THE

GAVA
GO! AUSTIN/ VAMOS! AUSTIN

mission:
TO SUBSTANTIALLY IMPROVE THE HEALTH OF THE 78744 AND 78745 COMMUNITIES BY IMPROVING ACCESS TO HEALTHY, NUTRITIOUS FOODS AND SAFE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY WHILE ALSO ESTABLISHING A SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY EFFORT TO LEAD THIS ONGOING TRANSFORMATION.
Today, it's our turn
Today, healthy community initiatives – initiatives that seek to cultivate social capital and cross-sector engagement within underserved communities – are springing up in more and more regions of the U.S as a way to address our country’s toughest health issues. There is increasing consensus around the idea that we can’t effectively or sustainably address complex public health issues, like childhood obesity, unless we partner with people within the communities and zip codes most deeply affected to fight on their own behalf. This type of work necessitates creating partnerships across sectors with stakeholders who may not have been traditional partners in the past.

Since the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation and our partners launched Go Austin! ¡Vamos Austin! (GAVA) in 2012, we’ve seen incredible changes in two communities. Our goal is to engage a cross-section of the community in coordinated childhood obesity prevention, and to find the sweet spot where local engagement meets evidence-based best practice. We’re getting there.

This work is far from easy or simple. It includes implementing strategies to evolve the leadership skills of residents already advocating for better health, building an army of community leaders to expand reach and figuring out how to take best practices evolved in one community and then marry them to another community’s own priorities to drive better health for its families. This all requires patience and perseverance.

In these neighborhoods, residents engaged from the very beginning of the process. From there, concerns and issues surfaced, leaders emerged, agendas were defined and action was initiated. This community initiative is a resident-driven, holistic approach that leverages partnerships with community organizations, local government, schools and businesses. It’s community organizing at its finest.

As the GAVA initiative continues to take shape and residents accomplish key wins, application of the lessons learned thus far and an understanding that there is always more to be done will ensure everyone involved stays laser focused on the job. The initiative has also begun to mature – graduating to greater community ownership, with a 2015 application for Michael & Susan Dell Foundation funding that was written in partnership by the funded organizations and residents. In fact, the foundation is funding and driving less in the community as other funders come into play.

It is an unpredictable, yet exciting, time for all of us. It’s a time of relinquishing control to organizations and residents in the community, pledging accountability and seeking new partners and supporters. We are anxious to see whether the numbers will continue to bear out impact, even as we become more demanding about the impact we expect and how long it will last. It’s a time when we make good on our commitment to our community partners to step back and follow their lead. It’s also a time we make good on our commitment to our foundation partners to be rigorous in our approach, informed in our implementation, dogged in our pursuit of impact and inspiring in our ability to find others who see the value of the people, the place, and the model that is GAVA.

There is still work to be done. As we move forward, we continue to identify architectures, connections and tools that are flexible enough to be used in different communities, whether across the highway from Dove Springs, across the state in the Rio Grande Valley, or across the nation in Camden, NJ.

On behalf of everyone involved in the Go Austin! ¡Vamos Austin! coalition in 78744 and 78745, thank you. Let’s keep building.

Aliya Hussaini, MD, MSc.
Michael & Susan Dell Foundation
the CHALLENGE

Austin, Texas, is recognized as one of the healthiest cities in America. Yet, those accolades ignore a realistic health crisis facing neighborhoods within Austin’s city limits. Of all Austin, Texas zip codes, 78744—a community often referred to as Dove Springs—has the highest prevalence of youth obesity and highest youth delinquency rate. The community also lacks access to healthy food and to safe places to engage in physical activity.

On the flip side, this tight-knit community has a number of assets to be leveraged. These include easily-identifiable leaders and experience advocating for improved healthcare access, additional bus routes and enhancements to address safety and crime susceptibility.

The community in zip code 78745 is very different – it is large and a community of transition, it lacks some of the community cohesion of Dove Springs, but contains several strong institutions that provide the community with infrastructural and programmatic assets.

the SOLUTION

In 2012, the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation partnered with other community organizations, schools and residents to launch Go Austin! ¡Vamos Austin! (GAVA), a place-based, cross-sector effort to improve the health of children living in a single zip-code—78744. Two years later, the initiative expanded to neighboring 78745. The goal of this place-based work is twofold: design an initiative that can help drive change in a single zip code while maintaining enough flexibility to be applicable in other urban communities.

The foundation and content experts from the GAVA teams, also known as the GAVA coalition, contributed an evidence base and helped the community align work across the neighborhood—all the while engaging, developing and connecting more local leaders to build a large, sustainable army in the fight against childhood obesity. We have also made connections with partners and resources to leverage opportunities more efficiently and effectively.

