progress of the teams' work. Sites with coordinators with strong expertise and experience in community development benefited from improved communication, enhanced stakeholder engagement, and more effective project execution. A consistent coordinator also helped sustain long-term relationships with state agencies and funders. |

## Figure 15. Team Characteristics: Limiting Factors

| | |
|---|---|
| **Perception of a static team composition** | The perception that team members included in the BHEC application needed to have an ongoing role in the initiative limited teams' progress. Since teams were required to select partner organizations upfront, many began with a commitment to a fixed membership before thoroughly clarifying their strategic focus or goals. As new priorities—such as access to healthy food—emerged, some teams discovered that certain existing members did not ideally align with the evolved objectives. Meanwhile, they missed chances to bring in organizations that could have strengthened their efforts. Although Reinvestment Fund remained flexible about team composition, teams would have benefited from clearer guidance to revisit and revise their membership. Encouraging teams to reassess their members as their work evolves would help ensure the involvement of organizations best suited to advancing the teams' vision and goals. |
| **Underutilizing team members not directly involved in core activities** | Related to the above factor, across each site, certain team members had only marginal engagement in team activities. Feedback gathered during the evaluation revealed that many of these individuals lacked clarity about their roles and responsibilities, resulting in their underutilization. This under-engagement represents a missed opportunity, as clearer role definition and targeted involvement of all team members could have strengthened collaboration and expanded overall team capacity. |
| **Limited or ineffective engagement of city staff and political leaders** | A key factor that limited team progress was the low level of active engagement from city agency staff and political leadership. While many teams formally listed city representatives as members, their participation in team meetings or efforts was often minimal or absent. Simply including city representatives did not guarantee meaningful collaboration; some teams faced persistent unresponsiveness despite proactive attempts to engage city staff. Successful collaboration with city government depends on carefully selecting representatives who hold relevant organizational positions and demonstrate genuine commitment, responsiveness, and the capacity to contribute effectively. This underscores the importance of teams carefully assessing and strategically selecting municipal participants and being clear on their role and when their attendance and insight are most critical. |

## External context

The external environment plays a critical role in shaping the success of an initiative. Various factors can either support or hinder progress. Economic conditions, for instance, influence housing development costs and access to capital. Similarly, political and regulatory landscapes can create opportunities through supportive policies or present challenges through restrictive regulations. External events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, can also impact how cities respond to opportunities and address challenges.

Understanding and adapting to these external influences is essential for the long-term success of efforts aimed at promoting health equity. The following figures summarize the contextual factors that served as accelerants to sites' work and others that limited their progress.

### Figure 16. External Context: Supporting Factors

| | |
|---|---|
| **Stronger community partnerships and increased focus on social determinants of health emerging from the COVID crisis** | While COVID-19 had a devastating impact on New Jersey communities, it also spurred local collaboration and reinforced the importance of SDOH. Many organizations that later joined BHEC had already worked together during the pandemic, thereby strengthening their relationships. The crisis highlighted the interconnectedness of food security, housing, and health, deepening commitment among organizations to address these issues in BHEC communities. |
| **Supportive state policies and increased funding** | During BHEC, the New Jersey administration prioritized affordable housing, access to healthy food, and community development. Several policies under the New Jersey Economic Recovery Act directly benefited BHEC efforts, including:<br>• **New Jersey Aspire program**: Offers tax credits to bridge financing gaps in redevelopment efforts.<br>• **Community-Anchored Development Program**: Allocates approximately $200 million annually in tax credits to support real estate development by anchor institutions.<br>• **Food Desert Relief Program**: Offers tax incentives to encourage businesses and developers to establish and maintain grocery stores in underserved communities.<br>• **Neighborhood Revitalization Tax Credit Program (NRTC)**: Provides business entities with a 100 percent tax credit for funds provided to nonprofit entities implementing comprehensive revitalization plans. |
| **Previous investments in neighborhood planning** | Many BHEC communities had already developed neighborhood plans through participation in New Jersey's NRTC program and with support from initiatives such as the Wells Fargo Regional Foundation Neighborhood Planning Grants. These planning processes, which included extensive community engagement, provided BHEC teams with a clear and actionable roadmap. Having established this vision, teams were able to accelerate progress and achieve their goals more effectively. |

