



# Evaluation of the Healthy Living Initiative

## High-level findings:

- Collaboration funded projects advanced community ownership of local food systems and contributed to increased availability and distribution of healthy foods. Despite these advancements, affordability remains an obstacle for many families.
- Robust peer leadership programs contributed to community organizations' capacity to provide culturally relevant health information and the development of non-judgmental, community-led spaces for learning.
- Increased accessibility of physical activity opportunities through Collaboration projects improved participation among Black and Latino youth. Integrating social-emotional learning into these physical activity programs showed promise as a non-traditional approach to improving youth mental health.
- The Collaboration effectively reached its intended participants, Black and Latino children and young adults in Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan.

## I. Introduction

### Background

In 2016, Boston Children's Hospital's Office of Community Health (OCH) received approval through the Massachusetts Determination of Need program to launch a \$53.4 million community health initiative entitled Boston Children's Collaboration for Community Health ("the Collaboration"). Boston Children's convened a Community Advisory Committee and conducted a needs assessment through a community engagement process to identify ways to use the funds, culminating in the development of a [Funding Strategy Report](#) that identified nine strategic initiatives.

Among these, the Community Physical Activity, Recreation and Food Access strategic initiative (later renamed the "Healthy Living" initiative) was allocated \$4.5 million dollars over six years to contribute to the overall goal of fostering collaboration and cohesion in communities disproportionately impacted by inequities in health and the social determinants of health. The specific objectives were to:

- Strengthen the community infrastructure for healthy food access, physical activity, and recreation, and
- Expand evidence-based or promising enrichment, recreation, and food security/access initiatives.

The expected long-term impacts of this initiative were a) increased participation in physical activity and recreation, b) increased access to and consumption of foods that meet guidelines for health, and c) building parent and youth leadership as a priority outcome of the initiatives.

To further these goals and objectives, OCH funded community nonprofits, health centers, and regional organizations (referred to as "funded partners") in two three-year cycles of funding. The first cycle (2018-2021) included 10 funded partners; the second cycle (2021-2024) included 12 funded partners, including five from the first cycle. All funded partners and their projects are listed at the end of this report.

## Evaluation of the Healthy Living Initiative

In 2017, OCH partnered with Mathematica to serve as their Evaluation Partner for the Collaboration. As part of this work, Mathematica co-created a theory of change for the Healthy Living initiative that articulated the core strategies through which the Collaboration planned to achieve the initiative's goals (Figure 1). The theory of change outlines how funded partners' activities (organized under three levers of change) would address the root causes of children's health inequities and lead to improvements across three broad domains that influence child health and wellbeing (changes in communities, services, and systems). These changes would contribute to improvements in child well-being, including reduced obesity, improved nutritional status, and improved mental health.

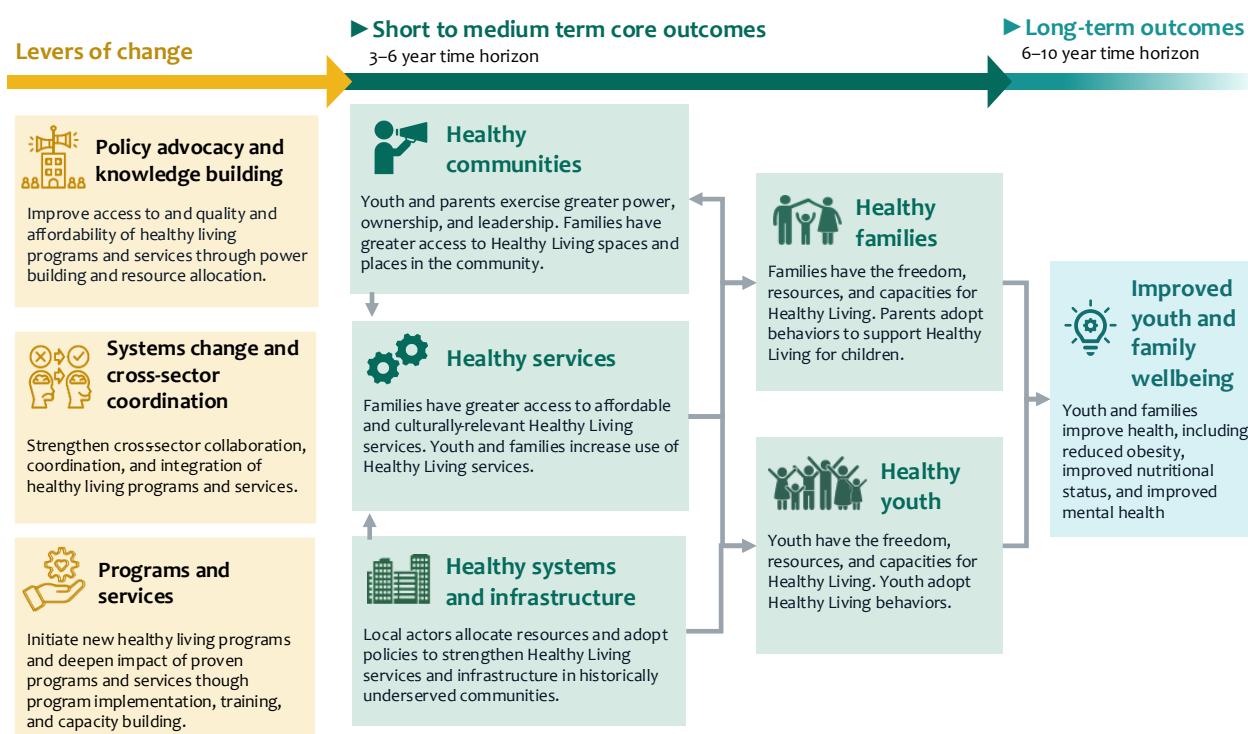
Mathematica used the theory of change to develop a mixed methods measurement framework to guide monitoring, evaluation and learning around the initiative. We used this measurement framework throughout the

implementation of the Healthy Living initiative to guide the ongoing monitoring and formative evaluation.

At the start of each funding cycle, Mathematica collaborated with funded partners to develop a set of quantitative indicators to measure their progress along the theory of change. Indicators were unique to each project but structured to allow progress to be summarized across partners. Funded partners were asked to report on these quantitative indicators twice annually. Funded partners also reported on standardized narrative questions about progress, challenges, partnerships, and advances in children's health equity. Additionally, funded partners reported on the age, race/ethnicity, and home zip code of individuals engaged in their programs (described in greater detail in [this brief](#)).

