

# Authentic Community Partnership and Power Sharing:

## A Case Study of Hamilton County Public Health's WeTHRIVE! Initiative

### Overview

This case study describes how [WeTHRIVE!](#), an initiative of Hamilton County Public Health in Ohio, fosters authentic partnerships between public health and local communities and shares decision-making power to address social determinants of health (SDOH) and prevent chronic disease in communities and schools throughout the county. At the core of its success are its commitments to following the lead of the community, sharing power and decision-making with community and school teams, and establishing the role of the health department in the broader community. WeTHRIVE!'s experience can serve as a model for other multisector coalitions and partnerships seeking to launch or expand community partnerships and share decision-making power with local communities.

**“We didn’t want it just to be public health coming into these communities and telling folks what to do. We wanted it to be public health and communities working together to make enhancements.”**

—Mary Ellen Knaebel, Director, Health Promotion and Education, Hamilton County Public Health

### The WeTHRIVE! Initiative

In 2009, Hamilton County Public Health engaged schools, businesses, faith-based organizations, elected officials, and residents to launch its WeTHRIVE! initiative. The initiative initially aimed to improve chronic disease by increasing access to healthy foods and physical activity opportunities while decreasing exposure to secondhand smoke. In 2014, it expanded its focus to improve the overall health, safety, and vitality of local communities, schools, and childcare environments. In addition to addressing chronic disease, WeTHRIVE! pathways now include harm reduction, social connection, injury prevention, environmental health, and emergency preparedness.

**Figure 1.** Groups in the WeTHRIVE! initiative



## Following the lead of the community

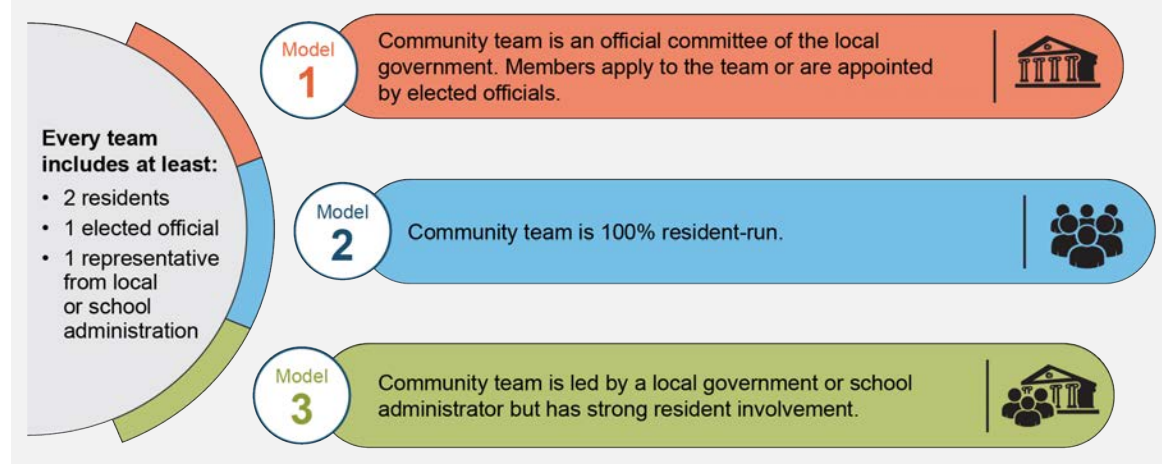
**Make it easy for communities to get involved.** WeTHRIVE! engages a series of teams composed of community members to implement sustainable, health-promoting initiatives tailored to the specific needs of communities. The county health department communicates the benefits of the WeTHRIVE! initiative to help communities decide whether to form a team.

Once communities and schools initiate the process of becoming a WeTHRIVE! team, WeTHRIVE! empowers them to determine their own priorities, action plans, and team composition. Although each community and school team structures itself a little differently in response to the needs of the community it serves, every team includes individuals from multiple sectors and, at a minimum, two residents, an elected official, and a representative from local government or school administration. Teams typically follow one of three models (Figure 2).