## Figure 17. External Context: Limiting Factors

| | |
|---|---|
| **Challenges launching during the COVID-19 pandemic** | BHEC launched during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, a time when many cities were focused on crisis response. Local organizations were stretched thin, addressing urgent needs such as business shutdowns, vaccination efforts, job losses, and food insecurity. As a result, many had limited capacity to fully engage with BHEC at the outset, delaying progress in some communities. Additionally, public health guidance on in-person convening led Reinvestment Fund to hold the BHEC kick-off and many meetings in the first year of the initiative virtually, which constrained early relationship and trust building. This overarching context also influenced the BHEC initiative design which may have differed under other circumstances. |
| **Rising construction costs** | During BHEC's implementation, construction costs increased due to inflation, supply chain disruptions, and labor shortages. These rising costs posed significant challenges, particularly for cities like Camden and Newark, where some projects faced delays or struggled to secure final financing. |
| **Limited city support for BHEC goals** | In several cities, securing full municipal support for BHEC projects proved challenging. For example, in Paterson, local government priorities were misaligned with BHEC's focus, as the city emphasized projects aimed at increasing tax revenue rather than those centered on equitable neighborhood development. Without strong municipal backing, the scale and impact of BHEC's efforts were more limited, particularly in terms of influencing local systems change. |

# STATE-LEVEL ACHIEVEMENTS

## Vision and approach to New Jersey state influence

RWJF decided to fund this work in a single state based on the hypothesis that concentrating efforts in one location would increase the likelihood of achieving statewide impact through policy changes and influencing local leaders and decision-makers. The BHEC theory of change specified that the initiative would yield several interim outcomes at the state level beyond the anticipated outcomes in the four participating cities. These desired outcomes included: 1) state stakeholders are engaged and understand site work, 2) actions and learning lead to common understanding of state system challenges related to community development, 3) state, philanthropic, local, and private resources are more aligned to address community priorities, 4) state policies, practices, and programs are changed to address some of the challenges and opportunities identified by the advisory group and sites, and 5) that other New Jersey cities are better positioned to benefit from improved alignment and state system changes related to equitable development.

The BHEC initiative design included two key interventions aimed at achieving state-level impact:

1. **Establishing an advisors group:** Engaging a group of state-level advisors to serve as catalysts for state policy and program change.

2. **Facilitating joint advocacy among BHEC cities:** Engaging a BHEC city team liaison to support cities working together on shared issue areas, focusing on addressing common community development challenges. The liaison established several affinity groups to connect a subset of BHEC partners across sites, fostering collaboration on specific issue areas. These groups focused on food systems and access, early childhood education, health systems, and housing policy. However, the food systems and access affinity group was the only group that gelled and remained active following the initial meetings.

Establishing a strong group of BHEC advisors, coupled with support from the BHEC city team liaison, contributed to a range of state-level achievements in New Jersey. Achievements include new or revised statewide programs and policies, changes in mindset and organizational approach, and the development of new or strengthened relationships. As BHEC influenced state-level actors and their organizations, its impact is likely to extend further than the four cities directly engaged in BHEC to other municipalities across the state.

## Figure 18. State-level Achievements

The following section reviews the statewide achievements that emerged from BHEC, based on interviews with state advisors, participating organizations across the four BHEC cities, and additional research conducted by the evaluation team. It is important to note that, in most cases, stakeholders emphasized that BHEC was only one of several factors contributing to the state-level changes detailed in the section below.

# New or revised statewide programs and policies

BHEC played a role in shaping and refining several statewide programs and policies. Through conversations and advisors' exposure to site-level work, BHEC helped identify barriers to equitable community development. This, in turn, provided advisors with additional data points that informed decisions to create new programs, assess and adjust requirements for select initiatives, and refine the structure of existing programs and policies.

### 1. Creation of the NJEDA Emerging Developers Grant Program

An advisor credited the BHEC initiative with influencing the creation of the NJEDA Emerging Developers Grant Program, which earmarked $20 million to support smaller developers—a departure from the EDA's traditional focus on large-scale developers. Through BHEC, NJEDA representatives engaged with state-level advisors and peers from various agencies to explore how other state actors define and support emerging developers. These discussions helped identify key barriers preventing emerging developers from accessing capital. By the end of 2024, the program had already received 150 applications, highlighting strong demand, and the NJEDA had already committed $15 million to developers.