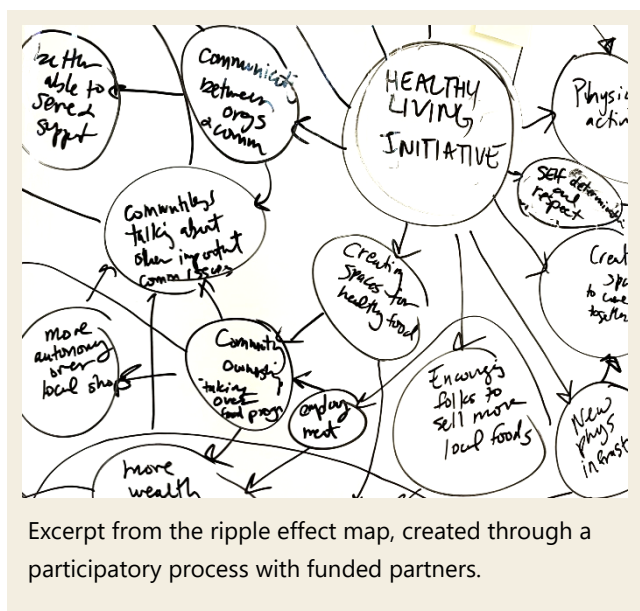
Collectively, Mathematica and OCH used this data to monitor funded partner progress towards goals and to structure implementation support on an ongoing basis. At the initiative-level, Mathematica used these data to develop monitoring and formative evaluation reports which tracked

Figure 1. Healthy Living Theory of Change



progress on key indicators, raised common challenges, and highlighted accomplishments. The Collaboration posted public-facing versions of these reports to [their webpage](#).

At the end of each cycle, Mathematica conducted supplemental data collection directly with funded partners to develop learnings and inform summative evaluation questions. At the end of the first cycle, Mathematica conducted virtual semi-structured interviews with the first cycle of funded partners to gather end-of-grant reflections. We deductively coded interviews by topics and shared emergent themes within each topic with OCH. In cycle 2, Mathematica held a Ripple Effect Mapping exercise with funded partners (see section C).



The summative evaluation of the Healthy Living initiative reviewed measurement data across the six years of work to draw evaluative conclusions. We synthesized evidence of how funded projects contributed to improvements in:

- A. Parents and caregivers' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors to support healthy eating and physical activity
- B. Children and youths' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to healthy eating and physical activity
- C. Youths' social and developmental outcomes

- D. Access to healthy foods and food security
- E. Access to opportunities for physical activity
- F. Sustained partnerships and funding for programs and services that promote healthy eating and physical activity among children and their families.

## Data sources for this report

For this report, Mathematica drew on the data collected during the monitoring and formative evaluation of the Healthy Living initiative, including narrative reporting, indicator data, demographic data, and interview data.

To guide the focus of the summative evaluation and collect additional data from the second cycle of funded partners, Mathematica held an in-person session with staff from funded organizations in October 2024. Eleven of the 12 Healthy Living funded partners attended, along with staff funded under the collaboration for food access work. During the session, Mathematica engaged funded partners in Ripple Effect Mapping (REM) exercise, a participatory way to examine outcomes from a complex collaboration. Funded partners held peer-to-peer interviews before participating in a mind-mapping session, where we visually documented intended and unintended changes resulting from activities. After we refined the map post-event, funded partners provided input on the most significant changes in the map.



Staff from funded partners held peer-to-peer interviews to generate ideas and exchange knowledge.

We overlaid the ripple effects map onto the theory of change to triangulate anticipated changes with those articulated during the REM session. We then considered three factors to determine where to focus the evaluation: (1) funded partners' perceptions of the most significant changes; (2) strategies OCH invested in that warranted further exploration; and (3) areas with robust data collection. Through this exercise, we articulated three areas of focus for the evaluation, described in Section III.

## **Limitations**

Several limitations in data availability or structure impacted the evaluation of the Healthy Living initiative. Funded partners reported on quantitative indicators specific to their diverse program models, which made it difficult to aggregate quantitative data within the pathways. As a result, some quantitative data reported underestimates the total reach and outcomes of the initiative, within a given domain.

Additionally, the Collaboration did not require funded organizations to collect new participant-level outcome data exclusively for this grant, given the burden this would place on organizations and the time horizons for change. As a result, youth

and family-level outcomes for the Healthy Living Initiative are largely qualitative, with some organizations reporting existing quantitative measures of participants' growth through their programs. For organizations funded in the first cycle, the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted programming and data collection, limiting much of the planned data collection on participants' outcomes.

## **Overview of this Report**

The first section of the report provides a high-level overview of the initiative's progress over the six years of funding, including data on the Healthy Living initiative's reach in Boston. It presents highlights from funded partners' indicator and demographic reporting and assesses the extent to which the Collaboration achieved its goals of reaching communities historically denied equal access to the social determinants of health. The following section includes three narratives that assess the extent to which funded partners contributed to improvements in the desired outcomes of the initiative. We conclude with a discussion of the evaluation's limitations and future directions.

