



East Providence Health Equity Zone Year One: Assessment & Action Plan

I. Introduction

The city of East Providence is situated in Providence County. The population is 47,314 and it is the fifth largest city in the state¹. The city has a rich history. It was the first settlement of Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island.² The city is resilient, and the residents take pleasure in their distinction as “Townie Pride.” There are three prominent neighborhoods in the city, East Providence, Riverside and Rumford. Each neighborhood has its own characteristics. The East Providence Health Equity Zone is proud to be a part of this community.

II. Overview of Year One

The East Providence Health Equity Zone (HEZ) was established in the summer of 2019 with the first-year goals of conducting a community-wide needs assessment, creating a Collaborative, and developing an action plan. We began this process in fall 2019 by conducting a preliminary provider survey among the staff of the HEZ Backbone Agency, East Bay Community Action Program (EBCAP). Results from the provider survey are highlighted in the evaluation component of this report.

In October 2019, a community-wide information session was facilitated at the East Providence Senior Center to share with the community the role of HEZ, and to generate discussion around two questions: What does a healthy East Providence look like? Who is missing from this discussion? The outcome of this meeting resulted in the formation of the East Providence HEZ Collaborative. The Collaborative consists of a diverse group of community residents, community-based organizations, municipal and state government, local businesses, and faith-based groups.

In December 2019, the East Providence HEZ began recruiting for the Steering Committee and creating a community-wide needs assessment. The role of the Steering Committee is to provide governance and steer initiatives until completion, leverage expertise to implement initiatives, provide strategic direction and champion the effort of HEZ in the community. A community-wide needs assessment was conducted using a mixed method approach. Surveys were conducted via Survey Monkey and hard copies were disseminated at East Providence Senior Center, East Providence City Hall, East Providence Public Library, Rumford Towers Senior Housing and the

¹ <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/east-providence-ri-population>

² Ephist.org

EBCAP Food Pantry and other departments throughout the organization. The youth survey was distributed to youth at the East Providence Boys and Girls Club and EBCAP's Youth Center.

Members of the Collaborative were invited to our first HEZ Steering information session in January 2020. By February 2020, East Providence HEZ had its official Steering Committee. The plan to implement a more formal governance structure for the HEZ was delayed in response to the community's need for immediate support due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

III. Assessment of Year One Progress

Steering Committee

With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Steering Committee shifted gears from the governance of the HEZ and began to identify and address the immediate needs of the East Providence community. We are fortunate to have a diverse group serving on this committee. Moreover, the Steering Committee has grown with representation from community residents, faith leaders, housing advocates and the East Providence Chamber of Commerce. Despite being a new Steering Committee, when the pandemic emerged as a significant threat in late February/early March, the Steering Committee increased its meeting frequency to weekly and has consistently maintained that schedule since mid-March. We are hopeful that this committed and talented group of community members will successfully lead the HEZ into Year Two of advocacy and programming.

Community Needs Assessment

The response rate from the community needs assessment totaled 494 representing both youth and community. There were 61 responses from the provider survey. The strategy of utilizing a mixed method approach proved to be effective. This strategy provided a two-fold outcome: the sample size and the geography are representative of East Providence; and there is a greater awareness of the HEZ and its purpose throughout the city.

Community Collaboration

To reach vulnerable populations, the Senior Center, EBCAP food pantry, community volunteers and the city of East Providence worked together to deliver food to those community members who are socially isolated. Key players in this collaboration serve on the HEZ Steering Committee. Through an emergency grant from the Rhode Island Foundation (RIF), EBCAP was able to provide the HEZ with funds to purchase gift cards to meet the basic needs of East Providence residents. EP HEZ is also in the process of distributing 10,000 masks it received from the state to vulnerable populations of residents. EBCAP and other Collaborative members have been instrumental in getting the masks to people most in need.

EP HEZ has been in frequent communication with RIDOH, the city of East Providence, EBCAP Health Center and community partners to promote the availability of COVID-19 testing in the community; and raise up any issues related to access. The HEZ Steering Committee met with EBCAP's Director of Nursing and the city's EMS Director in June to get an update on testing operations to inform how EP HEZ can continue to support COVID-19 response and recovery.

EP HEZ's Community Engagement Specialist is leading HEZ's collaboration with the City of East Providence to support RI Census 2020. HEZ's census outreach work is partially supported by a RIF grant which was awarded to its Backbone agency, EBCAP.

Community Clinical Linkages

EP HEZ has been engaged in the Rhode Island Diabetes Health Equity Challenge, funded by the Rhode Island Care Transformation Collaborative (CTC). This initiative brings together HEZ (team lead), Person with Lived Experience, EBCAP Health Services and EBCAP Community Health Team. The premise of this work is to build relationships and collaborations between community leaders, clinical partners, and community residents with lived experience of health inequities related to diabetes.