> *"One of the things I will say is, from the work with BHEC, our Emerging Developers Program did emerge." — BHEC advisor*

## 2. Modification of NJEDA's Aspire program

The BHEC initiative provided a platform for site representatives to engage with the NJEDA, shedding light on the initial challenges in implementing the Aspire program, which offers tax credits for development projects. These discussions, along with direct advocacy efforts led by representatives retained by the Paterson BHEC team, contributed to the governor's January 2025 decision to amend the Aspire program. The amendment expands the communities eligible for the program and increases the size of the tax credits available, among other considerations.[5] These changes will impact several New Jersey cities, including two BHEC sites, Camden and Paterson. The amendment adds Camden, East Orange, and New Brunswick as government-restricted municipalities (GRMs), joining Atlantic City, Paterson, and Trenton, all of which are now eligible for program funding. Additionally, projects in the original GRMs are now eligible for tax incentives of up to 85 percent of total project costs, capped at $120 million. Other changes include an accelerated incentive payout schedule, reducing the timeline from ten years to five, and the inclusion of building and land acquisition costs as eligible expenses.[6]

## 3. Development of a new NJEDA grant program to address food insecurity

BHEC input was one contributing factor that influenced NJEDA's development of a new grant program to address food insecurity. Previously focused solely on tax credits, NJEDA incorporated grant opportunities for a wide range of uses, making resources more accessible to communities facing food insecurity. A NJEDA staff member noted, "Instead of it just being a straight tax credit, being able to sell those tax credits to syndicators and then being able to use that funding for grants was something we hadn't done before. And so part of the conversations that we had with BHEC, I believe, helped to think of a broader way of disseminating funding throughout the state….[BHEC was] not the sole contributing factor, but definitely a factor."

> *"In having folks from my team meet with the team over at BHEC, it was really interesting to see how their advice, how their information, was also helpful in helping us to kind of guide and structure some of the programming we have as we look at our food desert communities."*
> *—BHEC advisor*

## 4. Contribution to the design of the Affordable Housing Support Initiative

BHEC played a pivotal role in shaping the Affordable Housing Support Initiative (AHSI), ensuring its policies align with the needs of community developers tackling local housing challenges. The New Jersey Redevelopment Authority (NJRA), which administers AHSI through a $25 million allocation from the Affordable Housing Trust Fund, had anecdotal insights into market needs. However, direct input from BHEC sites and advisors provided crucial, on-the-ground perspectives on development

[5] As summarized by New Jersey attorneys Greenbaum, Rowe, Smith, and Davis, "The legislation's impact includes a broadening of the types and geographical location of projects which qualify for Aspire incentives, as well as the size of available tax credits and other financial considerations for program applicants." Extracted from: https://www.greenbaumlaw.com/insights-alerts-A-Review-of-the-New-Jersey-Legislatures-Latest-Amendments-to-the-New-Jersey-Aspire-Program.html

[6] https://www.cooperlevenson.com/governor-approves-big-changes-to-the-nj-aspire-program-that-benefit-atlantic-city/

challenges and bottlenecks, helping to inform AHSI's design. BHEC insights confirmed the market's lack of capital and reinforced the need for low-equity, patient capital. AHSI projects are already benefiting BHEC site partners. Through BHEC, NJRA connected with the new CEO of Newark's NCC, leading to a $4 million AHSI project. For this scattered-site affordable housing development project, NJRA extended favorable terms to NCC, influenced by BHEC discussions, including a lower equity requirement (5 percent) and a ten-year repayment period, significantly longer than NJRA's typical three-year terms.

### 5. Increase in subsidy through the Qualified Allocation Plan

BHEC highlighted the challenges local community developers face in assembling capital stacks for their projects. This insight influenced the Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency's (HMFA) decision to refine its Qualified Allocation Plan (QAP), providing greater access to subsidies in targeted urban municipalities. This helped community developers build the necessary capital stack with fewer funding sources. By providing more 9% Low-Income Housing Tax Credits to support development in financially constrained localities, HMFA hopes to simplify the touchpoints for these communities.

### 6. Adjustments to regulations for the Foreclosure Intervention Program

Advisor engagement in BHEC provided insight into the barriers that nonprofits faced in accessing the HMFA's $25 million Foreclosure Intervention Program, designed to help nonprofits rehabilitate properties and resell them to first-time homebuyers. Through BHEC, HMFA learned that while mayors want to provide nonprofits with property for this effort, the nonprofits cannot compete with for-profit developers for property during sheriff sales. As a result of these conversations via BHEC, HMFA modified the Foreclosure Intervention Program's legislation and guidelines to make it easier for nonprofits to access properties through direct negotiations with municipalities.

### 7. Influence on the design of programs offered through the New Jersey Social Impact Investment Fund

One BHEC advisor who served on the state public bank implementation board as it created the Social Impact Investment Fund (SIIF) shared that she drew on conversations that transpired as part of BHEC to help shape the social impact investment work in terms of scope, scale, and target communities. The SIIF focuses on redevelopment lending for affordable housing in low-credit communities, and the state infrastructure bank has been developing what was described as a "stateside guarantee through the social impact investment funds for water and infrastructure work in low financial capacity communities." While this work was already underway, one interviewee emphasized that BHEC "helped shape the way we framed the programs."

