Building the Blocks of Kalamazoo through Asset Based Community Development

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Literature Review

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Acknowledgments

Abstract

As a Kalamazoo native, I have seen that resources for education, the neighborhood, and the built environment have the potential to alter community aspirations and the social determinants of health. I have participated intensively in a robust community change initiative called Building Blocks of Kalamazoo. In this Senior Integrated Project, I draw upon my experiences as a summer intern with Building Blocks and combine them with a literature review from Kim Cummings, the founder of Building Blocks. I will explore how a neighborhood intervention organization, Building Blocks of Kalamazoo, may influence public and community health on a small scale (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018). I use the Dahlgren-Whitehead model to explain how Building Blocks uses Asset Based Community Development approaches (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993) to address modifiable social determinants of health. The promotion of the agency of community members to strengthen *social networks* and enhance *built environments* in the neighborhood street block level, therefore, improving the community of Kalamazoo.

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Building the Blocks of Kalamazoo

From early June to late August 2022, I was the Community Outreach and Program Activities Intern for Building Blocks of Kalamazoo through the Stryker Center for Civic Engagement at Kalamazoo College. Throughout the internship, I found that Building Blocks of Kalamazoo was motivated by people in our community, and over time, I was, too. Many believe, as I have, that community change comes after a long period of time. However, while I was at Building Blocks of Kalamazoo, I witnessed change at a ten-fold speed. The satisfaction from completing block site projects then turned into motivation and a newfound approach to knowing how modifiable social determinants of health may be altered. Building Blocks of Kalamazoo allowed the community to choose what was happening, where it was happening, and when.

Building Blocks of Kalamazoo impacts the community of Kalamazoo, Michigan, in two immediate areas of social determinants of health: the domains of *social networks* and *built environments*. These are both modifiable social determinants of health; these can be changed over time and controlled to an extent (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services). I have had a first-person perspective on how Building Blocks has passed the reins back into the hands of individual members and the community.

Models such as those produced by Dr. Kim Cummings (2000) and Dahlgren & Whitehead (1991) show us exactly how organizations that promote individual and community power can account for an immediate change. Typically, many people are aware of a 'slow and steady' perspective; however, the literature written by Dr. Cummings and Dahlgren & Whitehead displays significant results over time. The accessibility to possess and maintain a connection to the collective community surrounding an individual and utilize the opportunity to improve personal and local communal spaces is influential to community health.

Cummings had put forth a fundamental model in his class framework at Kalamazoo College towards altering the five core neighborhoods of Kalamazoo with neighborhood and social disparity issues surrounding home improvement or beautification. Resources for homes and communities would be provided, for things such as monetary funding, organizational aspects, volunteer work, and general knowledge of home project's, which can be limited and hard for people to access on their own. This class then led to the creation of a nonprofit, Building Blocks of Kalamazoo, as an organization to further the disproportion of health inequity in the community.

The Dahlgren-Whitehead model displays the social determinants of health as a set of general social and economic conditions that collectively affect health throughout life. The Dahlgren-Whitehead model allows the system of public health workers to convey the importance of different levels of social-economic factors concerning the impact of a health burden. Health burden can be generally described and typically measured by financial cost, mortality, morbidity, or other indicators of health consequences. Many of these factors that affect health have a social gradient, with poorer people experiencing worse health outcomes.

Indeed, public health impacts a large group of people and often addresses a population's health. According to the World Health Organization, "[p]ublic health refers to all organized measures (whether public or private) to prevent disease, promote health, and prolong life among the population as a whole." Community health focuses on nonclinical methods for addressing the social, behavioral, environmental, economic, and other social determinants of health in a geographically specified community to improve health, prevent disease, and reduce health disparities (American Hospital Association, n.d.). I will show that community health focused organizations like Building Blocks of Kalamazoo greatly impacts problems on a smaller scale

that are often overlooked. The executive power of residents acted through community engagement in the neighborhoods will often see a quicker pace of change on this level compared to other approaches.