A healthy lifestyle should be easily accessible for everyone. A resident-led initiative that leverages multi-sector partnerships and an engaged community is proving that it can be.
MEASURING SUCCESS

The success of any complex, community-led initiative depends on understanding which pieces work—individually and in concert—to ensure time and energy are expended on effective implementation and unsuccessful strategies are eliminated. It can then be refined and replicated to make a significant, long-term impact. Of course, that understanding depends on evaluation. As with any multi-pronged, place-based childhood obesity prevention effort, the GAVA team had to address several questions:

- How do we assess the individual and collective contribution of so many moving pieces?
- How can we understand the emerging connections among partners and track the development of engaged, homegrown community leaders critical to the project’s long-term sustainability?
- How do we evaluate systems changes, and otherwise measure incremental outputs critical to the initiative’s success?
- How do we understand the real impact on children’s health?

GAVA’s evaluation was designed to address those questions—and challenges—from multiple angles. For example:

- One set of measurement tools captures the process of multiple implementation teams attempting to jointly accomplish evidence-based strategic plans, organized by site and geographic location. Sharing of these data means that implementation teams can keep track of multiple moving parts, make sure they are aligned and well resourced.
- Another set assesses and maps leading indicators of success, such as availability and quality of access points for healthy food and physical activity, leadership development and the development of key relationships between individuals and institutions.
- A final set is designed to measure downstream outcomes such as obesity prevalence in the neighborhood, nutrition and physical activity behaviors and attitudes. These evaluations include studies that are following a group of Dove Springs residents and control families over the course of five years.

KEY WINS WERE ACHIEVED THIS YEAR DUE TO THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESIDENTS, COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND STAKEHOLDERS TO:

- **Engage** – Changing behaviors and beliefs is central to transforming lives. The communities are increasing access to and participation in physical activity and improving nutrition healthy eating.
- **Collaborate** – The collective effort of various contributors is what propels the work forward and strengthens our resolve. Partnerships and cooperation are powerful tools as healthier communities are being built.
- **Advocate** – Awareness is not enough. Community members, elected officials and government bodies must advocate and enforce change that will remove barriers to access healthier foods and physical activities.
Efforts driven by community members themselves—those with the most to lose and the most to gain—are the most likely to take root and succeed.

The true architects of change are the residents of 78744 and 78745. While the goals of the GAVA initiative have been well-defined and sharply focused from the outset of the program, the communities continue to define the priorities. GAVA Community Directors are important supporters, co-strategists, organizers, and outreach coordinators. They actively seek community input and manage partner relationships. They engage with residents, identify partners, connect strategically, develop leaders, monitor data to ensure the ongoing efforts can succeed and be replicated, and identify obstacles that need to be addressed.

Years of groundwork made all of GAVA’s successes to date possible. But with established teams organized around four sectors—school (including out of school time), food access, physical activity and early childhood—there are even more tangible benefits to the community-led effort. Key wins from previous years continue to balloon—the number of quantifiable successes doubled over 2013-2014. Where parks were often unsafe or lacking adequate amenities and infrastructure, six resident-led park adoption teams have assumed ownership of those areas, creating inviting places to play and opening doors to funding and collaborations with the parks department and school district. Farm stands—a concept that previously failed—are thriving thanks to the relentlessness of community members who recognized the need for better access to fresh produce. Residents have also pivoted to work on wider aspects of their food environment by taking on food retail strategies to bring increased healthy food options to small and mid-sized stores in their community. Meanwhile, among coordinated school health teams there is more diverse representation. Parents, teachers, students and community members are collaborating to increase access to healthy foods and physical activity during the school day—most effectively in schools.
where principals are fully engaged. No longer are experts dictating what actions schools should be taking. Parents, teachers and all of those involved on the school wellness teams are collectively deciding what they have the energy, motivation and momentum to move forward as they take into account their assets and priorities.

There are no easy answers to fighting childhood obesity or to creating environments where making healthy choices is the norm. Community-specific factors always influence these types of interventions and can make them more difficult to replicate or apply learnings to another location. It’s encouraging that the learnings from 78744 are being applied in 78745. And the insights into the work in both zip codes will influence wellness efforts in other communities. The GAVA evaluation has uncovered a correlation between wins being achieved in the neighborhoods and needs identified by community residents at the beginning of the work.

The progress made in the past year alone is cause to celebrate, and every stakeholder and resident should expect even greater things to come from the efforts and commitment in 78744 and 78745 as the neighborhoods further embrace healthy living. No list of facts and figures will paint a full picture of the community’s progress toward building a healthier community or the new future that has been defined and constructed by its residents.

