



RI Senate Finance Committee Hearing on Health Equity Zones
Testimony prepared for RI Senate Finance Committee on November 16, 2023
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Central Providence Opportunities HEZ | est. 2016
Backbone Agency: ONE Neighborhood Builders

Thank you for the opportunity to testify here today on the innovative and impactful Health Equity Zone model – and in particular, on the vision and accomplishments of the Central Providence Opportunities Health Equity Zone. My name is Anusha Venkataraman, and I serve as the Managing Director of ONE Central Providence, leading the team within ONE Neighborhood Builders that serves as the backbone organization for this collective impact initiative of 60+ partners.

We've been at this work for over decade, from the convening of the Olneyville Collaborative (now the Central Providence Collaborative) to the launching of the Olneyville Health Equity Zone in 2016, which grew into the Central Providence Opportunities Health Equity Zone (CPO-HEZ). Our Central Providence Collaborative members span sectors, geographies, and issue areas of focus – from City and State governmental partners, elected officials, healthcare and social service providers, and philanthropic allies, to small grassroots organizations and residents from Central Providence's nine diverse and distinct communities.

The CPO-HEZ has facilitated an incredible level of statewide and national investment from outside the public sector. We are part of Blue Meridian Partners' national Place Matters cohort; through this partnership BMP has invested a total of \$10,750,000 in Rhode Island to date, including over \$8M in Central Providence neighborhoods. We've also been able to leverage an additional \$1M in private funds last year to support work in Central Providence, and \$1.3M in 2023. We are also lucky to have the support of a number of national technical assistance providers over the next year, including the Mobility Action Learning Network, a technical assistance program administered by the Urban Institute for advancing locally driven

programs, policies, and actions that boost upward mobility from poverty and racial equity.

OUTCOMES SOUGHT AND THEORY OF CHANGE

In March 2023, the CPO-HEZ unveiled the [Central Providence Roadmap](#), a ten-year vision for health and economic equity that addresses the structural conditions driving disparity in our nine neighborhoods.

- The Roadmap serves as a guide for the collective impact work of the Health Equity Zone. The development process, which spanned over 6 months, engaged HEZ partner organizations and members of their Resident Advisory Council to ensure that the Roadmap was reflective of the needs of the community and the work being done by partner organizations.
- The Roadmap pairs the shared goals and outcomes with concrete strategies and tactics for achieving shared goals. It is centered around the Theory of Change that if CPO-HEZ invests operational, financial, and political capital into efforts that meet residents' foundational needs, increases access to drivers of mobility, and builds local power and capacity, then the conditions that drive health and economic disparities will improve.
- In implementation of the Roadmap, CPO-HEZ convenes quarterly Working Group meetings under each of our six North Stars (Housing, Health, Education, Employment, Business, and Power) composed of community advocates, practitioners/service providers, and organizers to align on priorities, mutually amplify each other's efforts, and build deep relationships across organizations. Under each outcome, we are tracking indicators that will help us to assess and demonstrate progress along the way.
- The Roadmap also serves to align investments across the nine neighborhoods by providing a community-developed blueprint for neighborhood improvements and aligned strategic goals. This enables more collaborative fundraising by CPO-HEZ member organizations as well as coordinated engagement and advocacy and forms a guide for City and State governments. For instance, just last week we joined with the South Providence and 02907 HEZs to host an event to gather input on the City of Providence's 10-year Comprehensive Plan for land use, which is currently in development.

RECENT ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND CURRENT INITIATIVES

Beyond the systems change work related to the Roadmap, our HEZ also manages initiatives focused on building civic, social, and institutional infrastructure across the nine neighborhoods.

Nine Neighborhood Fund: Over the past year, Central Providence Opportunities: A Health Equity Zone has facilitated the [Nine Neighborhood Fund](#), a participatory budgeting initiative to democratically allocate \$1M in support of community projects that improve community health in Central Providence. This pilot initiative was made possible through initial funds from Medicaid redesign dollars allocated by the State of RI, matched with (and exceeded by) private dollars from Blue Meridian Partners.