Often, these organizations can directly and swiftly impact the community based on their ability to interact and gauge what the community needs because neighbors can make these choices. Building Blocks strives to improve the modifiable factors of social determinants of health, mainly focusing on *social networks* and *built environments*. I will claim that it is up to both the individuals of a neighborhood and their collective community to work towards changing the factors that impact community health and to take the necessary action to influence linked factors in the Dahlgren-Whitehead model of the social determinants of health.

Social Determinants of Health

Social determinants of health are the conditions of the environments in which people are surrounded that affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes and risks (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, n.d.). These determinants include but are not limited to an individual's economic status, physical environment, social support networks, and occupation. Social determinants of health can lead to an individual's health burdens being higher or lower from birth to end-of-life.

The role of understanding and addressing social determinants of health within any community is vital, medical care, accounts for only 10-20 percent of health outcomes and life expectancy (Hood et al., 2016). 80-90 percent is related to social determinants of health, which if applied correctly by public health officials, can hopefully lower the unfortunately high health disparities (Artiga & Hinton, 2019). Health disparities are health issues that socially disadvantaged populations experience due to the burden of preventable (and sometimes

modifiable) factors, including disease, injury, violence, or opportunity to reach optimal health (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], Community Health and Program Services, 2008).

Health disparities are often rooted social and economic factors such as educational disadvantages and areas of impoverishment and environmental problems (Baciu et al., 2008). These areas will struggle to have a solid base for social justice as a form of health equity and need a supporting guiding organization to assist in the area's flourishing. Programs that work towards establishing improvement frameworks will often take note of the factors that lead to health disparities and set goals to alter these factors. To create more effective treatment programs and improved healthcare systems, it is essential to recognize and include social elements that affect health-related behaviors and health status.

It is crucial to address these factors personally with the individuals involved, especially as an entity coming into the neighborhoods that may be outside of their direct community. The people of these areas are placed in a position where they are often systematically denied or ignored when the "problem" factors arise. Hence, the entities or organizations that come into the community must focus on the collective and individual response based on the social elements of their collective history. It is also imperative to acknowledge the history of racial discrimination and the segregation of people of color with discrepancies in their health burdens. The social elements that will be discussed include the history behind the systematically enforced issues of health disparities through redlining and issues of agency as two important factors of the social determinants of health: the domains of *social networks* and *built environments*.

Kalamazoo's Historic Redlining

Redlining is a form of discrimination in which services are often limited based on neighborhoods deemed "hazardous" based on income level and environment. Often with redlining, real estate steering occurs. This is when a real estate agent exerts pressure on a client to make a particular choice based on one of the factors listed in the Fair Housing Act, such as race, religion, gender, disability, familial situation, or nationality. Steering clearly has the effect of limiting minority homebuyers' housing options. Real estate agents routinely show African American buyers fewer listings, thereby reducing their housing options (Christensen & Timmins, 2018).

Due to steering and therefore redlining, these areas are disproportionately made up of ethnic minorities and people of low income and often are in the regions that are seen as unsafe or unsatisfactory locations for services to be provided for the community. In Kalamazoo, redlining has, in part, created an issue with health disparities since the mid-1930s and has had many efforts to correct systematic housing inequality (Wedel, 2020). Redlining has, to some extent though not entirely, caused several neighborhoods of Kalamazoo to have housing with little chance for maintenance or aesthetic goals based on this disparity.

The social determinants of health in these communities have issues of imbalance that increase the health burden of the residents in the neighborhoods. In many low-income neighborhoods with minority groups, redlining established hurdles to the movement of capital, fostering the conditions for long-term racial segregation. Neighborhoods that are redlined are the victim of targeted racism, and the housing segregation of these populations creates economic imperatives for the ruling class to take advantage of.

These locations are vulnerable to predatory stores, such as check cashing storefronts, also known as Payday Loans. An issue coined "food apartheid" by Karen Washington (2018) was created to describe further the structural inequalities in the nation's food system because of limited access to healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate nutrition. Structural inequalities around food availability have been done by elitist strategic planning of limiting grocery stores, impacting the surrounding neighborhoods and resulting in a heightened health burden for these areas. This is one of many issues that need to be addressed in cities with a heightened level of predatory storefronts within neighborhoods of increased poverty levels and racial segregation of people of color.