### 8. Acceleration of momentum toward passing a state right of first refusal policy

In the final year of the initiative, BHEC sites, supported by the BHEC city team liaison and select advisors, have been engaged in efforts to advance a statewide policy proposal granting nonprofits the right of first refusal to acquire publicly disposed properties. The Paterson BHEC team first introduced this concept during the initiative to level the playing field for nonprofits, which often struggle to compete with for-profit developers that can move more quickly in land acquisitions. In Camden, the BHEC lead organization engaged local Assemblyman Bill Spearman, who then brought

*"There were already efforts on this for about three years before, but I think that one of the issues is that there wasn't a coalition backing it, and, without support, things don't move. So that's where hopefully BHEC has been helpful because policy tends to sit if there isn't really a motivation."*
*— BHEC advisor*

the idea to the Housing and Community Development Network of New Jersey (HCDNNJ). BHEC representatives also hosted a discussion on the topic at the Governor's Conference in September 2024.

While BHEC efforts helped surface interest, energy, and advocacy around this issue, some state-level stakeholders had been working on advancing this very concept for several years. One BHEC advisor from HMFA had drafted initial legislation, and several legislators had expressed interest; however, progress had stalled.

The new momentum from BHEC stakeholders, who are now championing this concept, may provide the energy necessary to establish the new legislation. Reinvestment Fund has been playing a role in highlighting the challenges faced by nonprofit developers on the ground and creating a more cohesive, unified conversation that will help stakeholders pursue this legislation as a single, coordinated effort. Additionally, the Camden BHEC lead organization has continued to advocate for the proposed legislation, engaging State Senator Troy Singleton. Since BHEC actors began pursuing this concept, Housing and Community Development Network of New Jersey (HCDNNJ) has prioritized this policy, with a legislative framework ready to move this forward. As of early 2025, HCDNNJ planned to take the lead in advancing this legislation.

# Changes in mindset and organizational approach

To drive changes in state-level programs and policies, it is essential to first influence the mindsets of state leaders, prompting them to adjust their organizations' approach to the work. In addition to the specific program and policy changes outlined above, this section highlights how BHEC shaped advisors' perspectives, ultimately contributing to shifts in their organizations' approaches to community development.

### 1. Shift toward a holistic neighborhood investment approach for DCA

As a result of participating in BHEC tours during convenings, the Department of Community Affairs (DCA) has become more intentional in its approach to funding decisions, adopting a more holistic, neighborhood-level view of investments rather than evaluating projects in isolation. DCA reported that engagement in BHEC, paired with access to federal American Rescue Plan Act funding, has led to more intentional, smaller-scale, people-centered, place-based work. BHEC is one lever it has used to connect to this type of work. As an eclectic department that supports a wide range of programs, from housing production to lead remediation to service grants, the DCA is now approaching its work with an eye to how each investment can be leveraged.

### 2. Adoption of a social determinants of health frame by relevant agencies

The dialogue among BHEC partners influenced the New Jersey Department of Health (DOH) Office of Minority and Multicultural Health representative to approach health equity with a stronger

framework that incorporates SDOH. With this framework in mind, her office requested and received authorization to allow its 40 COVID-19 Health Disparities grantees to address a broader range of needs than previously supported. The DOH BHEC advisor engaged program managers to emphasize the importance of funding a broader set of activities, including housing and transportation-related requests, to holistically support resident needs and remove barriers to health. BHEC engagement also encouraged the office to explore ways to better braid public health funding with other entities' investments in built-environment projects. Inspired by the conversations among BHEC partners, the DOH BHEC advisor submitted a request to leadership to establish an interagency council on social determinants of health. This council would better align public health initiatives with broader community development efforts.

### 3. Greater equity orientation at the NJEDA

BHEC played a key role in shaping the NJEDA's approach to equitable economic development by influencing the creation and structure of numerous programs that are more accessible to smaller cities, developers, and community-based organizations, and support some of the most disadvantaged New Jersey communities. As noted earlier, BHEC contributed to developing the Emerging Developers Grant Program, modifying the Aspire program, and creating a grant program to address food insecurity.

Additionally, partially in response to challenges raised during BHEC, NJEDA introduced predevelopment lending and waived application fees for specific programs, such as its Activation, Revitalization, and Transformation (A.R.T.) program, recognizing that smaller entities often lack the resources to apply. Conversations among BHEC advisors and site participants also influenced the design of several other NJEDA programs, including the GRM Planning Grants, which provide $3 million for long-term strategic action plans in New Jersey's most economically challenged municipalities, and the $900,000 Asset Activation Planning Grant Program that offers up to $50,000 for early-stage planning to repurpose underutilized public assets. Smaller grants, such as those offered through the Asset Activation program, fund entities not yet prepared to undertake complex tax credit applications. BHEC dialogue also contributed to the rationale for modifying NJEDA's communication and outreach, including expanding office hours and ensuring that webinars and program materials are accessible to a broad audience. Ultimately, BHEC's efforts led to organizational change within the NJEDA, fostering a more responsive and equitable approach to economic development across New Jersey.