Programming and Funding Opportunities

In addition to funding and programming opportunities referenced above, EP HEZ received an award from RIDOH of a Preschool Development Grant (PDG) to be implemented effective 7/1/20. This one-year grant of \$57,927.80 will support the hiring of a Family Navigator to engage families with young children/expectant families to participate in the array of evidence-based maternal/early childhood home visiting programs; and to support families to secure the social and health resources they need. EP HEZ will also offer family groups based on the evidence-based Parents as Teachers (PAT) model; and partner with HEZ Collaborative member, RI Philharmonic & Music School, to pair the PAT group with music programming to support early language acquisition for very young children. Through PDG, EP HEZ will also offer a session on Safe Sleep and implement the evidence-based *Incredible Years* parenting education program. Below is a summary of programming/funding opportunities secured by EP HEZ in Year One:

- Funds for basic needs, EBCAP via RIF, \$2,000.00
- Funds to support census outreach, shared with EBCAP, RIF, \$10,000.00
- RI Diabetes Health Equity Challenge, shared with EBCAP, CTC, \$15,000.00
- Pre-School Development Grant, RIDOH, \$57,927.80 (effective 7/1/20)

COVID-19 Pandemic

The greatest challenge for the HEZ has been the COVID-19 pandemic. Our focus quickly shifted from defining the governance structure of HEZ and building a broader Collaborative to addressing the immediate needs of the community. The gathering and dissemination of information and resources proved to be challenging in that communication around COVID-19 resources and information constantly changed. EP HEZ disseminated a brief survey through various social media channels (HEZ Facebook page and Survey Monkey) to those community residents who completed the community-wide needs assessment to identify what were the immediate needs because of COVID-19; and to direct residents to resources as needed. Responses so far have been low.

Although the COVID19 crisis has presented many challenges, it also has presented unique opportunities to meaningfully engage a diverse group of community partners to respond to an urgent need; and to learn from and contribute to a community of practice including RIDOH staff and HEZ colleagues from across the state.

Expending Funds

The Project Director did not start until early September 2019. Funds for his position were not expended until two months after the grant award. Additionally, due to the pandemic, HEZ was not able to engage in various community outreach and marketing activities for which funds had been budgeted but not expended. As a result of these factors, the overall project budget is underspent for the first year.

Evaluation Process

EP HEZ initiated its community needs assessment process without the services of a professional evaluation consultant. A highly skilled evaluator, Kristina Brown, HousingWorks RI, Roger Williams University, was contracted in the final quarter of the year to help produce the final evaluation report. This first-year experience has shown the value of implementing an incremental and fully integrated formal evaluation process. Our Year Two budget includes funding for such consultation services.

IV. Year Two Action Areas

Based on the findings from the EP HEZ Community Needs Assessment, we have created five preliminary action areas to frame the work in Year Two. These overarching action areas represent the synthesis of what we have heard from residents.

a. Build Awareness

Residents and Providers were clear that throughout the community there was a lack of awareness of existing services and supports. A key objective of Year Two is to increase community awareness of available resources across social, health, educational, and financial areas. A second objective within this goal is to expand community awareness of the EP HEZ.

b. Promote Resiliency

EP HEZ sees community resiliency as foundational to stabilizing social determinants of health and responding to the needs identified by residents. We are committed to working on this goal in two ways for Year Two: (1) developing neighborhood based networks that can nimbly respond to emergency needs through resource sharing both among residents and faith communities; (2) strategizing around housing insecurity, both existing and in relation to COVID-19.

c. Improve Access to Health Services

Related to our first goal of building awareness, the EP HEZ heard from both Providers and Residents that there are substantial barriers in accessing health services, specifically mental and behavioral health. EP HEZ will commit to improving access to services through investment in community resources. One focus will be the ongoing assessment of existing gaps in behavioral health services and formulating a specific intervention to address those gaps. An additional action will be participating in the RI Diabetes Health Equity Challenge which integrates clinical and population health to address health disparities among residents with diabetes.

d. Support Health & Wellness across the Lifespan

Residents and Providers in East Providence feel strongly that education and programs that promote health and wellness across age groups and all abilities was greatly lacking. Part of this work in Year Two will be through providing Family Navigator services and evidence-based programming to expectant families and families with young children. EP HEZ will commit to a deeper assessment of the programmatic needs of youth and seniors in Year Two that bolster physical activity, healthy relationships, and healthy eating habits.

e. Strengthen EP HEZ Capacity and Structure

Lastly, establishing the internal structure and governance of the EP HEZ is a high priority in Year Two. Utilizing the expertise of our committed Steering Committee members and larger Collaborative, our goal is to strengthen the operations of the HEZ and build capacity for the projects ahead.

It is our hope that a focus on these action areas will begin the deep dive into addressing root causes of inequity, developing strategies to help eradicate inequities and engaging more community partnerships in this effort.