In the areas of systematic redlining, there are parts of people's homes and exterior land that are not a priority to be fixed or beautified and are often dismissed by homeowners. Usually, this is because of financial issues, general knowledge about home improvement projects, the need for a workforce, and a lack of connection with the surrounding neighbors for street projects. When these projects are done, the result of these improvements affects the community members in multiple ways, such as pride in the home or street, self-acknowledgment of "doing it yourself/together," and the general joy of aesthetic features.

While redlining can only be solved through policy decisions and long-term commitment, but a program like Building Blocks can demonstrate what the community of Kalamazoo can establish for further development promptly. By addressing the social determinants of health of *social networks* and *built environments*, a class was created, further developing into a starting point for Building Blocks to move forward with the community to re-establish a sense of community and individual agency.

Agency as a Driving Factor for Community Change

Essential aspects of a person can be commonly acknowledged to include their capacity for action, effectiveness, power over their individual life, and acceptance of responsibility for their actions. Social determinants of health impact this sense of agency over personal and overall health. Believing in personal power to shape thoughts and behaviors and handle various activities and circumstances, is necessary for a person to feel in control of their life and allow themselves to better both physical and mental health.

Agency in social science refers to a person's ability to have the means and power to reach their full potential. For instance, structure comprises the impact elements that either dictate or constrain agents and their decisions, such as social class, religion, gender, ethnicity, aptitude, and customs (Barker, 2005). The impact of agency being further developed in residents in neighborhoods may allow for a more accessible form of projects for their neighborhood community for organizing or home improvements that would lead to beneficial health outcomes.

The sense of control an individual has over their life, the ability to shape their ideas and behaviors, and their confidence in their abilities to deal with various challenges and circumstances are all examples of agency. Factors that force agency can come from whether an individual feels secure in the standards of their life, and when at a level of significant disparity, agency can be lost and feel out of their hands. In Building Blocks, the sense of agency in residents over what projects get done at an individual's home is placed into their hands, and funding is provided so that the sense of agency over the beautification of the home and block is a self-determined aspect.

Many organizations attempt to devise solutions for instead of allowing the power of decision-making to be done by the community members. When choices affecting the entire

neighborhood implemented by the organization are made, top-down management is used, whereas bottom-up management involves all individuals in these decisions. For larger, national organizations with significant popularity are impacting the community, top-down management tends to limit the amount of agency for the individuals involved and limit their sense of agency. Organizations that operate on a smaller scale will often have substantial involvement with people directly affected by their implementations.

In this manner, agency re-established through bottom-up participatory project management styles can help with both a person's short-term goals as well as any long-term goals that a community hopes to accomplish. By addressing two social determinants of health, Building Blocks of Kalamazoo puts the power of agency back into individuals' hands, resulting in them gaining the ability to be stable while still being adaptable or flexible in the midst of conflict or change. This adaptability, paired with recognizing the impact of historical redlining on a social level, allows for essential public health models to impact social equity and social capital.

Frameworks for Understanding Social Equity and Capital

Models that acknowledge the connection between health equity and health outcomes amongst a population are essential to the frameworks surrounding public health (Marmot et al., 2008). The Dahlgren and Whitehead model, created in 1991, follows the layers of health, from personal or biological determinants to those that are further removed, from nonprofits and organizations within our community to much larger structures such as education, occupation, cultural and economic systems. The application of this model in addressing social determinants of health has been acknowledged to promote immediate change upon multiple levels of varying significance (Salipante & Golden-Biddle, 1995).

Asset Based Community Development (ABCD), created by John L. McKnight and John P. Kretzmann in 1993 provides an approach to connecting people within a community to that very community itself. Asset Based Community Development recognizes the importance of community members' resources in mobilizing the neighborhood to continue finding solutions that are influential to short-term and long-term development.