### 4. Increase in HMFA's responsiveness to communities

HMFA's engagement in BHEC has increased its responsiveness to community needs by exploring ways to support smaller projects and small developers. Recognizing that its minimum project size of 25 units limits access to financing, HMFA is working with the DCA to provide more resources for smaller projects. HMFA is also trying to support entities with a strong history of developing small-scale projects to take on larger-scale, tax credit development projects. Additionally, HMFA encourages small developers to seek early guidance, even with incomplete project proposals, to improve their chances of securing funding. Based on the experiences of BHEC sites in financing projects, HMFA is considering how to create a centralized pathway to improve access to working capital for nonprofits and small developers, including guarantees and credit lines, to help developers secure financing that allows them to undertake multiple projects simultaneously. Insights gained

through BHEC have enabled HMFA to identify common challenges across the state, prompting efforts to develop and implement standardized systemic solutions.

### 5. Inspiration for exploring food desert solutions

Based on exposure to BHEC site work, the HMFA is actively encouraging developers to consider incorporating small grocery stores into their commercial projects. Paterson's small grocery store project, highlighted during the Paterson convening, inspired the HMFA BHEC advisor to connect with the Northeast Organic Farming Association and have HMFA staff organize a bus tour during the governor's conference, bringing 100 developers to visit the C.R.O.P.S Food Hub in Atlantic City. Bringing developers to this site, which features a community garden, community kitchen, and markets, was a way for HMFA to encourage developers to explore food-related spaces as one of their options for the commercial portions of their projects.

Many towns are requiring projects to include commercial space, which has been challenging to fill. BHEC has helped the HMFA recognize the potential opportunity of working with developers to integrate small grocery stores into their projects, which would address the developers' need to fill the space while also fulfilling a major community need. HMFA has now taken the extra step to encourage developers to pursue this route by providing a tangible example of what this could look like. Additionally, HMFA is working with these developers to help secure funding from an EDA program to support projects that address food deserts.

## Development of new or strengthened relationships

Beyond its contributions to new and revised programs and policies, as well as shifts in mindset and organizational approach, BHEC played a crucial role in fostering and strengthening relationships that lay the groundwork for future collaboration. These evolving connections create pathways for ongoing impact, with BHEC serving as the convening platform that catalyzed and solidified relationships.

### 1. Improved coordination among state agencies

BHEC facilitated collaboration among key state agencies, including DCA, HMFA, NJEDA, and NJRA, among others, fostering cross-agency discussions on aligning funding and addressing shared challenges. While most BHEC advisors had pre-existing relationships and, in some cases, communicated regularly, numerous advisors emphasized that the engagement through BHEC deepened those relationships and that there was value in convening the full group of state-level actors together. One stakeholder noted the benefit of using the BHEC advisor group as a sounding board for her agency's efforts. By coming together regularly as part of BHEC, partners were able to provide updates to the group on their agency's current activities and programs, which enabled them to enhance their coordination. For instance, through BHEC, NJRA

> *"There are folks on this advisory committee that I've known for years but haven't done this type of work with. And so, there were different pain points that I was able to understand from a better perspective." – BHEC advisor*

and the New Jersey Community Loan Fund developed a deeper understanding of each other's financing structures, enhancing their ability to support community projects.

### 2. Expanded relationships between advisors and BHEC cities

BHEC provided a platform for local actors to engage directly with state agencies, leading to several tangible outcomes:

- Relationships developed through BHEC helped Camden connect with the right individuals to successfully pursue Aspire funding.
- A connection between HMFA and stakeholders in Camden via BHEC led to the identification of available properties for development.
- In some cases, early conceptual conversations between advisors and sites at BHEC convenings were constructive. HMFA worked with stakeholders in Paterson on a few smaller issues to advance a stalled project.

## Factors related to state-level outcomes

When considering the design of the BHEC initiative, the participation of BHEC advisors was the primary mechanism for achieving state-level outcomes. Several factors positively influenced these state-level achievements, while a handful of factors limited progress.