- Over the process, nearly 350 ideas were collected through 13 events, online, and at drop-boxes at local libraries and businesses within Central Providence. Residents – including young people from Mount Pleasant High School – were recruited to serve as Project Delegates, where they took the ideas submitted and narrowed them down to 14 large projects and 8 small projects that would be on the ballot for voting. Voting occurred over two weeks in June, where ~1200 residents who live in or go to school in Central Providence older than 13 cast their ballot; around 250 of those voters were in high school or middle school and many others were first-time voters
- Winning projects include nearly \$370,000 for new or upgraded bathrooms and landscaping in local parks, including composting toilets in Merino Park; \$330,000 for lead water filters for households in 02908 and 02909; \$50,000 for peer mental health training; and \$132,000 to improve amenities at local bus stops. Additionally, 4 small projects of \$30,000 were funded.
- This pilot initiative helped to advance goals of increasing civic engagement by changing attitudes about voting and instilling positive voting behaviors from an early age, institutionalizing resident involvement in government funding and budget decision-making processes

Central Providence Community Health Worker Collective and Pre-Apprenticeship Program: Starting in 2020, CPO-HEZ has led the expansion of the CHW workforce through the Central Providence Community Health Worker Collective. ONE|NB is a registered apprenticeship site where we connect Community Health Workers with the CORE CHW training and paid on-the-job training. In addition, CPO-HEZ has hosted a Community Health Worker Pre-Apprenticeship Program to build individual and community capacity by bringing more individuals into the CHW Workforce and prepare participants to address health inequities in their communities. Between the

two programs, we've served about 40 Community Health Workers from Central Providence.

Community Wireless: ONE|NB also created [the first free community wireless network](#) in Rhode Island, started in the depth of the pandemic, providing high-speed broadband to more than 2,500 unique users in the Olneyville neighborhood.

CPO-HEZ Pilot Projects:

CPO-HEZ has cultivated community-led pilot projects that advance on-ramps to living wages. In particular, we would like to highlight the SEIU Education and Support Fund: Educator-Led Community of Care (ELCC). ELCC is a family childcare provider-led initiative to design and launch family childcare networks where providers connect deeply and support one another, develop skills and business capacities, assert leadership over policy, and build the advocacy skills and collective power they need to transform the sector. ELCC was recently featured on a call with the White House Office of Public Engagement and the Domestic Policy Council, as an innovative local solution tackling the national childcare shortage.

Business Supports:

With Innovation Studio, we have kicked off the Biz Bodega, a front porch for small business owners and entrepreneurs in Central Providence and beyond to attain support and resources to propel the growth of their businesses and their economic potential. Now one year into its operation, Biz Bodega has served 62 individuals in 2023 through 1:1 entrepreneurship navigation and cohort-based workshops for those looking to start or expand their small business. Biz Bodega has started serving as a location for office hours with Business Service Center Specialists from the Secretary of State Office.

Biz Bodega also provides a free and accessible space for other business support organizations (BSO) to better reach residents and business owners in Central Providence. 21 BSO partner programs and services have been held at Biz Bodega, including Taste of Hope and Main and Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Minority Business Enterprise Workshop.

Additionally, operating within the two zip codes of Central Providence (02908 and 02909), the Central Providence Community Loan Fund (CPCLF) functions as a community-driven fund, offering accessible low-interest loans to small businesses and nonprofit organizations. In collaboration with the Providence Revolving Fund

(PRF) and our community-led loan committee, eligible recipients can access up to \$20,000 with a fixed interest rate of 2% from the \$500,000 investment pool, with repayment contributing to the continuous cycle of support for other ventures.

Since the first loan closing in September of 2022, the program has gained momentum, generating substantial interest and engagement within the community. Over half of the initial investment pool (\$252,000) has been awarded to seventeen local small businesses. All businesses in the CPCLF portfolio are minority-owned businesses, with industries ranging from construction, food, and art.

ONE|NB Affordable Housing

Lastly, let's spend a moment on affordable housing – what may come to mind first when you think of ONE Neighborhood Builders. ONE Neighborhood Builders is deepening its work across Rhode Island. ONE|NB has submitted plans to Rhode Island Housing to develop and preserve over 280 rental homes across four municipalities. The proposals submitted include five projects that will produce a total of nearly 170 new apartments and preserve 113 existing affordable units. ONE|NB's five housing production and preservation proposals total over \$95M. ONE|NB has 5 recently completed Permanent Supportive Housing Units. All of these projects are located in Health Equity Zones, from Cumberland, Central Falls, and East Providence to our Central Providence HEZ.

These investments will pay off in each of these communities. A new report on the Continuum of Care from ONE Neighborhood Builders (ONE|NB) and [Providence Community Health Centers](#) (PCHC) shows that the average Medicaid-related health care spending for persons who were formerly homeless and who are now living in permanent supportive housing was consistently lower than Medicaid recipients who continued to experience homelessness. As stated by our Executive Director Jennifer Hawkins, "This report validates our call for more affordable housing and shows that our state's housing crisis is also a health care crisis."

Thank you for your time and interest in the Health Equity Zone model and the Central Providence Opportunities Health Equity Zone. I look forward to your questions and input.