Dahlgren-Whitehead Rainbow

The Dahlgren-Whitehead rainbow shows the intersection of health inequalities between individuals, their environment, and health (Dahlgren & Whitehead, 2021). The Dahlgren-Whitehead model depicts the influential factors on an individual that can impact health. These factors were described as either fixed (core non-modifiable factors), such as age, sex, and race, or as modifiable factors, which include personal lifestyle, the physical and social environment, and socioeconomic conditions (Scriven & Garman, 2005).

Modifiable factors are presented within the Dahlgren-Whitehead model as more removed from the individual; however, these factors can be altered and consequently improve or worsen an individual's health. Public health addresses social determinants of health and, therefore, the modifiable health factors as influential to health outcomes. Each element is on a particular 'level' for each individual, starting in the diagram as being very close to the individual, going 'outwards' from the individual to things that are further removed from the individual's grasp. These 'outward' levels can be altered by societal, environmental, governmental, or other institutions rather than by an individual's actions toward their health.

An organization that promotes action at a personal level and can show direct change is Building Blocks of Kalamazoo. Building Blocks works towards funding and undertakes community projects for beautifying low- to low-moderate-income neighborhoods as a form of

equity. This allows for an increase in the community neighborhood social capital. Building Blocks employs an approach to organizing that explicitly emphasizes the power of personal relationships and encourages the residents to go beyond a merely instrumental connection with the people on their street. Nonprofits such as Building Blocks, demonstrates that small scall collective organizations can quickly and successfully affect changes in a community. Organizations that promote health equity and equal access to resources for a population are essential for the groundwork for future policies, specifically within tight-knit communities.

Asset Based Community Development

A strategy for sustainable community-driven development is asset-based community development (ABCD). John L. McKnight and John P. Kretzmann developed the ABCD approach in their co-authored book, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Asset*s (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). The attractiveness of ABCD resides in its underlying idea that community members and organizers may take control of the development process by recognizing and using already existing but frequently underutilized assets, responding to and generating local economic opportunities.

Mapping out these assets is essential in mobilizing them for current and future development. Institutions, individuals, and local organizations all are pivotal in community mobilization. They will allow for community mobilization's driving force to focus on essential issues within that community (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Implementing the assets from the community back onto the residents is a level of community organizing and participatory social justice by investing back into the area of focus.

The central concept behind this strategy is to apply and utilize what the community already has to address the issues within that community. Two of asset-based community

development's several vital principles focus on how *relationships help to build a community*, as people must be connected for sustainable community development to take place, and the function of *inside-out organization*, where local community members are in control of the development of their community (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993).

The principle of how *relationships help to build a community* allows for an interconnection between people and their community. Networking with individuals outside of a person's immediate group can pave the way for further development within a community. These relationships aid in community building and increase social capital. Trust within these relationships also allows for a stronger connection between individuals or institutions with solid and reliable resources. Building trust with these partners within the community allows for further engagement and access to support or assistance.

As previously addressed, agency is a means that is a driving factor for community development. Establishing solid and meaningful relationships within a community will allow for a deeper connection and easier access to resources that might have been otherwise sought outside of the immediate community and likely cost more. With this agency in mind, the sense of individual ability to form connections within the community can increase the likelihood of improvements made by community members.

As ABCD explains, there is improvement in the overall strength of the community through relationship building. I argue that through relationship building, an individual's sense of agency is improved based on these relationships, leading to community betterment. This version of agency that I claim is found through ABCD is a mobilizing effort of the impacts of ABCD on individual people. When people are given community access to resources within their area, they are empowered and able to develop many aspects of their life further.

Within the strategy of ABCD, there are five critical assets in any given community: individuals, associations, institutions, physical assets, and connections. Each of these assets is then mapped out by Kretzmann and McKnight and used as driving factors towards mobilization of a community to institute improvements, compared to traditional strategies of improvement. These traditional strategies often do not account for resources or assets within what the authors described as "troubled" communities. Maintaining this effort, communities dismissed as areas of great difficulty or "troubled" by prejudice will have these resources but are likely unaware of their presence or ability to use them.