*"One thing that I think wouldn't necessarily be a new revelation, but certainly was hammered home, was the difficulty of stacking financing, which we certainly know is a difficulty, but in talking about it, and then having the various state partners, I was really able to see, kind of the multitude of streams going into each of these projects and entities, the difficulties of maneuvering them." — BHEC advisor*

## Figure 19. Advancing State Policy Change: Supporting Factors

| | |
|---|---|
| **Advisor exposure to site-level activities via virtual meetings or on-site convenings** | Advisors gained significant value from exposure to site-level activities, which influenced numerous advisors to approach their work more holistically and led several to create or modify their agencies' programs and policies. Exposure to site activities provided advisors with a closer understanding of the work municipalities are undertaking, a clearer sense of where capacity exists, and insight into where site stakeholders could benefit from support. |
| **Involvement of multiple BHEC sites** | Advisors could draw on data and experiences from multiple communities, revealing common challenges to advancing built-environment projects. This evidence helped build the case for state-level stakeholders to take action in creating or modifying programs and policies to address these challenges. While advisors often had anecdotal information about common barriers to equitable community development projects, evidence from four sites in the same state helped confirm the common barriers more systematically. |
| **Previous investments in neighborhood planning** | Many BHEC communities had already developed neighborhood plans through participation in New Jersey's NRTC program and with support from initiatives such as the Wells Fargo Regional Foundation Neighborhood Planning Grants. These planning processes, which included extensive community engagement, provided BHEC teams with a clear and actionable roadmap. Having established this vision, teams were able to accelerate progress and achieve their goals more effectively. |
| **Strong composition of the advisor group** | Reinvestment Fund assembled a strong group of executive leaders from the relevant agencies to serve as BHEC advisors. These leaders possessed strong knowledge of the community development system, a comprehensive understanding of the broader statewide context, and decision-making authority. |
| **Getting cities aligned on common community development issues** | Early in the initiative, BHEC sites collaborated on coordinated testimony to the New Jersey governor, advocating for the allocation of American Rescue Plan State Fiscal Recovery Funds toward community development, housing, food systems, and workforce development. Since then, Reinvestment Fund has helped BHEC sites unite around the prospect of advancing land-use policy to provide nonprofits with the right of first refusal for publicly disposed property. Identifying common barriers to community development and collaborating with sites to address these issues has influenced their approach to work and their agencies' programs and policies. |
| **Reinvestment Fund's frequent, informal contact with state-level actors** | Reinvestment Fund's ongoing, informal contact with advisors and other key state-level actors helped build trust and deepened relationships considerably. This regular communication via emails, phone calls, Zoom, and during in-person events fostered more authentic dialogue and created an open forum for information exchange. This, in turn, helped strengthen the community development ecosystem, as Reinvestment Fund staff served as a conduit of information among stakeholders. |
| **Reinvestment Fund's intentionality and extensive work to immerse itself in the New Jersey community development landscape** | During a year-long planning phase, Reinvestment Fund, in partnership with RWJF, held conversations with state-level decision-makers. Through this process, Reinvestment Fund became deeply involved in relevant activities across New Jersey, built relationships with key policymakers, and generated interest and engagement in BHEC. These discussions also informed the initiative's design and the niche role BHEC could play to add the most value. This approach also gave BHEC a level of credibility that may have contributed to state actors devoting their time and attention to the initiative. Reinvestment Fund has continued to embed itself in the New Jersey philanthropic community by joining the Council on New Jersey Grantmakers, sharing various approaches to funding based on a CDFI lens, and making connections to help align community development resources. |

## Figure 20. Advancing State Policy Change: Limiting Factors

| | |
|---|---|
| **Lack of clarity on the role of the advisors and the desire for BHEC to drive state-level policy change** | Most advisors initially expected to take on a more direct technical advisory role in BHEC built-environment projects than they ultimately did. Many were unaware that the advisory body was intended to serve as the primary mechanism for driving state-level policy change on behalf of BHEC. While BHEC contributed to a number of state-level achievements as outlined in this section, the initiative may have been able to drive further system change if the advisors had a clearer charge from the outset. In the final year of BHEC, sites identified a desired state-level policy change, and efforts are underway to pursue it. Still, advisors could have played a more decisive role earlier in the initiative by working with the sites to identify possible policy solutions that address the common barriers to equitable community development and then advocating for the desired change. The fact that sites did not identify a statewide policy to pursue until the last year of the initiative was a missed opportunity to leverage the advisors' knowledge and power more intentionally during the initiative to advance statewide policy change. Relatedly, uncertainty over whether sites or a specific advisor's agency would lead the right of first refusal effort resulted in several months of inaction. |
| **A disconnect between other existing efforts to pursue a specific land use policy change** | When BHEC sites worked with the BHEC city team liaison to advance the right of first refusal policy change efforts, they did not appear to be aware of existing efforts to pursue the same change. There was a missed opportunity to better align and collaborate with state-level actors and legislators already engaged in discussions and drafting legislation on this issue. |
| **Limited utilization of affinity groups' full potential** | While the BHEC city team liaison convened several affinity groups during the initiative, only the food affinity group remained consistently active, providing a space for participants to connect and share updates on their work. Those involved valued the opportunity to build relationships and exchange knowledge across sites. However, BHEC could have leveraged the affinity group structure more effectively as a platform for local strategizing around key issues. Overall, the affinity groups lacked a clear purpose, which some stakeholders saw as a missed opportunity to use BHEC to identify significant challenges and pursue statewide system change accordingly. One stakeholder observed, "I think [the affinity groups] could have been a massive vehicle for the bottom-up change people wanted from BHEC, but they weren't designed or resourced appropriately." |