## II. Highlights of Initiative Progress (2018-2024)



**950 youth leaders**  
conducting activities such  
as peer education, bike  
repair, and urban farming



**512 healthy eating  
events**, including  
culturally relevant  
cooking classes



**283,920 servings of  
fresh produce** distributed  
and purchased



**226 youth reported a  
positive change** in  
social-emotional skills or  
wellbeing



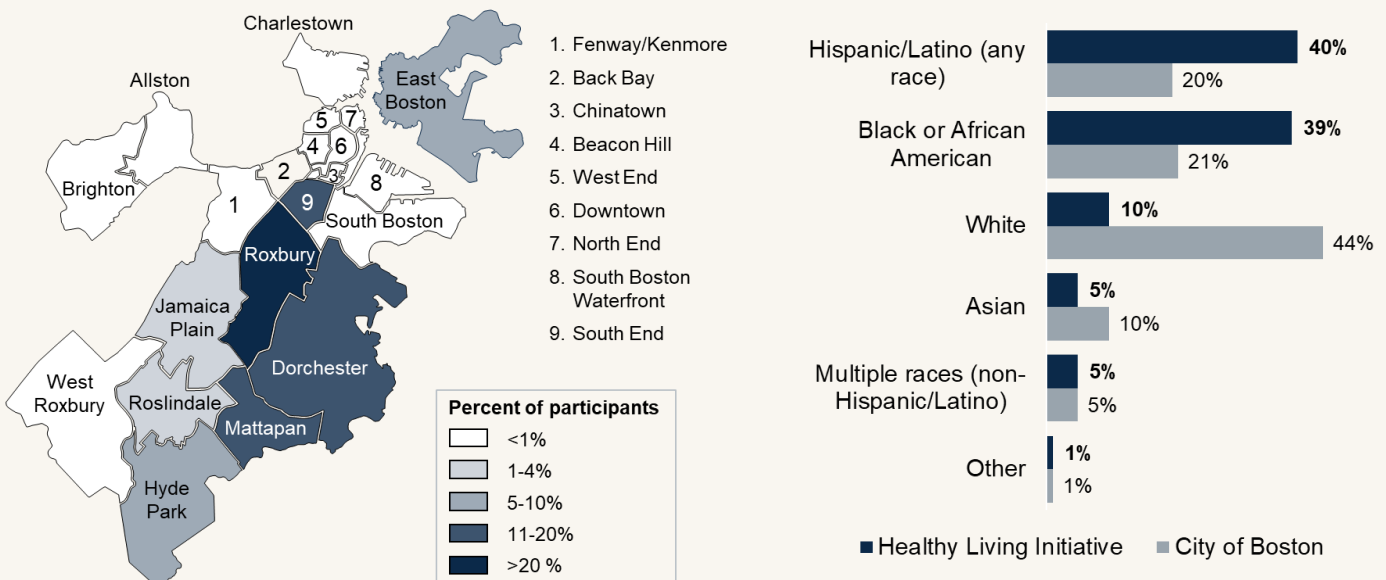
**640 parents changed  
their knowledge or  
attitudes** about nutrition  
and healthy living



**12,461 children and  
families engaged in  
physical activities** like  
biking and sports leagues

### Alignment with Health Equity Goals

The Collaboration primarily engaged children (71%), young adults (15%), and parents (9%) in communities with the highest childhood poverty rates in Boston (Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan). Program participants were predominantly Hispanic/Latino and Black, in alignment with the Collaboration's commitment to reaching communities historically denied equal access to resources. These values are based on demographic reporting on 15,558 individuals engaged in activities at funded partner organizations.



### III. Introduction to the Evaluation Narratives

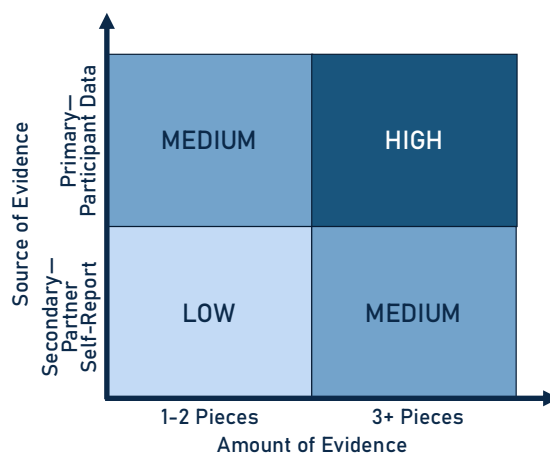
The three narratives that follow assess how the Collaboration contributed to its overall goals. We accomplish this by evaluating funded partners' contributions to change in three domains:

- Increasing healthy food consumption through community ownership
- Delivering information through trusted messengers to promote uptake of healthy behaviors
- Using physical activity interventions as a catalyst for improving youth mental health

Funded partners first articulated these concepts during the Ripple Effects Mapping session as some of the most significant ways that their organizations affected changes in healthy living in their communities. As articulated above, we selected and refined these concepts with OCH to better understand the initiative's activities and outcomes that contributed to change.

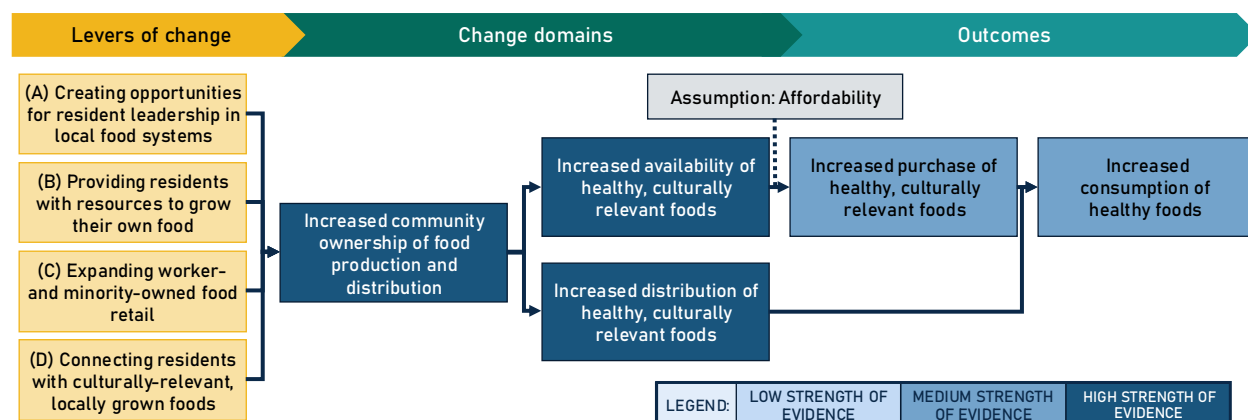
Mathematica organized data available on each of these domains from six years of indicator reporting, narrative reporting, interviews, and the ripple effect mapping session. We further categorized this evidence by the specific activities and outcomes within each domain, shown at the start of each narrative. We then assessed the strength of evidence for each activity or outcome using the framework below (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Strength of Evidence Assessment Criteria



Families participate in a workshop on the history, folklore, and medicinal properties of sunflowers at Urban Farming Institute's Astoria Farm. Participants received sunflower seeds to plant in their own gardens.