By leveraging the community's existing resources, ABCD encourages people, organizations, and institutions to collaborate and focus on the community's resources rather than solely its needs. Before they become mobilized to work together to build on the identified assets of everyone involved, a significant amount of effort is spent identifying the assets of individuals, associations, and eventually institutions, including nonprofits. Community members who are interested in or need the identified assets from an individual are linked with them. It is important to note that within this strategy, there are some discrepancies and issues that need to be addressed when working with communities that have had high levels of racial discrimination, police or elite structured violence, as well as other forms of prejudice.

These varying degrees of mobilization are described within their written literature and are known to be currently outdated. Many of the practices established in ABCD are still applicable as long as some updating occurs during their implementation in the community engagement and revitalization field of development. Building Blocks of Kalamazoo is comparable to ABCD by its means of community development and focuses on the participation mobilization of the neighborhood community members. The way the ABCD strategy is suggested to be implemented

mirrors that of Building Blocks in its original form as a participatory social justice action-based class.

Origins of Building Blocks of Kalamazoo

Founder of Building Blocks, Kalamazoo College Professor of Sociology, Dr. Kim Cummings, established a much-needed model for addressing issues around the social capital of Kalamazoo's low- to low-moderate-income neighborhoods. Cummings worked towards establishing Building Blocks of Kalamazoo through his classroom and, through time, has made a lasting impact on community members' sense of agency while working towards further modifying the factors of *social networks* and *built environments* in Kalamazoo.

Cummings met with directors of the city's neighborhood associations, representatives of Kalamazoo Neighborhood Housing Services, and the Local Initiatives Support Corporation to discuss a significant but underappreciated issue. Despite the neighborhood associations' impressive strengths and accomplishments, the five core neighborhoods of Kalamazoo are placed in a profiling and segregated system that undermines the improvement.

These areas have predominantly poor residents of color; this population remained in these neighborhoods through the elite, rich white control of the housing market. This systemic discrimination within housing reinforces the patterns of racial and wealth segregation. Racism plays a prominent role in the social barriers brought into light when working towards the improvement of the community, as well as limited opportunities due to the economic status of individuals in residential areas with a higher population of people of color.

The issues homeowners and city-wide housing groups faced jeopardized their significant financial investments. In his paper, *John Dewey and the Rebuilding of Urban Community: Engaging Undergraduates as Neighborhood Organizers*, Cummings claims that individuals from

the community first came to Building Blocks as its initial class formation out of what he describes as "self-interest" (Cummings, 2000). The community may have come with a goal of improvement and self-sufficiency. Later in the paper, Cummings states:

> In summary, then, Building Blocks would be seen by Dewey as addressing five key aspects of building a democratic, self-educating community: bringing residents back into intense association around shared problems, empowering residents through participative decision-making and direct work responsibilities, inducing residents to engage in reflection and practical experimentation, overcoming social barriers between residents, and transcending the dualism between self and society.

Building Blocks of Kalamazoo, now operating as a fully functioning nonprofit, continues to address these five key aspects. This, combined with the return of agency into the hands of the neighborhood residents, is the eventual result of supporting the improvement of *social networks* and *built environments*.

Building Blocks of Kalamazoo

Building Blocks began as a small pilot project in the spring of 1995, aiming to help the associations representing Kalamazoo's low-income neighborhoods to extend their organizing efforts to individual streets (Building Blocks, n.d.). Since 2010, they have operated as a local nonprofit, writing grants for the same target neighborhoods on a larger scale for improvement in the city of Kalamazoo, Michigan. As mentioned before, Building Blocks maintains the connection between residents and organizers and allows college-level students to volunteer or be brought on board for an internship at the nonprofit to further their knowledge.

