**Models for Community-Academic Partnerships:
West Philly Promise Neighborhood**

Community Brief

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This brief is part of a series that spotlights successful community-academic partnerships. Community-academic partnerships are collaborative relationships between community members, leaders, or organizations and colleges or universities. The goal of this series is to help researchers and community members learn more about coming together to improve health.

What Is Community-Based Participatory Research?

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) focuses on answering questions important to the community involved. It is an approach to research that changes the role of a researcher. Community members help guide the research process and contribute their skills, knowledge, and expertise.

CBPR can strengthen community-academic partnerships by including communities in all phases of a study. Community members being included in research ensures that the research will benefit the community while also improving research response rates, retention, and representativeness. In addition, community-driven solutions to public health issues also have the greatest potential to be adopted and to evolve with communities over time. Finally, community participation in research helps to ensure that communities have access to and ownership of data. Community access to data may help with program development and future social and policy change.

What Was the West Philly Promise Neighborhood?

The West Philly Promise Neighborhood (PN) is one example of a recent community-academic partnership in Philadelphia, PA. The PN initiative focused on a 2-square mile area of West Philadelphia and was funded by the U.S. Department of Education from 2017 to 2023. Its goal was to improve education, health, and economic successes for children, their families, and communities. In addition to funding programs for children and families, the initiative also incorporated CBPR approaches.
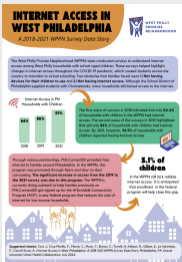
CBPR in Action

The PN initiative involved a CBPR approach with the aim of better understanding community wellbeing. Community members were involved in all phases of the research, as described below.

1. **Planning Phase:** One way that the initiative partnered with community members was through a Community Advisory Council (CAC). The CAC provided oversight to the entire initiative and assisted in planning different aspects of the PN evaluation research. For example, the CAC helped plan how data would be collected through surveys. These surveys were conducted in 2018, 2019, and 2021 to understand caregivers' and families' experiences of health, housing, safety, education, employment, their neighborhood, and the PN initiative. The CAC provided feedback on survey development, the study design, and the sampling strategy (who took the surveys and how to recruit them).

2. **Implementation Phase:** Members of the CAC felt initially distrustful of a new research project coming into their communities, since many projects collect data from residents but never return to share results that could benefit them. Because three waves of the survey were mandated by the research project sponsor, CAC members recommended that PN survey the same families over time, so that these families would have an opportunity to share their thoughts throughout the initiative. Results were also regularly reported back to participants to build trust and lasting relationships. To ensure that data was not being collected from outsiders, community members were also invited to join the research team. Over seven years, 20 community members were trained and hired as Community Researchers. These Community Researchers helped administer the surveys and collect data.

INTERNET ACCESS IN WEST PHILADELPHIA
A 2018-2021 WPPN Survey Data Story

The West Philly Promise Neighborhood (WPPN) team conducted surveys to understand internet access among West Philly households with school-aged children. These surveys helped highlight changes in internet access throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused students across the country to transition to virtual schooling. Two students their family faced were 1) **not having devices for their children to use** and 2) **Not having internet access.** Although the School District of Philadelphia provided free Chromebooks, many households still lacked access to the internet.

Internet Access in PN Households with Children

84% | 83% | 97%
2018 | 2019 | 2021

The first wave of surveys in 2018 indicated that only **84.4%** of households with children in the WPPN had internet access. The second wave of the surveys in 2019 highlighted that still only **83%** of households with children had internet access. **97.3%** of households with children reported having internet access.

3.1% of children
in the WPPN still lack reliable internet access. It is anticipated that enrollment in the federal program will help close this gap.

Through various partnerships, PHLConnectED provided free internet to families around Philadelphia. In the WPPN, this program was promoted through News and Jobs for close connectivity. **The significant increase in access from the 2019 to the 2021 survey was due to this program.** The WPPN's biggest saving outreach to help more families enroll in PHLConnectED get signed up for the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), a new federal program that reduces the cost of internet for low-income households.

Suggested citation: Cao, J., Cruz-Peralta, P., Haras, C., Riser, S., Diven, S., Terrell, H., Hebson, R., Gibson, S., et Interiano, P., Carroll Lisa, Common Access in West Philadelphia: A 2018-2021 WPPN Access Data Story. Philadelphia, PA: Drexel University Dornsife School of Public Health, 2024.

3. **Dissemination Phase:** Community Researchers have helped interpret the data from the perspectives of residents. They are now helping to share the results directly with the community through a technique called data storytelling. Data storytelling is a way to share the results of a research project so that many different people can understand them.

Data stories usually have three parts: numbers, a narrative, and a visual. These stories can be used to describe issues in an impactful way and to form powerful arguments.

For example, one current data story about the PN project focuses on changes in internet access during the COVID-19 pandemic (See graphic at left).

These data stories will be shared with local social service providers, programmatic partners, and civic associations in the neighborhood.

Community Researcher Workforce Development

One specific goal of the PN project was to support economic opportunities for families living in West Philly. Throughout the project, the PN team supported this goal by hiring community residents as project staff. Some of these community researchers now continue to contribute to other community-engaged research projects by facilitating focus groups, serving on research advisory boards, co-facilitating workshops, and presenting findings at local and national conferences. Team members feel that their involvement in research has supported their own personal and professional development. They have been able to create and strengthen relationships with community members and researchers, overcome fears related to data and research, and pursue new job opportunities.

West Philly Promise Neighborhood Community Researchers Christina Brown, Rita Nelson, and Hyden Terrell.

Community Ownership of Research Data

Community researchers report that their participation ultimately helped them connect, build trust, and empower participation in creating positive change with the community. One major way the PN team fostered this engagement was by ensuring that data collected throughout the project was not only shared with the community, but that the community has continued ownership of and access to PN data.

Rita Nelson: "The fact that we were promised from day one that when we collected the data, that we would bring it back, meant so much to the community because people collect data all the time but never bring it back. That also helped people be more eager when they saw us during the next periods of data collection ... The data helped create more programming in the community like early learning centers, afterschool programs, and additional in-school counselors."

Christina Brown: "Having ownership over data felt amazing. Data was shared at big community events and community members got to engage with the data during data games... Information was given back to the people, which made me feel like the project team kept their promise to the community by giving the data back."

The goal of ensuring equitable access to data is to empower residents and local organizations, since this data ultimately belongs to the community. Although the West Philly Promise Neighborhood grant has formally ended, data can continue to be used to support future programs and advocacy aimed at improving community health and enabling ongoing social and policy change.

Who We Are

The Community Engagement Core at the Drexel Urban Health Collaborative (UHC) aims to facilitate and strengthen engagement between the UHC and community partners. Our goal is to serve as a channel for UHC faculty, students, and staff to work collaboratively with communities and vice-versa, with the goal of improving health and addressing local needs.

- To contact the Community Engagement Core at the UHC, please email: communityengagedUHC@drexel.edu
- To learn more about the West Philly Promise Neighborhood initiative and other related projects, visit drexel.edu/uhc
- For more information on our sources of data, a complete list of references, and information on the Drexel Urban Health Collaborative, please visit drexel.edu/uhc/resources/briefs

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West Philly Promise Neighborhood Survey Team