# CONCLUSION

## Major takeaways

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

Over the four years of the initiative, BHEC influenced 19 built environment projects. Of these, five have been completed, six are currently under construction or nearing completion, and the remaining eight are in the predevelopment or planning phase. In most cases, these projects might have eventually proceeded without BHEC's involvement. However, the evaluation found evidence that BHEC's engagement accelerated the development of several projects and significantly improved 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 In all four sites, BHEC enhanced the community development infrastructure, embedding a stronger focus on health equity.

The initiative significantly strengthened local community development systems by promoting collaborative practices among diverse stakeholders in each city. It enhanced the coordination of existing services and activities across local organizations and built the organizational capacity of participating community nonprofits. By prioritizing social determinants of health, BHEC successfully aligned both 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 moving forward.

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

The BHEC teams' configurations and partner engagement varied from site to site, and for the most part, deviated from the initial vision of a collaborative team with fully engaged partners who collectively owned the BHEC activities. Nonetheless, the site-level progress catalyzed by BHEC was still significant, regardless of the team's structure. Each site established a structure tailored to its needs, prioritizing the development of relationships with relevant local stakeholders. This approach gave teams flexibility in their engagement with BHEC projects and events. Two critical components that allowed for this variation in collaborative structure while still fostering progress were the presence of a strong CDC lead and the availability of funding to hire a 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, by building on existing RWJF programs and relationships in New Jersey and engaging key state-level stakeholders and decision-makers as initiative advisors, BHEC was able to influence the mindsets of these advisors, their organizational approaches, and ultimately, changes to statewide programs and related policies. Additionally, the relationships forged and solidified through BHEC have created opportunities for ongoing collaboration, coordination, and progress. A statewide administration supportive of equitable community development, Reinvestment Fund's early planning efforts, and the initiative's approach to engaging state-level advisors were key factors in achieving these outcomes. Providing advisors with greater clarity early in the initiative about their role as the primary drivers of statewide system change for BHEC could potentially have led to even greater gains.

## Implications for intermediaries and funders

**1 TIMELINE: The design of multisite health equity initiatives should clearly reflect the extended timeframe typically required to achieve meaningful outcomes.**

It is essential for those developing and funding such initiatives to acknowledge that achieving system-level impacts typically requires a decade or more. This prolonged timeframe is especially true for initiatives aiming to shift deeply-rooted attitudes, relationships, and practices, as well as for built-environment projects that must transition from concept development to construction. Consequently, initiative designs should either adjust their theory of change to focus on outcomes realistically achievable within shorter periods, such as three years, or commit to extending timelines sufficiently to facilitate meaningful systemic change and ensure projects reach successful completion.

**2 FLEXIBILITY: The design of multisite health equity initiatives should also be flexible enough to respond to changes in the context and site priorities.**

This complex, long-term work takes different forms over time, requiring a flexible initiative structure that can adapt and recalibrate as needed. Equitable community development efforts that aim to advance built-environment projects and system changes at the local and state levels are not straightforward. As seen with BHEC, specific topic areas, like food justice, which were not initially a focus area of the initiative, emerged and gained momentum over time. To some extent, Reinvestment Fund leaned into this emerging topic as the initiative unfolded, forming an affinity group and incorporating relevant discussions and site tours into convenings.

## 3 DUAL FOCUS: It is important to recognize that advancing both system change goals and built-environment projects involves a diverse set of actors, skills, and approaches.

It is challenging to drive system change when there is a strong priority on advancing built-environment projects. The types of actors who typically work on built-environment projects deal with land assembly, capital stacks, and pro formas. Those working to change policies, practices, and programs related to the community development system and addressing social determinants of health are often stakeholders with a policy background and organizing skills. System change does not naturally emerge from built-environment projects; it requires the engagement of individuals with policy expertise. While some individuals may possess the skills and abilities to contribute to both, expecting them to lead both is often unrealistic. To successfully advance built-environment projects and system change, engaging individuals with the right mix of expertise is essential. It is also critical to recognize that the strategies to advance built-environment projects differ from those to change systems.