## IV. Increasing Healthy Food Consumption through Community Ownership



### Introduction

In this narrative, we document the ways in which the Collaboration supported the availability, purchase, and consumption of healthy foods by changing conditions in local food systems. We focus on the ways in which organizations implemented activities according to the levers of change in the initiative's theory of change and aligned with the principles of food sovereignty, a paradigm that recognizes community members' right to control and shape their own local food production and distribution systems. By increasing community ownership, the Collaboration advanced access to healthy, culturally relevant foods in Boston neighborhoods.

### Levers of Change

Collaboration-funded projects employed four sets of strategic activities that broadly align with a food sovereignty approach:

**A. Creating opportunities for resident leadership in local food systems.** The Collaboration supported youth-led urban farming activities at Haley House's Thornton Street Farm, Urban Farming Institute's Fowler Clark Epstein Farm, Sociedad Latina's hydroponics and community garden, and The Food Project's Dudley Greenhouse and farms. Youth leaders received stipends to lead urban farming activities and shape

programming. Grants also supported activities to enhance community influence, such as Haley House's community visioning process and the Food Project's community needs assessment around the development of a food hub in Dudley Square.

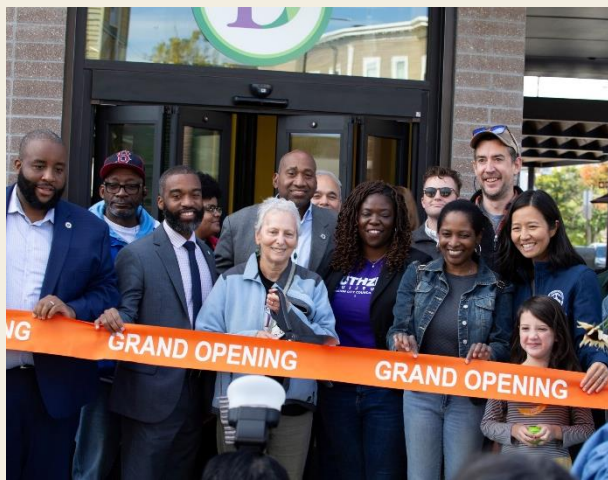
*"More than just providing access, the farm works to increase knowledge of and a sense of connection to and ownership of the fruits of this land for our neighbors. This land belongs to the community; Haley House is just a steward."* Haley House

**B. Providing residents with resources to grow their own food.** The Food Project, Urban Farming Institute, and Haley House built over 500 community garden beds for residents' use. Likewise, Sociedad Latina's youth leaders helped Mission Hill residents establish garden plots. Through their new youth-led hydroponics program, Sociedad Latina provided families with their own hydroponic setups and training.

*"The raised bed gardens are empowering individuals to grow the type of culturally appropriate foods they truly desire. We believe that the opportunity to grow one's own food is deeply empowering, building equity and food sovereignty."*

The Food Project

**C. Expanding worker and minority-owned food retail.** Collaboration funding expanded worker- and minority-owned food retail enterprises. Dorchester Food Co-op, a community-owned grocery store, used funds to support the launch of their grocery store and engagement with local communities. The Massachusetts Food Trust Project received funding to support their loan program for farm stands, corner stores, independent grocery stores, and other establishments to increase their ability to distribute healthy, fresh foods. Collaboration funds also supported Black-owned food service company City Fresh Foods' expansion in Roxbury.



Mayor Michelle Wu and city and state elected officials join Dorchester Food Coop's leadership team for its grand opening in October 2023 in Bowdoin-Geneva.

**D. Connecting residents with culturally relevant, locally grown foods.** The Collaboration also supported farmers' markets affiliated with urban farms, connecting growers with consumers to access fresh, sustainably grown food. The Food Project used funds to extend their Farmer's Market season, and Mattapan Food and Fitness Coalition provided opportunities for youth leadership at their Farm Stand and Market.

## Changes in Services, Institutions, and Communities

**Increased community ownership of food production and distribution.** We observed

evidence of increased ownership of food distribution in the outcomes of worker- and minority-owned food retail enterprises. Dorchester Food Co-op prioritized inclusive community ownership at launch by offering 127 subsidized member shares to low-income households and hiring 52 neighborhood residents. City Fresh Foods created an employee stock-option program. The Massachusetts Food Trust Project aided 38 food retailers across Massachusetts—48% minority owned—with loans to increase fresh food access.

*"[This is] a significant expansion of [food] access in traditionally underserved communities. Keeping those healthy food retailers alive and moving forward during COVID has been especially critical for the communities they serve."*

Massachusetts Food Trust Project

Processes to increase community engagement in urban farms and retailers additionally contributed to increased *cultural relevance* of foods. Across organizations, staff noted how community input and knowledge of residents' cultural backgrounds informed purchasing and crop selection.

*"We grow food that embraces our residents' cultural backgrounds including callaloo and aji dulce peppers, and we also offer culturally relevant food and nutrition education."*

Urban Farming Institute

**Increased availability of healthy, culturally relevant foods.** Projects supported through the Collaboration expanded residents' physical access to healthy food. Food retail projects with loans from Massachusetts Food Trust Project reached an estimated 380,000 adults and 90,000 children, the majority Black, Asian, and Hispanic residents in underserved areas. For example, Mill City Grows in Lowell opened a commercial kitchen to process produce from their farm and distribute this at markets. Dorchester Food Co-op opened its doors in October 2023 in Bowdoin-Geneva, a majority

Black and Hispanic neighborhood with strong immigrant diasporas.

*"I've heard so many people say—of all colors—how this was a blessing for them, how they don't have to travel far anymore to get any of these products that they've been looking for."*

Employee at Dorchester Food Co-op

The Collaboration also supported farmers markets affiliated with urban farms, and connected growers with consumers for fresh, sustainably grown food. The Food Project used funds to extend their Farmer's Market season, and Mattapan Food and Fitness Coalition provided opportunities for youth leadership at their Farm Stand and Market.

*"It's taking a step to reduce food deserts and making more healthy food available to more people, which I think the farmer's market is definitely really good for."*

Youth leader with Mattapan Food and Fitness Coalition

**Increased distribution of healthy, culturally relevant foods.** Community-driven organizations facilitated and expanded produce distribution. Haley House and the Food Project distributed more than 107,700 servings of produce to residents, with the Food Project expanding their provision of Fresh Veggie Boxes from 60 to 220 boxes over the funding period. Haley House launched a produce delivery program to Highland Park seniors during the height of COVID-19; youth leaders harvested and personally delivered produce, building cross-generational connections. Dorchester Food Co-op served as a conduit between producers and families, facilitating the delivery of over 1,000 lbs. of food per week to food pantries and local produce from Boston Area Gleaners to families.