Still the impact starts to become clear in the stories of the residents and as we look at key wins from the past year. You can see the progress on the neighborhoods’ streets. In the parks and school yards. In the corner stores and farm stands. In the children playing. And in the smiling faces.

**Implementation Scale for 78744 and 78745**

- Number of Implementation Teams Involved in GAVA: 40
- Number of Organizations Involved in GAVA: 122
- Number of Individuals Called Upon for GAVA Efforts: 1,238
- Number of Individuals Actively Engaged in GAVA Efforts: 567
- Number of Active GAVA Sites: 34
- % of Kids in the Community Who Have Access to GAVA Efforts: 86%

Data obtained from sector managers, leadership team members and Community Directors as part of ongoing GAVA evaluation efforts. Data current as of August 21st 2015
PHYSICAL Activity

GOALS:
Address safety concerns and other barriers to support and increase individual, family, and community access and opportunities to engage in physical activity.

• Improved access to safe physical activity environments
• Improved participation in physical activity opportunities
Engagement

In 2013, the Austin Police Activities League launched a free soccer league for children in Dove Springs. Games were held at the Dove Springs Recreation Center in 78744, and entire families attended games to support the community’s newest physical activity program that was the brainchild of Austin Police Department (APD) Officer Paula Aguilar.

Three hundred children in 78744 participated in this new league. However, 78744 is a large area with thousands of children and limited public transportation routes, and the distance to the Dove Springs Recreation Center limited participation for those traveling by foot with small children from areas up to two miles away. Many families at Houston Elementary, in the northwest quadrant of 78744, found it too far to travel for practices and games.

As community members explored creating an additional space for active play, they uncovered other missing resources that would prove critical to empowering families to increase physical activity. Houston Elementary School’s park, jointly owned by the city and school district, offered some space, but with several obstacles. A large tree was in the middle of what could be a full-sized field, and there was no access to water, restroom facilities, or trash receptacles. And any outdoor activities had to be conducted during the day due to the lack of outdoor lighting on the property.

Collaboration

Enter a park adoption team that grew out of the robust and physical activity-centered parent wellness team at Houston Elementary. In the past year, residents have worked with Austin Parks and Recreations Department (PARD) to begin to address the needs in this park and the neighboring Ponciana Park. With the help of GAVA partner Austin Parks Foundation, they fostered a dialogue with the Austin Independent School District (AISD) to leverage funds needed to realize a bigger dream: a full-sized soccer field on the Houston Elementary campus park.

The dream took over a year to fully realize. Lights were needed for the field to be used beyond daylight hours, and would cost tens of thousands of dollars. Irrigation was quoted as an additional $50,000. A fence would be needed to protect the land while seeds were scattered. And, since neither residents nor the school officials had any desire to cut down trees or the shade they provide (the school had recently acquired newly planted ones), the large tree would have to be carefully moved to allow a full-sized field.
The residents in the team used their local expertise and relationships to reduce some of the costs. A professional plumber who had lived in the neighborhood for more than 30 years agreed to donate labor to irrigate the fields, bringing the cost down to $10,000, for just equipment and parts. The more the team could leverage from various public and private sources, the more AISD and PARD were willing to invest in funding. Eventually, month by month, the park acquired the needed assets: six large lights, four trash cans, and an irrigated field. Their next task was to address the need for access to drinking water.

Per AISD policy, residents were informed that school parks would not receive water fountains because they were vulnerable to vandalism, so a hose bib was installed on the property for access to water. But residents worried that it would be difficult for children to drink from it, and GAVA staff partners agreed that it was difficult to tell by looking at it that it was even a source of potable water. The park adoption team was not deterred and continued to advocate for a water fountain on the property to be used by children at play. Resident leaders had formed an alliance with PARD, who had now heard from multiple GAVA schools in both zip codes that access to water outside was a much needed asset, and PARD pledged to AISD that they would pay for the fountains as well as their installation and maintenance, if AISD assumed responsibility for the cost of the water. AISD agreed, and a real water fountain was installed.

Advocacy

Additional government and school policies were born from the efforts to provide adequate facilities for a youth soccer league. The required Memorandum of Understanding between PARD and AISD to accommodate for the water fountains on school property provided guidelines for future cooperation on land jointly owned by the two entities. Park maintenance, playscape installation and upkeep and water fountains were included in this agreement. The open communication fostered by this dialogue allows resident teams to continue to work collaboratively to remove barriers to physical activities for children and families in 78744, 78745 and beyond.