## 4 ALIGNMENT: It is crucial to align initiative activities with existing state and local system change efforts to achieve a meaningful and sustainable impact.

Initiatives that integrate with the ongoing local context position themselves for success. For instance, BHEC partners focused on food access achieved robust outcomes by aligning with other efforts and stakeholders addressing similar issues. However, driving system change is more challenging when initiative activities are not well-aligned with existing on-the-ground efforts. A deeper understanding and strategic integration within the broader policy landscape would have strengthened the BHEC initiative. Recognizing emerging complementary efforts and recalibrating the initiative design to incorporate them, such as expanding the advisor group composition and encouraging teams to reassess their partnerships, helps leverage momentum and leads to stronger, more sustainable outcomes. Identifying and proactively incorporating new initiative efforts, along with ongoing corresponding activities, is critical to maximizing momentum and achieving sustainable outcomes.

## 5 TEAM: Intermediaries and funders should not prioritize assembling a fixed collaborative "team" but emphasize the need to engage strategic partners throughout the process.

With the understanding that a variety of team structures can lead to progress, it may be counter-productive to assemble a narrow, fixed team of actors to sign on for the entirety of the initiative. A strong community development organization as the lead entity—committed to collaboration and an openness to taking on systems change work—can be trusted to develop deeper relationships with local partners and engage a broader set of individuals and organizations as the work emerges. This is particularly true if the initiative's design includes activities such as convenings and peer learning opportunities that aim to foster new and deeper relationships within cities and between communities and state actors. Intermediaries may want to emphasize the expectations of a fluid team structure in the initial initiative application.

## 6 SUSTAINABILITY: It is important to recognize the implications of the end of an initiative, plan proactively for exit and sustainability strategies prior to its completion, and clearly communicate that vision to relevant participating stakeholders.

Community development work aimed at building healthier, more equitable communities is ongoing by nature—it does not end when a funded initiative concludes. Yet without thoughtful planning, the end of such initiatives can stall hard-won progress. Funders and intermediaries can play a critical role in supporting sustainability beyond the grant period.

One approach is to identify follow-on funding opportunities—either directly or by connecting grantees with aligned funders—to continue promising work seeded during the initiative. Funders and intermediaries can also collaborate with grantees to explore creative strategies for sustaining the work. For example, encouraging initiative participants to engage their boards early on can build internal support and highlight the value of new roles or practices. This engagement can lay the groundwork for boards to prioritize ongoing funding for staff positions created during the initiative or to embed key initiative principles into organizations' strategic direction. Finally, funders can use their influence to encourage broader support—from state government or local philanthropy—for the initiative's values, strengthening an enabling environment where the work can continue to thrive.

# APPENDIX

## BHEC advisors

1. Leslie A. Anderson, president and CEO, New Jersey Redevelopment Authority (NJRA)
2. Robert Atkins, former executive director, New Jersey Health Initiatives*
3. Staci Berger, president and CEO, Housing and Community Development Network of New Jersey (HCDNNJ)
4. Katie Brennan, former chief of staff, New Jersey Housing Mortgage and Finance Agency (NJHMFA)*
5. Victoria Brogan, senior vice president of strategic initiatives, New Jersey Hospital Association (NJHA)
6. Tai Cooper, chief community development officer, New Jersey Economic Development Authority (NJEDA)
7. Marc Dashield, former project manager, community strategies, New Jersey Community Capital (NJCC)
8. Rev. Eric Dobson, senior special advisor, Fairshare Housing, and executive director, United Black Agenda
9. Barbara George Johnson, vice president of external affairs and urban policy and research, Watson Institute for Public Policy, Kean University
10. Darryl Godfrey, chief operating officer, New Jersey Redevelopment Authority (NJRA)
11. Lois Greco, philanthropic consultant*
12. Hanaa Hamdi, former director of health impact investment strategies and partnerships, New Jersey Community Capital (NJCC) *
13. Jeanne Herb, former executive director, environmental analysis & communications group, Rutgers University, Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy
14. Marie Mascherin, former chief operating officer, New Jersey Community Capital (NJCC)*
15. Amanda Medina-Forrester, executive director, Office of Minority and Multicultural Health, New Jersey Department of Health
16. Melanie Walter, executive director, New Jersey Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency (NJHMFA)
17. Janel Winter, director, Division of Housing and Community Resources, New Jersey Department of Community Affairs (NJDCA)

*Asterisks indicate advisors who did not participate in the advising role for the full duration of BHEC, primarily due to a change in employment.