*"I can say without a shadow of a doubt, that the collaboration with [Dorchester Food] Co-op has enabled us to give out*

*more high-quality food than we ever have in the past."*

Director of the Roslindale Food Collective

The Mayor's Office of Food Access also addressed immediate needs for low-income families through Boston Eats, which distributed summer meals through 89 community sites. Collaboration funds supported the distribution of 420,850 meals.

## Outcomes for Children and Families

**Increased purchase of healthy, culturally relevant foods.** To a more limited extent, we found evidence that retail availability translated to increased purchase of healthy foods. The Food Project estimated residents purchased 33,200 servings of produce during extended market days, and Mattapan Food and Fitness Coalition reported that residents purchased 143,020 servings of produce at their farmer's market. City Fresh Food's expansion enabled them to secure a \$17-million food service contract in 2022 with Boston Public Schools, serving culturally diverse offerings like Jamaican beef patties and sourcing produce from regional farms.

**A Note on Affordability.** Funded partners raised affordability as a significant barrier to increased purchase of healthy foods. While food retailers almost universally accepted SNAP/EBT with additional discounts, they reported healthier foods they stock are still financially out of reach for some residents. Additional discounts, like Boston's farmers market coupon program, increased affordability, but require ongoing investment; the Food Project reported a decline in their market sales once the coupon program was discontinued.

*"It's not just 'Are they going to sell these foods?' but 'Are people going to buy these foods?'"*

Funded partner at Collaboration gathering

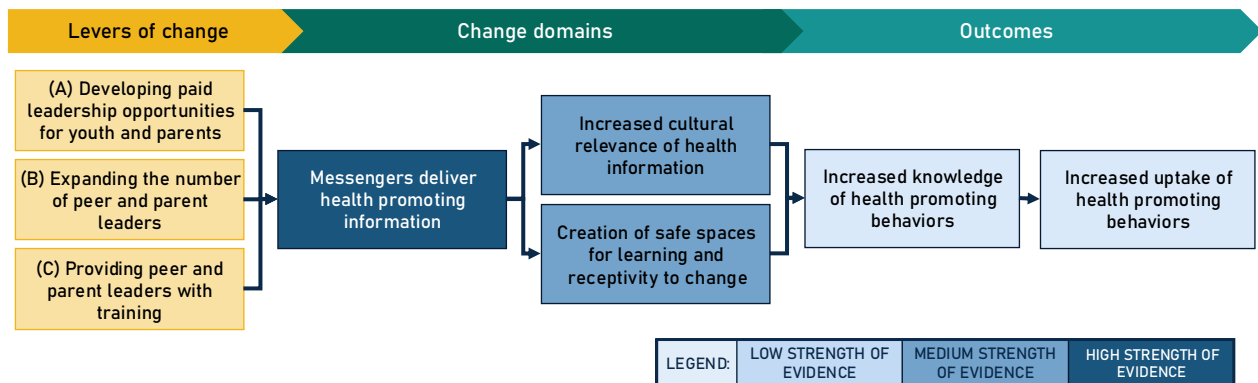
**Increased consumption of healthy foods.** While the efforts above indicated the Collaboration's contributions to food access, we had limited data to confirm increased consumption. Once a

community member produces, receives, or purchases healthy foods, consumption may be limited by parents' knowledge or time to prepare foods and children's willingness to try new foods. Many funded partners addressed this through nutrition education, discussed in part in the next pathway. Funded partners shared a few stories of how activities influenced families' consumption of healthy foods, such as increasing exposure to fruits and vegetables through urban farms, expanded healthy food options in grocery stores, and providing low or no-cost foods. Survey data from the Food Project found that 90 percent of farmers' market customers reported consuming more produce.

*"The program was consistent with supplying veggies and produce. It caused me to cook healthy meals weekly. I otherwise would not go to the grocery store and buy fresh veggies and produce."*

Resident receiving produce from Haley House

## V. Delivery of Health Information Through Peer Leaders



### Introduction

Using peer health educators can enhance how messages are received, understood, and acted upon. People are more receptive to guidance when it comes from someone they can relate to and trust, making the message more relevant and credible.<sup>1</sup> Recognizing this, the Collaboration partnered with community organizations to train and elevate youth and parents to increase engagement across diverse populations and promote healthy behaviors. In this narrative, we document the process and achievements of these trusted messengers.

### Levers of Change

Community organizations strengthened Healthy Living activities by providing substantive leadership opportunities for youth and parents - training them to succeed.

**A. Developing leadership opportunities for youth and parents.** The Collaboration funded the launch or expansion of community leadership programs at several organizations, in addition to the youth leadership roles on urban farms discussed in the previous narrative. Several opportunities focused explicitly on health education, including Health Educators at Sociedad Latina, Peer Leaders at Waltham Boys and Girls Club, and Parent Leaders at the Somali Parents Advocacy Center for Education. Other organizations expanded leadership opportunities in physical activity programs, including biking-related positions at Mattapan Food and Fitness

Coalition, Bikes not Bombs, and Playworks' Junior Coach program. Youth with South Street Youth Center developed resources around social and emotional health for youth and selected proposals for healthy activities. WalkMassachusetts engaged parents and caregivers in East Boston to advocate for changes in the built environment to improve residents' health and safety.

*"[The program is] about being a leader to younger kids even though you are a kid, but still being able to teach them new things. Being a leader means working hard, thinking about others, and having empathy."*

Junior coach with Playworks

**B. Expanding the number of peer and parent leaders.** Partners hired or engaged 950 youth and 60 parents or adults to lead healthy living activities and campaigns (524 of the youth being Playworks Junior Coaches). The majority of the roles included stipends for participating in training and conducting activities.

**C. Providing peer and parent leaders with training.** Organizations held trainings for leaders designed to meet the needs of the role and advance the knowledge or skills needed to lead Healthy Living activities. For example, Bikes Not Bombs Youth Apprentices led bike classes and workshops while advancing through a three-year program focused on bike repair, career skills, and transportation equity. Organizations equipped

leaders to communicate health information and coordinate initiatives; youth leaders with Waltham Boys and Girls Club, for instance, completed training in peer outreach, addressing depression, and program facilitation.