**"WeTHRIVE! is very engaging and continues to work with us on the needs that are essential for our community... WeTHRIVE! staff guide us through understanding the resources and capability we could develop within our community always allowing us to implement what we need."**

—WeTHRIVE! community member

**Figure 2. WeTHRIVE! team models**



Teams conduct an assessment with the support of WeTHRIVE! staff to identify the top priorities in their community and consider actionable strategies for implementation. WeTHRIVE! supports teams in conducting a new assessment every two years to identify new and changing priorities.

WeTHRIVE! encourages its health department staff, the majority of whom are population health specialists, to engage deeply and spend time with their assigned community and school teams to foster trusting relationships. To do this, WeTHRIVE! assigns each population health specialist a limited number of community and school teams and closely monitors staff capacity to determine when to hire additional population health specialists. The continuity of the relationship between population health specialists and their community and school teams helps build trust between the health department and WeTHRIVE! communities and schools.

**Follow the needs and changing priorities of the community.** WeTHRIVE! staff keep the needs of the community at the forefront by being flexible and adapting to shifting timelines and priorities. WeTHRIVE! uses multiple best practices for managing expectations:

- Respecting that community members have other competing personal and work commitments.
- Embracing that the work and team structure will change over time. If a topic no longer seems to be relevant or engaging, consider reassessing priorities and action plans. Identify resources and community partners to address emerging community and school team priorities.
- Tailoring meetings to accommodate team members' needs and preferences. Some team members may only be available in the evenings or on weekends or may only be available during certain parts of the year. Other team members may face language barriers to participation. WeTHRIVE! staff are encouraged to consider shifting meeting cadence, times, and format accordingly and make translation services available to teams as appropriate.
- Building long-term relationships that can withstand the natural ebb and flow of work. Even if someone must step back from the work because of competing priorities, maintaining personal relationships with community members can help them pick up the work again later.



### Promising practice: Motivate teams by celebrating small wins

Team recognition and appreciation is essential to building strong and lasting community partnerships. Because community and school teams may make progress at different paces, WeTHRIVE! avoids comparing teams to one another. Even a team accomplishment like gaining a new community team member or meeting after a six-month hiatus is important progress that WeTHRIVE! takes time to celebrate. Celebrating small wins also gives community teams momentum to keep moving toward sustainable change. WeTHRIVE! highlights team wins on the [stories page](#) of its website.

## Ceding decision-making power to community and school teams

### Establish decision-making and power-sharing processes that empower community members as the experts in their own communities.

When community members have decision-making power and lead the development and implementation of solutions that directly affect them, they become co-owners of their initiatives. WeTHRIVE! recognizes community members are the foremost experts in their community and thus should have ultimate decision-making power around focus areas, team composition, action plans, and timelines. Although WeTHRIVE! staff may present recommendations and best practices based on their experience, community and school teams might—and often do—have other ideas. WeTHRIVE! cedes final decision-making about the strategies and programs to implement to the teams.

### Set expectations to establish a culture of

**partnership.** WeTHRIVE! shares information about potential resources and community partners with community and school teams to address their priorities, but the teams ultimately decide what best fits their needs. WeTHRIVE! sets the expectation with its community partners that teams have the ultimate decision-making power on which resources or services to use. In this way, partner organizations buy into the community power-sharing model. WeTHRIVE! also emphasizes to community partners that the work is



### Promising practice: Cultivate community leaders

Each year, WeTHRIVE! provides extra leadership training and a small stipend to two trusted community members per community for up to two WeTHRIVE! communities. These community members are called Neighborhood Navigators and live or work in the communities they serve. With support from WeTHRIVE! staff, Neighborhood Navigators become community team leads and help develop and implement their team's action plan. The Neighborhood Navigators program develops local leadership and encourages ownership of team activities, operationalizing WeTHRIVE!'s commitment to sharing power with community members.

about collective impact, not who gets credit. This emphasis helps create a culture of partnership and collaboration rather than competition.