Results

GAVA evaluation data offers a glimpse into the potential long-term impact of the park adoption team’s efforts. Neighborhood perception of barriers to physical activity have gone down in 78744. In areas near Houston and Langford Elementary Schools, the percentage of residents reporting barriers (in terms of lack of quality programming, safety issues, lack of affordable programming, distance to physical

THE MOVEMENT THAT WAS CONCEIVED TO CREATE A SOCCER LEAGUE GAINED MOMENTUM AND YIELDED OTHER KEY WINS:

- $100,000 in improvements in 78744’s Ponciana Park
- Parent leaders and AISD collaborated to install more than $20,000 of lighting at Widen Elementary Playscape
- 8 free and 2 reduced cost programs added at Dove Springs Recreation Center
- Parent-led Zumba classes began at Houston Elementary School
- Participation in Summer Playground Program increased
activity facilities) reduced by up to 30 percent in the past year (see map on next page). Stakeholder interviews indicate that the community is in the “Preparation Stage” of community readiness, suggesting there is a general attitude of concern and willingness to do something about the problem in the community. Residents acknowledge that community leaders are actively supportive of continuing or improving current efforts or developing new efforts. Some resources have been identified and community members or leaders are actively working to secure these resources.

Finally, our door to door surveys show an increased use of physical activity access points in Dove Springs over the three year period.

### Percentage of Residents Reporting Usage of Physical Activity Assets

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<th>Year</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>66.0%</td>
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<td>Year 3</td>
<td>79.9%</td>
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39,000 residents have neighborhood access to GAVA physical activity assets in 44 and 45.

8 site teams comprised working on active PA assets in 44 and 45.

10 active physical activity sites.

$2.5M secured in infrastructure and programming improvements across 44 and 45 from funding other than MSDG grant money.
Decrease in percentage of residents reporting barriers to physical activity

RESULT: UP TO 30% REDUCTION IN RESIDENT REPORTED BARRIERS

Map was generated by Children’s Optimal Health using data from 167 families participating in a five-year cohort study conducted by UTH Health School of Public Health

2015 END OF YEAR REPORT
As a longtime Austin Police district representative in an area that crosses 78744 and 78745, Officer Aguilar’s job is to interact with community members and respond to concerns. But her love of the area and vested interest in the health and safety of the children and families inspired her to do more to benefit the residents.

Officer Aguilar grew up playing soccer. She loved it. She also knew that when children have soccer games, entire families come to watch. Those events would be non-threatening opportunities for Austin police officers to interact and build rapport with a population at times leery of engaging with law enforcement. The Police Activities League (PAL) also wanted to target 5th graders who were headed into middle school and get them interested in physical activity and making good grades.

When the PAL launched the first soccer league in 78744 in 2013, Officer Aguilar shepherded 300 young players around the fields virtually unaided. “It was great. We had 300 registrations and 600 people for the games— aunts, uncles, parents, grandparents.”

She knew, though, that the games held at Dove Springs Recreation Center limited participation to those families who lived close to the facility. Other leagues—with more resources—were required to provide physical activity options for children in other zip codes.

As the league and her responsibilities evolved, so did the officer’s position with the department. A position with the PAL was created for Officer Aguilar so she could focus her full attention on managing the soccer league. The new role also allowed the time and resources necessary for her to coordinate efforts with residents in 78745 to expand the soccer league to the second zip code.

Registration for the soccer league was opened to children residing in 78745 in 2014 and has been successfully implemented at various 78745 schools. Residents who had been working on soccer programming on their own have begun to align forces with the PAL program and to work on the adoption and stewardship of a previously unadopted school park site in order to secure a steady site for the program’s implementation in the 78745 zip code.

“My goal was always to have the league in 44 and 45. There were parents coming to the games and asking me when I was going to start a league there,” recalled Aguilar. “I’d been attending GAVA meetings and I had relationships with the community in 45. I made contact with some of the schools and they were interested in joining the soccer program. I immediately had four schools that wanted to sign up.”

Today, Officer Aguilar manages soccer leagues at 11 schools between the two zip codes. She coordinated with community leaders in 78745. She recruited new players and coaches and trained teenage referees. Her efforts have done more than remove barriers to physical activity. The soccer leagues are creating safer neighborhoods.

“I see children being more active. The parents had to be involved in the soccer program. I used to get calls and hear ‘Our parks aren’t safe. Our kids aren’t safe. We can’t play outside. There’s illegal activity.’ Now the parents are in charge of their parks and playgrounds. The parks are safe, so the parents schedule soccer practices two days a week in those places. Some are on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Some on Mondays and Wednesdays. But that means the parks are busy every day. Kids are playing every day and being physically active. And because the parks are filled with the community, there’s less illegal activity going on in those areas, too.”
Gloria Lugo is in constant motion. She’s retired from her career as an electronics device manufacturer, but as a mother, grandmother, president of the PTA and community leader, she’s busier than ever.