V. Action Plan

| PROJECT NAME | PROJECT DIRECTOR | BACKBONE ORGANIZATION |
|---------------------|------------------|---|
| East Providence HEZ | Albert Whitaker | East Bay Community Action Program (EBCAP) |

| ACTION | OBJECTIVE | RESPONSIBLE | TIMEFRAME | START DATE | FUNDING |
|---|--|-------------------------------------|--|------------|--|
| GOAL #1: BUILD AWARENESS | | | | | |
| Establish a Community Engagement/Communications workgroup | Increase awareness of available social, health, educational, and financial supports. Increase visibility of the EP HEZ. | HEZ Community Engagement Specialist | To begin working by September for the duration of the HEZ activities | 8/1/20 | N/A |
| GOAL #2: PROMOTE RESILIENCY | | | | | |
| Establish a Housing & Homelessness workgroup | Assess available housing supports in the community and existing disparities. Identify a priority action item for EP HEZ to address. | Steering Committee | To begin working by fall of 2020, throughout Year 2 | Sept. 2020 | N/A |
| Establish a Neighbor-to-Neighbor Program | Develop resident capacity for emergency response resource sharing | EP HEZ Staff and Collaborative | To begin in July, continue throughout Year 2 | 7/10/20 | RIDOH Community Resilience Initiatives Grant |
| Create a Community Resilience Hub | Develop a comprehensive resource hub to support residents in self-sufficiency | EP HEZ Staff and Collaborative | To begin in July, continue throughout Year 2 | 7/10/20 | RIDOH Community Resilience Initiatives Grant |
| Create a Faith Leaders Resiliency Collaborative | Support Faith Leaders in assisting with community emergency response efforts and integrate their work with larger community resiliency efforts | EP HEZ Staff and Collaborative | To begin in July, continue throughout Year 2 | 7/10/20 | RIDOH Community Resilience Initiatives Grant |

| GOAL #3: IMPROVE ACCESS TO HEALTH SERVICES | | | | | |
|---|--|---|---|------------|---|
| Establish a workgroup to assess behavioral health disparities | Assess gaps in existing behavioral health services system. Identify a priority action item for EP HEZ to address. | Steering Committee | To begin working by fall of 2020, throughout Year 2 | Sept. 2020 | N/A |
| RI Diabetes Health Equity Challenge | Promote integration of clinical practice and community health strategies to address disparities in health outcomes for people with diabetes | EP HEZ Director, EBCAP Health, and Person with Lived Experience | Ongoing | | Care Transformation Collaborative (CTC) Grant |
| GOAL #4: SUPPORT HEALTH & WELLNESS | | | | | |
| Establish a workgroup focused on Youth Health & Wellness | Deeper investigation of Youth Survey findings related to prevalence of Bullying and Substance Misuse. Identify a priority action item for EP HEZ to address. | Steering Committee | To begin working by fall of 2020, throughout Year 2 | Sept. 2020 | N/A |
| Establish a workgroup focused on Senior Health & Wellness | Assess needs of seniors to identify a priority action item for EP HEZ to address. | Steering Committee | To begin working by fall of 2020, throughout Year 2 | Sept. 2020 | N/A |
| Engage families with young children and expectant families to participate in evidence-based maternal + early childhood programs | Provide support for families to secure the social and health resources needed | EP HEZ, RI Philharmonic | To begin July 2020, through June 2021 | 7/1/20 | RIDOH Pre-School Development Grant (PDG) |

| GOAL #5: STRENGTHEN CAPACITY/STRUCTURE OF THE EP HEZ | | | | | |
|--|--|--------------------------------|---|-----------|-----|
| Develop a governance structure for decision-making and operations of the HEZ | Increase capacity of the HEZ | Steering Committee | To begin working by end of summer, 2020 | Aug. 2020 | N/A |
| Conduct continued outreach to key community partners and residents | Increase stakeholder and resident engagement | EP HEZ Staff and Collaborative | To begin working by end of summer, 2020 | Aug. 2020 | N/A |

VI. Conclusion

This has been both an exciting and challenging time for East Providence HEZ. However, our community is resilient and the HEZ is committed to building an environment that realizes the influences of social determinants and works toward mitigating those inequities. Getting to where we are today would not be possible if not for the work of a phenomenal Steering Committee and HEZ staff that have gone above and beyond toward this endeavor. Your passion and commitment for a healthier East Providence does not go unnoticed. Thank you!

EAST PROVIDENCE STEERING COMMITTEE

David Bachrach—City of East Providence Community Development

Christine Brown – Bradley Hospital

Kristina Brown – HousingWorks RI Roger Williams University

Rev. Pamela Byrd – Trinity Tabernacle

Liana Cassar – State Representative District 66

East Bay Community Action Program-EP HEZ Backbone Agency

Wendy Fenner-Aubin – Communities for People, Family Care Community Partnership

Rev. Amy Carter Frenze – Hope Congregational Church

Laura Jones – East Providence Senior Center

Madeline Marlow – East Providence Prevention Coalition

Laura McNamara – East Providence Chamber of Commerce

Tina Lyn Ridondo – Riverside Nutrition

Julie Silva – Jules Hope Chest

Sonya Taly – Communities for People, Family Care Community Partnership

EAST PROVIDENCE HEZ STAFF

Albert Whitaker, MA – Project Director, East Providence HEZ

Jacquelyn Brooks - Community Engagement Specialist, East Providence HEZ

Angela Downing, MSW—Director of Social Services, EBCAP

Rita Capotosto, LMHC – Vice-President Family Development, EBCAP

Respectfully submitted,
Albert Whitaker
Project Director