Through training, organizations encouraged leaders to integrate their own lived experiences and cultural backgrounds into their concepts of healthy behaviors. Partnerships supported organizations' cultural responsiveness; for example, Mattapan Food and Fitness Coalition partnered with Boston Organization of Nutritionists and Dietitians of Color to develop their nutrition curriculum. Several organizations explicitly integrated content on racial equity and health disparities into their curricula for leaders.

*"As many of our youth are people of color with immigrant backgrounds, we discussed how important it was to balance what was taught about health and wellness through food in a Western scope and our own pride and comfort about our cultural foods."*

Sociedad Latina

## Changes in Services, Institutions, and Communities

**Delivery of health-promoting information by trusted messengers.** Peer leaders successfully conducted community outreach on health-related topics through different avenues. Training and coaching by partner organizations enabled leaders to step into substantive roles in communicating with peers, community members, and decision-makers. Peers led at least 88 community events with more than 293 attendees, though this count underestimates the total due to data availability. Peer leaders most often:

- Led or supported community events and workshops: Young Farmers prepared healthy snacks for family activity days at Haley House's Thorton Street Farm
- Advocated for community infrastructure to support healthy living: Leaders with

WalkMassachusetts identified and set up temporary curb extension installations to improve pedestrian safety, then used pedestrian feedback to advocate for permanent solutions

- Shaped programming at community organizations: Youth led a proposal and grantmaking process for healthy living activities at South Street Youth Center
- Led healthy living activities: Playworks' Junior Coaches facilitated physically active games in classrooms at Boston Public Schools
- Held informal conversations with peers and family members to encourage taking steps to improve healthy behaviors

*"We have seen small groups of participants get together and discuss nutrition while sharing food they've cooked according to guidelines we've shared during class."*

Somali Parents Advocacy Center for Education



Health Educators with Sociedad Latina lead workshops on hydroponic gardening.

**Increased cultural relevance of health information.** Partners increased the cultural relevance of health information by empowering peer leaders to incorporate cultural perspectives into their messages and actions. To encourage healthy eating, leaders focused on presenting healthy options that aligned with the ethnic backgrounds of their neighborhoods. For example,

youth with Mattapan Food and Fitness Coalition developed a cookbook of ethnically relevant healthy recipes. Peer leaders also influenced the relevance of offerings by providing input on future programming. At Sociedad Latina, Health Educators offered insights on what activities and initiatives would be most impactful for themselves and their peers.

**Creation of safe spaces for learning and receptivity to change.** Organizations engaging peer leaders created spaces where youth, parents, and other community members felt comfortable, though peer leadership was just one of several contributing factors. Organizations shared participant and staff perspectives on how community-led programs supported a safe, non-judgmental learning environment for community members. Factors that contributed to increased receptivity included staff that reflected community members' identities, time invested in relationship building, community ownership, and engagement activities aligned with people's interests. Most evidence focused on how the organizations' culture and staffing contributed to the development of safe spaces; however, peer leadership contributed to both a sense of community ownership and the selection of engaging activities.

*"Because this space was peer-led and hosted in their own community, many participants felt safer talking about their experiences than they would have in a group led by an outsider or held in a medical setting."*

Haley House

## Outcomes for Children and Families

**Increased knowledge and uptake of health promoting behaviors.** Most organizations were not able to collect robust evidence on the effect of peer leaders on other community members' knowledge and practices, due to the challenges of tracking diffuse outcomes from peer leaders' influence. Anecdotally, organizations reported some examples of youth leaders modeling positive behaviors and affecting the health habits of other

community members. While the evidence base for peer health education programs supports the ability of peer education programs to promote healthy behaviors, we did not have enough data to evaluate whether this was the case for the individual programs.

*"It's been great having the Junior Coaches help out and model leadership behavior. I have noticed an increase in use of conflict resolution strategies in the classroom as well as at recess."*

Staff member, Grew School (Playworks)

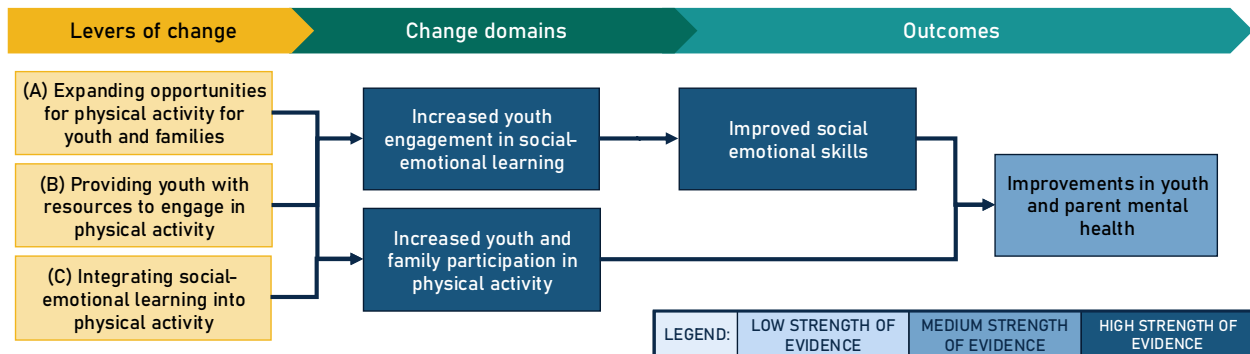
The value of these peer leadership programs was more evident in shaping programs and organizational culture, as described above, and in positive outcomes for *youth and parent leaders* themselves. All organizations provided evidence that peer leaders improved their confidence, leadership, and communication skills through training and action.



*"We have supported parents and caregivers in addressing the consequences of obstacles to green spaces, open spaces, and safe streets. This has resulted in increased civic understanding and a sense of confidence when advocating for their own health and well-being, we hope ultimately benefiting their children and families."*

WalkMassachusetts

## VI. Increasing Family and Youth Mental Health through Physical Activity



### Introduction

Residents of Boston neighborhoods have uneven access to opportunities for physical activity, with disparities driven by factors like socioeconomic status, neighborhood safety, and access to green spaces or other resources. Physical activity not only improves physical health, but also plays a vital role in supporting mental well-being.<sup>ii</sup> This narrative examines how the Collaboration's collective efforts to increase access to engagement in exercise and active play, including the integration of social-emotional learning into these activities, contributed to improvements in mental health.