At a meeting of local PTA leaders, Gloria wondered why her school wasn’t offering physical activity programs similar to those at other campuses in Austin and immediately began a campaign to generate support for some in 78744. She surveyed neighbors to determine what park improvements and physical activity options would be of most interest to their families.

“The kids need a safe place to play. PARD has all kinds of programs but if they want to bring them here, we need a place to play,” Lugo explained. “We can’t go far and take our kids a long way, so APD is willing to bring the programs to us.”

Once a soccer field—a safe place for kids to play and home for an APD youth league—was deemed the priority project, Gloria and team identified five imperative improvements to the Houston Elementary school grounds: trash receptacles, portable toilets, new grass, an irrigation system and a water fountain.

“Most of the people around here—a lot of them don’t speak English—are afraid to speak up for themselves, but they know what we need. They need someone to motivate them. I’m the type of person who says, ‘Come on! Let’s go do it,’ so they feel comfortable,” said Lugo about her personality. “And we need a lot of support.”

Together, the residents uncovered APRD and AISD grants that could be used to cover facility improvement costs at Houston Elementary. For the first time since it opened in 1976, trash cans were made available throughout the campus. Portable toilets were brought on-site for use by families playing on the grounds. New grass was planted to delineate an actual soccer field. Gloria led the charge in soliciting in-kind donations from community members to alleviate high costs like installing irrigation systems and trash receptacles.

Meanwhile, Austin PARD and AISD collaborated to install and maintain a water fountain near the soccer field, as well as secure funding for the water supply long-term.

Rightfully so, Lugo is proud of what she and her neighbors have accomplished. “This field belongs to AISD, the PARD and us. We came up with the idea to fix the park together and to build a soccer field for the community.”
FOOD Access

GOALS:
Increase access to and availability of fresh fruits and vegetables and other healthy options. Promote consumption of healthy options as well as reducing promotion of unhealthy choices.

- Improved access to safe healthful nutrition environments
- Improved participation in healthy nutrition opportunities
Engagement

La Voz is a cross-issue, geographic team of residents based in a micro-neighborhood that was born in response to barriers to access in the community. The first geographic team, established in a neighborhood of 78745, was charged with addressing multiple issues related to GAVA’s four focus sectors. Their neighborhood principal was not yet ready to partner in this effort, so the team would worked outside the school to create initiatives such as additional recreational programs and an off-campus farm stand to address barriers to healthy living.

One of the most commonly cited barriers in the micro-neighborhood was the difficulty of accessing healthy food there. To address this, the team had a dual strategy: build awareness of and motivation to change the barriers to healthy food and start implementation efforts. How? By working with corner stores to provide healthier options and looking for opportunities to work with farm stands.

While retail strategies stalled as technical assistance expertise was identified, the team was not deterred. They made significant progress in creating farm stands and driving demand for the healthier inventory available at the diffuse access points. In 2013, the focus shifted and, since then, the 50 La Voz members—led by 15 primary leaders—have proven that community members can organize and scale their efforts to build sustainable programs.

Collaboration

La Voz can now claim responsibility for leading the establishment of the first resident-led farm stand in the two GAVA zip codes and establishing a blueprint for farm stands throughout the city. With a community aware of the importance of increased access to healthy foods, the residents have been relentless in their pursuit to open the first resident-led farm stand. The collaboration among residents and community partners increases the likelihood of sustainability in these critical points of access. The school communities have taken note and a second resident-led team out of Cunningham Elementary, using the blueprints of La Voz, will be able to establish their very own farm stand later in the year.

The farm stands are located in the 78745 community at the Sierra Ridge Apartments and Cunningham Elementary School- both in close proximity to a large number of children and families. They offer produce and vegetables to residents in the neighborhood. And the cross zip code sharing has begun: A newly formed geographic team in 78744 has formed a committee to bring a farm stand to their community by the spring of 2016.

Levels of Leadership

1. Emerging leaders: residents who have been contacted by GAVA staff and express an interest in GAVA priorities
2. Active leaders: residents who are part of implementation teams, and attend team meetings
3. Primary leaders: residents who are part of implementation teams, attend team meetings, and have been responsible for driving one or more key wins in the neighborhood.
Thanks to the hard work of the Sustainable Food Center (SFC), a partner in the GAVA coalition, Austin Farmshare was brought on to partner with residents and supply produce for the resident-led farm stands. Their local, fresh inventory is sold at a low price point, allowing more families to purchase the healthy food. SFC staff also helped residents define and execute implantation of the resident led farm stands, training residents in every aspect, from setting up the produce for sale, to running SNAP machines at the stands.