Members of the Mt. Healthy City Schools WeTHRIVE! team at a WeTHRIVE! Learning Collaborative event.

## Establishing the role of the health department in the broader community

**Provide training and support tailored to community needs.** WeTHRIVE! mobilizes its population health specialists to provide training and technical assistance to communities and schools. With the support of a WeTHRIVE! population health specialist, each community and school team complete an assessment and develops an action plan to address areas of need. Population health specialists then connect community and school teams to resources and community partners to help implement their action plans. Population

health specialists also support community and school teams with team recruitment and formation; landscape reviews to understand available resources and potential gaps that exist in the community; and access to public health data through community data profiles that contain infographics, demographics, and key health measures that teams can use to gain insight into their communities.

**Recognize the opportunities of the health department in the community.** As an initiative of the public health department, WeTHRIVE! is in an ideal position to connect community and school teams to available resources and information because it has broad insights into and extensive connections to community resources and partners. WeTHRIVE! maintains comprehensive lists of resources (for funding, educational programming, and direct services) and community partners for each potential focus area. WeTHRIVE! also conducts outreach and networking to help fill any gaps in its current community partner offerings. For example, as teams expand work on mental health, WeTHRIVE! conducts landscape scans to better understand prospective partners in Hamilton County that provide resources and services related to education, prevention, and treatment of mental health conditions.

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**“Putting the time and energy into building community coalitions and resources not only helps to improve the health of communities, but it helps to form that trust and two-way communication...that can be used at any point.”**

—Mary Ellen Knaebel, Director, Health Promotion and Education, Hamilton County Public Health



WeTHRIVE! also plays an important role in the broader community. Although public health departments are often seen as regulatory agencies, establishing and maintaining a local community presence can help the department move beyond that role. For example, because of WeTHRIVE!'s existing community relationships and contacts, Hamilton County Public Health was able to establish vaccine clinics quickly during the COVID-19 public health emergency in higher-need communities. In addition, Hamilton County Public Health's Lead Prevention Team leveraged the WeTHRIVE! community network to spread the word about available programs and resources for lead mitigation and increase their reach. Investing in relationship-building with community champions—whether individual community members or community partner organizations—is vital to building a strong network of trusted public health messengers.



**“Having community champions that...live and work in those communities...[is] huge. Sometimes them saying the same thing that we’re saying goes 100 percent further than us coming in and saying it because we’re not always the trusted source.”**

—Mary Ellen Knaebel, Director, Health Promotion and Education, Hamilton County Public Health

## Next steps

WeTHRIVE! is committed to quality improvement and identifying opportunities to grow the initiative to meet the evolving needs of communities and schools. As a next step, WeTHRIVE! plans to identify additional community partners to address community and school teams' emerging priorities. WeTHRIVE! is also committed to understanding and expanding the capacity of community and school teams to evaluate their work. Finally, WeTHRIVE! plans to use its Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) grant funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to expand its policy and systems approach, especially around improving built environment and expanding access to healthy foods. For more information, stories, and tools from WeTHRIVE!, please visit their website: <https://watchustrive.org>.

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**Get Further Faster.** For more resources to support multisector community coalitions and partnerships addressing SDOH to advance health equity and improve chronic disease, go to [gettingfurtherfaster.org](http://gettingfurtherfaster.org).

**Let's Progress Together.** For questions or comments regarding this resource or to receive assistance with your SDOH work, contact NACCHO at [chronicdisease@naccho.org](mailto:chronicdisease@naccho.org) or ASTHO at [chronicdisease@astho.org](mailto:chronicdisease@astho.org). For more information about Mathematica, visit [mathematica.org](http://mathematica.org).