### Levers of Change

Organizations within the collaboration used several responsive strategies to increase youth and parents' engagement in physical activity and mental well-being.

**A. Expanding accessible opportunities for physical activity for youth and families.** The Collaboration expanded access to physical activity programs for primarily Black and Latino youth in Boston by supporting a range of culturally relevant, community-based options. Organizations offered sports leagues, outdoor activities, walking challenges, and group bike rides—among other activities—to engage youth and families in active lifestyles.

To remove barriers to access, organizations partnered with more than 46 housing developments, schools, and community centers to offer on-site programming. For example, Boston Centers for Youth and Families hosted Family Gym, a free drop-in program for families with young children, at community centers in the South End, Dorchester, Roxbury, and other neighborhoods with limited safe recreational space.



*"Our Say YES program is especially important given the impact that isolation has been shown to have on our community. The barriers of income, cultural and religious differences, and disability status can prevent both kids and adults from engaging with these [recreational] opportunities."*

Somali Parents Advocacy Center for Education

During the COVID-19 pandemic, programs swiftly adapted to reach youth at home; for example, when their ski and snowboarding trips were canceled, Youth Enrichment Services shifted to offering drop-in biking programs at four local housing developments. Both Youth Enrichment Services and the Somali Parents Advocacy Center for Education offered adaptive programs to address disparities in access for youth with disabilities.

**B. Providing youth with resources to engage in physical activity.** Three organizations used Collaboration funds to provide youth with 111 bikes and training in both maintenance and biking skills. Access to bicycles and repair skills removed barriers to youth safely engaging in physically active transportation.

*"Ninety-five percent of participants did not have a bike at the start of the program. Our surveys showed that there was a significant increase in young people who consistently rode bikes after the program."*

Bikes Not Bombs

**C. Integrating social-emotional learning into physical activity.** Two organizations explicitly incorporated social-emotional learning into physical activity through Collaboration funding. Playworks' provided training in social-emotional learning to school-based coaches. In addition, youth in Playworks' Junior Coaches program receive 80 hours of training to build social and emotional skills, which they use to encourage students to be more active and engaged in recess and classrooms.

Bikes not Bombs partnered with Children's Services of Roxbury through this funding opportunity to integrate social-emotional learning workshops into their Bike School classes. Children's Services of Roxbury delivered 165 hours of therapeutic support through this partnership, with a curriculum facilitated by professional therapeutic support staff.

*"[Our] social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum covers essential topics such as agency, growth mindset, self-care, and the importance of support systems. The SEL curriculum supported participants' communication skills and capacity for self-advocacy."*

Bikes not Bombs/Children's Services of Roxbury

## Changes in Services, Institutions, and Communities

**Increased youth and family participation in physical activity.** Funded organizations successfully increased youth participation in physical activity during the funding period through expanding program enrollment or offering new programs. Over the funding period, more than 2,281 youth and families participated in activities with nine organizations, contributing toward the recommended guideline of 60 minutes of physical activity per day. In Mattapan, families walked over 11,000 miles as part of Healthy Walking Challenges, started with Collaboration funds in 2019.

*"Participants reported making behavior changes during the [walking] challenge, like walking instead of taking the bus, or going for more walks with neighbors, friends, and family."*

Mattapan Food and Fitness Coalition

Playworks contributed to increasing the overall physical activity level of over 10,000 students at Boston Public Schools by training and placing coaches to encourage active play at recess. Coaches help schools address barriers to play: addressing safety concerns, inviting in excluded students to activities, and supporting conflict resolution. 98% of teachers and principals at Playworks schools agreed that more students were physically active at recess, with an observed 3-6% increase in physical activity.

Some personal changes in physical activity achieved may sustain beyond the funding period, based on data from program participants across several organizations. Participants overwhelmingly said that they intended to continue in physical activity after the programs end. Several organizations reported increases in youth sport-specific skills, safety, and confidence, conditions that support future engagement in sports.

*"When youth feel safe engaging with YES and engaging in an outdoor physical activity, their willingness to continue in the program and in the activity and try something new next season also grows."*

Youth Enrichment Services

**Increased youth engagement in social-emotional learning.** Leadership roles in physical activity programs proved to be an effective entry point for engaging youth who might not otherwise choose to participate in a social-emotional learning program. At Bikes not Bombs, 81 youth progressed through the social-emotional learning curriculum. Playworks grew the leadership and social-emotional skills of 524 Junior Coaches through afterschool training.



Through Bikes Not Bombs' Bike School at Children's Services of Roxbury, participants built technical and social-emotional skills by refurbishing bikes to keep as their own.

## Outcomes for Children and Families

**Improved social-emotional skills.** There is strong evidence that youth in programs with social-emotional learning curricula increased their social-emotional skills. Both pre- and post-testing and observational data supports that the vast majority of youth improved in their resiliencies, emotional control, ability to recognize and communicate their needs, and assertiveness, among others. In Bikes not Bombs' program, 100% of youth completing pre- and post-assessments reported increases in social-emotional wellbeing after completing the program; likewise, 100% of youth assessed in Playworks' Junior Coaches program reported a positive change in one or more resiliencies after their participation.

*"One of my students struggled in the beginning of the year with behavior issues in class. Ever since our Playworks Coach got him involved with the Junior Coach program, his behavior has significantly improved."*

Support Staff, Taylor Elementary School

**Improvements in youth and family mental health.** Anecdotal evidence suggests that engagement in physical activity—particularly in group settings—may have contributed to improvements in mental health or well-being for community members engaged in the Collaboration. This aligns with the broader evidence that physical activity is protective for mental health, and this effect is stronger in group contexts.<sup>iii</sup> Participants and staff observers identified increased social support and connections, greater persistence through challenges, and less screentime as outcomes of participation in physical activity programs.

## VII. Conclusion

Over six years, the Healthy Living initiative funded a range of community-based strategies aimed at improving access to healthy food, physical activity, and culturally aligned health information. The Collaboration identified and built a network of community-driven organizations with the cultural competence to successfully engage with youth and families in priority Boston neighborhoods.

Funded partners provided both direct services—opportunities for physical activity and food access—and invested in systems change work. As a result, funded partners increased community leadership in local food systems and improved the local infrastructure to support healthy living.