To ease replication in other communities, a formal operational handbook will be produced in the fall of 2015 so others might benefit from GAVA’s experience.

Now that community engagement has been stoked, and with the identification of a strong technical assistant, the food retail strategy has gathered significant momentum, too.

Advocacy

The La Voz’ mission is to be a unified voice for the residents of the St. Elmo neighborhood in 78745. Their collective efforts to amplify the needs of the community have done more than create awareness. La Voz initiated action. Their diligence and dedication convinced GAVA organizers and other partners that new farm stands would be patronized, managed and sustained by the community. They also gathered energy and resources for a strategy that would have remained stalled without their efforts.

Results

Systemic change doesn’t happen overnight. We are encouraged by the efforts thus far, but healthy food access continues to be a challenge in both zip codes. Progress in residents’ acknowledgement of the issue is reflected in the GAVA evaluation results. Now more people understand the challenge they’re facing: real barriers to healthy food access that exists in their community.

The neighborhood perception of barriers to fresh food options has gone up from the previous year. In areas where GAVA has seen high resident engagement (near Houston Elementary) and the percentage of residents reporting barriers (in terms of quality, affordability, availability, and distance to nutrition related assets) increased by up to 25 percent (see map on p. 23).
Stakeholder interviews indicate that the community is in the “pre-planning stage” of community readiness based on the Community Readiness Handbook for Successful Change. This stage suggests that the community believes food access is important, but community members have limited knowledge about the issue and are still unaware of the efforts happening in the community or what they can do to support them.

- **32,000** residents have neighborhood access to GAVA nutrition assets in 44 and 45.
- **6** active teams established and working on food strategies.
- **10** active foodsites and 10 emerging sites.
- **$120K** secured in training efforts and city budget priorities to support food retail work across 44 and 45.
Increase in percentage of residents reporting barriers to food access

RESULT: UP TO 25% INCREASE IN RESIDENT REPORTED BARRIERS

Map was generated by Children’s Optimal Health using data from 153 families participating in a five-year cohort study conducted by UTHealth School of Public Health
Lorig Weaver describes her occupation as farming. But in Dove Springs and in neighboring 78745, she’s also an educator.

Farmshare Austin is a nonprofit farm committed to education, food access, land preservation and community and was introduced to those responsible for the Sierra Ridge and Cunningham Elementary farm stands by the Sustainable Food Center. As its farm manager, Lorig manages the three-acre property and supplies organic, local food to farm stands—including the two GAVA-supported locations.

Her young age shouldn’t fool you. Lorig has spent years on farms. She’s well aware of the conversation around the standing concern that healthy food access is growing, particularly in low-income areas. She can attest to the fact that people want to eat healthier. People want to eat local. Lorig believes everyone has a right to access good food.

Her role as a farmer and supplier to farm stands has afforded Lorig two marquee opportunities to educate others: through an operations guide designed to share insights on building and sustaining a successful farm stand and through interactions with residents while staffing the farm stand.

“An interesting issue we came across is that creating a farm stand was a great idea and it needed to happen, but as always in projects, that’s easier said than done,” Lorig shared.

It was clear that an operations guide was needed to detail how to establish a food stand in other neighborhoods, address issues that are certain to arise, leverage available resources, promote the stand to residents and ensure sustainability. Given the farms stands’ success in the past year, the guide will be distributed so the farm stand model can be replicated elsewhere.

“The idea is to outline—in easy steps—how to establish the farm stand in other Austin neighborhoods. My input comes in as a farmer. From a farmer’s perspective, how to set up those relationships is helpful to community members.”

Lorig also enjoys sharing new foods with community members and exposing children to new, seasonal items. “At the beginning, I would bring a few different types of new items that people weren’t used to—things like fennel, fresh celery or different colored peppers and greens. Over time, people would be interested in trying them out. Typically, they’d come back and tell me, ‘I cooked it how you told me to. I loved it. My kids loved it.’ Then, those people would relay that to their friends and the friends would then come and try the new items.”

She shares information on seasonality and is pleased by the residents’ interest in consuming local, fresh foods. She ensures children with limited cash on hand leave the stand with tasty, fresh produce. She takes notes that could supplement the operations guide. Then, at the end of the day she returns to Farmshare Austin and tends to her next crop of teaching tools.
Everyone involved in GAVA is interested in improving the health of their fellow community members. But their motivation can vary—as does each individual’s contribution to efforts until barriers to healthy food access are removed.

Luckily for those in Dove Springs and 78745, Elena Rodriguez and Pilar Franco, a mother and grandmother committed to increasing the availability of healthy foods in corner stores, the impetus for their involvement with GAVA—and the strength of their resolve—is similar. These strong and disciplined women prove that diligent, dedicated leaders who emerge from the pack have the power to change their entire community.

Both Elena and Pilar were saddened by the high obesity rates in their neighborhoods and took responsibility for helping to find a solution to the problem. Elena made up her mind to help her community when she looked around and saw unhealthy habits and unhealthy kids. “For me, it’s seeing the children in my community with diabetes. That’s the thing that hits my heart. That’s when I started talking to my neighbors and to other people in the community and to the corner stores. I said we have to do something about this.”

Pilar recognized the need for change and knew the corner stores would be a critical place to start. “When I looked around and could see obesity and diabetes among the children, I knew we had to start in the corner stores because that’s where the junk food is. We have to get healthier options there. Change the front entrances. Get rid of the sodas and unhealthy beverages and put fruit there.”

Changing the inventory in the corner stores isn’t the end goal. These women want to help change behaviors of children and families. Elena believes kids will make healthier choices if presented with healthier options. “When they pass through, I want children to grab a pear or an apple instead of chips or candy. Everything I’m doing, it’s really about the kids.”

These women recognize there’s plenty of work left to do, and they have no plans to quit now. Working with GAVA has opened several doors for both Elena and Pilar to participate in other community groups and interact with new people. “I like to help others,” said Pilar. “I like to meet new people. Helping with things in the community lets me do both.”
GOALS:

- Implement the coordinated school health model to guide the process for improving the school environment
- Ensure the existence of a school wellness team including school staff, students, parents, and community partners
Engagement

The ability to capitalize on programs already in place has helped GAVA identify ways to incorporate new, evidence-based approaches into existing initiatives. Seven years ago, coordinated school health became an unfunded state mandate AISD was forced to address alone. The district’s herculean efforts to devise a framework for wellness efforts in all schools, including the selection of Coordinated Approach to Child Health (CATCH) as a district-wide curriculum, was effective and created many changes in school environments and attitudes. The community engagement facilitated by GAVA has augmented the district’s impact on students, families and the 78744-78745 communities by supporting them in turning the theory of a coordinated, representative team into practice.

This year, as the successful wellness team model from Dove Springs has taken hold in schools in neighboring 78745, the GAVA teams help to identify efficiencies and innovations with AISD staff as they implement the programs and policies outlined in their wellness framework. Quality physical education, frequent “Brain Breaks” during class time, health education, staff wellness programs and campus policies related to wellness are instilling healthy habits in the students and faculty. GAVA’s team provides training to make implementation easier and also ensures timelines stipulated in agreed upon action plans are met.

Diverse wellness teams reflect the campus and community-wide support for the coordinated school health efforts. There is buy in at every grade level. Teams include physical education teachers, school nurses, parents, community members, administrators.

The schools in both zip codes have made huge strides toward establishing themselves as hubs of wellness. But as the work is demonstrating, kids aren’t the only ones who need to be supported. The messages and lessons about physical activity and healthy foods have to extend to parents and the community. Only then will entire families value good health.

Collaboration

Establishing a school as a community hub requires an outpouring of involvement from residents, community organizations, neighboring businesses and school staff. However, this work is not easy. Even when one person—namely, the school principal—endorses the coordinated school health initiative, it is often a struggle to create the space for faculty and parents to collaborate effectively. School administrators are overwhelmed with an exhaustive workload. It’s easier to delegate active involvement in the wellness teams and cheer from afar than to passionately champion the school’s wellness initiatives.
A key win this year has been increased engagement of the community’s school principals: The inaugural principals’ meetings convened to address common challenges, share solutions and bolster results at every school in the district. With the principals’ full backing, additional community groups supplemented the programs and aligned their offerings so they would be less overwhelming to schools. New parent fitness classes were offered on school campuses in 78745 and continue to be sustained in 78744. School parks became the focus of clean-up efforts. Creating safe environments for the entire community to utilize to increase physical activity levels was established as a priority.

Together, community members are constructing school hubs from which wellness is radiating.