Continued efforts in this space should emphasize addressing affordability, sustaining and expanding promising new program models, and assessing the long-term impacts of these health initiatives.

### Acknowledgements

Thank you to the funded partners recognized in this report—and listed below—for their participation in the evaluation and engagement in the Collaboration over the last six years. Your contributions to advancing the health of children and families in Boston made this possible. We also thank the Boston Children’s Board Committee for Community Health and Community Advisory Board for shaping the vision for the Healthy Living initiative and for their support in enhancing the impact of these efforts.

#### [Children’s Services of Roxbury](#) and [Bikes Not Bombs](#)

Healthy Pathways: Building Skills, Resiliency, and Joy Through Bicycle-Based Learning (2021-2024) supported young people from under-resourced Boston neighborhoods to build skills, establish healthy habits, advance transportation equity, and develop a passion for cycling in safe, supported, trauma-sensitive environments.

#### [City Fresh Foods](#)

The 94 Shirley Street Project (2022-2037) sets up the conditions for City Fresh Foods to remain in Roxbury, employ Roxbury residents, and make healthy, nutritious, and culturally diverse foods accessible to the neighborhood. City Fresh Foods promotes employee wealth through an employee stock ownership program and local purchasing.

#### [Dorchester Food Co-Op](#)

Transforming the Food System through Community Ownership and Healthy Food for All (2021-2024) opened a cooperative market to create access to affordable, nutritious food, build community wealth, and develop partnerships with urban farms and local health centers to enhance health, well-being, and equity in Dorchester.

#### [The Food Project](#)

Growing the Dudley Community Food Center (2021-2024) worked with residents and stakeholders to plan and pilot expanded programs for the Community Food Center, a new facility that will support residents to access, grow, cook, share, and advocate for healthy food in Dudley.

#### [The Foundation for BCYF](#)

Family Gym (2018-2021) provided a free, weekly play program that promotes physical activity for children ages 3-8 and their families, encouraging a healthy lifestyle in neighborhoods with high rates of obesity and low-access to safe, accessible play areas. This program expanded Family Gym to additional BCYF community centers and to develop a more robust nutrition education component.

#### [Haley House](#)

Roxbury Rooted: Nourishing Youth and Community through Urban Farming (2018-2024) provided opportunities for youth and families to connect with the land, grow, cook, and share food, and deepen relationships through urban farming, in partnership with the [Hawthorne Youth & Community Center](#) and [YouthBuild Boston](#). The

project included a leadership program to train youth food ambassadors, a cooking and nutrition program at Haley House, community meals programs, and the creation of urban farming and community gardens.

#### **Massachusetts Public Health Alliance**

Building and Strengthening the Massachusetts Food Trust Program (2018-2021) increased access to healthy foods in low- and moderate- income communities in Boston and across Massachusetts. It aimed to secure funding through advocacy and develop a strong program structure and reputation for the MFTP as the recognized financing source for healthy food enterprises in these communities.

#### **Mattapan Food and Fitness Coalition**

The Cooking with Confidence + Getting Physically Active Project (2018-2024) provided culturally based cooking classes and physical activity opportunities for families in Mattapan. It aimed to increase the healthy food consumption of Mattapan residents by promoting the use of community gardens, the Farmers Market and youth run Farm Stand, and increase regular physical activity through the promotion of seasonal activity programs.

#### **Playworks New England**

Playworks Boston Public School Expansion (2018-2024) provided coaches to support and improve the health of across priority schools in Boston by infusing play and physical activity throughout the school through daily recess, class game time, a peer leadership program, and afterschool sports leagues.

#### **Mayor's Office of Food Justice**

Boston Eats (2018-2021) increased access to healthy food for children in households facing food insecurity and struggling with adequate food access. It supported community partners to build capacity to offer sustainable summer and afterschool meal programs.

#### **Sociedad Latina**

Padres Comprometidos (2018-2021) connected low-income Latino, Spanish-speaking and immigrant families with health and wellness learning opportunities that focus on nutrition and fitness. Hydroponics STEM Lab (2021-2024) provided youth and families with healthier food options, nutrition education, and hands-on experiences in cultivating their own organic foods and contributing to greater food access in their community.

#### **Somali Parents Advocacy Center for Education**

Reconnecting and Reimagining Healthy Living for Somali-American Families in Boston (2021-2024) engaged Somali-American families in workshops and conversations to encourage the adoption of sustainable, healthy behaviors, and strengthen partnerships between families and social service and health care providers.

#### **Southern Jamaica Plain Health Center**

Entrepreneurship and Healing to Support South Street Center Youth (2021-2024) created entrepreneurship and employment opportunities to improve health and healing for youth of color in Jamaica Plain.

#### **Urban Farming Institute of Boston**

Healthy Eating for Boston's Communities of Color (2021-2024) provided a food- and farming-related curriculum for schools, and add education offerings for adults and families in Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan to increase their knowledge about growing food, cooking, and nutrition.

#### **WalkMassachusetts**

Connecting Kids and Families to Parks and Open Spaces (2021-2024) identified and addressed physical and social barriers to park access in East Boston in order to create a safe and welcome environment so all residents can enjoy their local parks and the associated health benefits.

### Waltham Boys & Girls Club

Youth-Led Health Initiative (2018-2021) focused on improving healthy lifestyles of young people. The youth-led group promoted physical activities, nutritional programs, and coping skill-building workshops throughout the community.

### Youth Enrichment Services

Outdoor Adventures with YES! (2018-2024) engaged youth from Roxbury, Dorchester, Jamaica Plain, and Mattapan in outdoor physical activities by expanding partnerships with additional housing developments, community-based organizations, and/or schools.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>i</sup> Abdi, F., & Simbar, M. (2013). The peer education approach in adolescents-narrative review article. *Iranian journal of public health*, 42(11), 1200.

<sup>ii</sup> Vieten, C., Sprengel, M., Lubarsky, O., Mansoor, R. Niebauer, E. (2022). Move Your Mental Health: a review of the evidence on the role of exercise and physical activity in mental health. John W. Brick Foundation.

<sup>iii</sup> Stevens, M., Lieschke, J., Cruwys, T., Cárdenas, D., Platow, M. J., & Reynolds, K. J. (2021). Better together: How group-based physical activity protects against depression. *Social science & medicine*, 286, 114337.