Advocacy

The passion of coordinated school health team members has fueled their efforts and their collective voice has empowered others to help establish schools as community hubs. School administrators are collaborating with coordinated school health teams to create new programs and policies that enable students and families to make healthy choices every day. Park adoption teams—consisting of community members—in partnership with PARD staff and AISD employees—channeled efforts to improve school parks. School administrators and city officials who are passionate about obesity prevention have helped navigate through the sometimes challenging process of creating safer routes to schools.

As the lessons of wellness continue to infiltrate the community, the messages and practices of good health will continue to increase in both zip codes.

Results

Interviews with school principals in the community uncovered positive outcomes from the past year that will facilitate even more progress in and out of the classroom. The schools with the strongest support systems were those that established well-structured coordinated school health teams. Principals who strongly supported the wellness efforts in their schools and demonstrated a strong, personal commitment are those who expressed interest in expanding their schools’ capacity to host a farm stand or take on another lofty initiative.
“Wellness is the silver bullet in education,” according to Michele Rusnak, Health and Physical Education Supervisor for AISD. Her perspective is a uniquely, qualified one. For the past seven years, Michele has spearheaded the mandated coordinated school health initiative at the 129 AISD campuses, which is no easy task. Assistance from GAVA to supercharge her team’s efforts was welcome—as long as it was well-positioned with the district staff.

Michele spent years defining and implementing a wellness framework for the district and was acutely aware how critical it would be to align the GAVA team’s goals with the structure already widely accepted by the faculty. The initiative would face opponents if viewed as yet another thing to add to an educator’s daily lesson plan or to-do list. Two years into the partnership, Michele now raves about the operational support and community resources GAVA’s team now provides as they work in tandem to establish community hubs at schools in Dove Springs and 78745.

“We have to get the message of wellness into the community. We can’t just educate kids. We have to educate parents and the surrounding communities.” Michele continued, “How is the work and the shift in behaviors sustained? If their own school values wellness, the kids will carry it on. When the community values wellness, that’s when it’s sustained.”

Engaging more than 100,000 residents in two zip codes will take time, and the efforts—while easy to replicate—must extend beyond the walls of the schools. She knows that if the GAVA initiative and coordinated school health initiatives are successful in these initial locations, they can be successful across the city.

Michele has a simple indicator of the value the community places on wellness. “If you ever really want to know if a program is working, go to the back of the school and watch the kids during recess. See what they’re doing. If they’ve already learned how important physical activity is, they’re creating games and they’re moving. Go into the cafeteria and look what they’re bringing. A lot of times parents pack the lunches, but the kids are leaving the junk food and eating their fruits and vegetables.

And we’re starting to see a trend that school lunches are becoming healthier. According to a federal report released by the CDC, nearly 80 percent of schools offered two or more vegetables per meal in 2014, the data showed, up from 62 percent in 2000. Two or more fruits were offered in about 78 percent of schools, up from 68 percent in 2000. About a third of schools now have salad bars. Since students consume up to half of their calories at school, the hope is this trend is having a positive impact on their overall health.

“Kids will be talking about healthy foods. The staff and administration will feel better because they’re taking part. They’re feeling well inside. You can see that. Joy and happiness. Those are big parts of wellness.”

Michele Rusnak is a big part of why wellness—and joy and happiness—are spreading in Dove Springs and 78745.
In the past two years, we’ve witnessed how much one motivated resident can impact her community.

Evita Cruz, Dove Springs mother of three, explained, “I initially got involved with Marathon Kids through Rodriguez Elementary. The parent support specialist there saw a lot of enthusiasm and initiative on my part for the Zumba group, and she referred me to Marathon Kids. They asked me to get involved.”

Since first engaging with Marathon Kids and participating as a GAVA community leader, Evita has continued to advocate for healthier after-school food options and better selection at local corner stores.

“In schools, I’ve held meetings with the GAVA team and other people in the community.” As Cruz explains, access to quality foods for children is a challenge in learning institutions. “Some children get home and don’t have anything to eat. Some schools offer meals after school but they were unhealthy. Just because it’s a free meal, doesn’t mean it has to be something poor or something not good for their health.”

Thanks to Evita’s tenacity and the coordinated efforts of her school team and fellow residents, a conversation began with GAVA organizations, the school district, and a representative from the company providing meals. As a result, the menus for after-school meals at Mendez Middle School have changed. Whole wheat wraps with fresh ingredients have replaced salty tasting, salami sandwiches. Whole wheat pasta with chicken and fresh vegetables are served regularly.

It took time, relationship building and strong arguments to realize these changes. To Evita, it was worth it. “I didn’t quit when this fight got tough because I love my community. I love my family. I love my kids. My kids aren’t just the kids who came out of my womb. They’re all the kids in my community. I have a passion for them. I want a better future for my kids, my grandkids.”