Building Blocks of Kalamazoo offers specialized block-level community organizing, aiming to develop and revitalize neighborhoods to improve the overall quality of life at the hands of the neighborhood's residents. In the five neighborhoods that Building Blocks operates in, there are 20 block action groups and eight more sites to be added by the beginning of 2023. New sites in each neighborhood will allow these areas to develop socially and economically fully. Using the theories of the Dahlgren-Whitehead model and Assets Based Community Development model, each neighborhood should be able to improve its health block by block.

The commitment and collaboration of Building Blocks with the community for the goals of both individuals and the neighborhood succeeds in improving the blocks it is active on. The strengths-based organizing for community development also allows for some social barriers to be lifted and for the claimed improvement of social determinants of health. Building Blocks help to build and strengthen social capital, resident resilience, civic engagement, individual and collective resident leadership, and the physical appearance of the block and homes (Building Blocks, n.d.).

I was the Community Outreach and Program Activities Intern for the summer of 2022 for Building Blocks of Kalamazoo. My primary responsibilities focused on helping to coordinate target site programming and carrying out specific tasks supporting Building Blocks' goals. I worked with the Catalyst Sites for Spring and Summer as they overlapped during my internship. I was also closely involved with the Continuation Grant with a site in the Northside neighborhood, where I am still in contact with the group.

Most of my duties were to help with the facilitating of bonds between neighbors, to create and assist in strengthening community relationships, and establishing myself as a helpful community member. It was important to interact with residents, as emphasized in Dr.

Cummings' work; even as a native of Kalamazoo, it was essential to witness their own vocalized needs rather than asserting what one may personally think should be done. Residents of the sites were encouraged to talk with me about project options, ask for opportunities to apply for grants for their block or community space, and often discuss how Building Blocks has improved the physical qualities of their neighborhood and social interactions with other community members.

Residents would talk with me about their experiences in Building Blocks throughout my time. I would assist them in participating in block action group sites, community gardens, and corner street gardens and organize the continuation grants for two groups. Having the opportunity to work with residents and discuss their thoughts on the organization allowed me to recognize further the importance of *social networks* and the work that Building Blocks provides. I helped develop plans for recruitment, and resident planning meetings, assisting in larger goals of mobilizing residents and developing strong resident networks. Since I am a Kalamazoo native, it was accessible for me to talk with residents and assist with the connection between residents due to the mutual connection.

Through Building Blocks, there are options for applications for Kalamazoo blocks to become sites, or blocks are selected in the five core neighborhoods in Kalamazoo: Edison neighborhood, Northside neighborhood, Eastside neighborhood, Vine neighborhood, and Oakwood neighborhood. After initial contact is made by flyers sent to residents within the block area, resident leaders are established to recruit the block. Meetings are held with resident leaders from seasonal sites to assist them with the structure of the projects and help coordinate and network with companies that Building Blocks functions with closely.

Part of the initial meeting for resident leaders describes the 'tiers' of Building Blocks functions and programs. Each 'tier' is a functional level of assistance for the neighborhood

through community action, involvement, and organization. Tier 1 explores the Catalyst

Programs;

> This program provides a platform for residents to come together to establish
>
> relationships as they cooperate on home improvement projects. Encouraged by
>
> organizers, residents themselves help to mobilize their neighbors, decide on
>
> priorities, and make final funding decisions. They seek donations, contribute special
>
> expertise, and assume primary responsibility for completing their own work
>
> projects (Building Blocks, n.d.).

In Tier 2, there also are Block Action Groups, neighborhood groups that form and decide

they want to continue working on an ongoing basis. This includes initiatives such as providing

safety improvements in Kalamazoo organized by Building Blocks. An initiative to be

implemented shortly will provide neighborhoods with poor lighting the opportunity to have

floodlights installed and an option for the installment of Ring Doorbells.

Tier 3 involves Resident Lead Block Action Groups, where the community's

involvement comes into play. Neighbors who have met through Building Blocks will often

become more invested in their street blocks and want to participate in more forms of community

involvement. The connection between individuals becoming improved and developed over time

is an important aspect that Building Blocks hopes to foster. One group I worked in close contact

with was the Oak Street Community Garden, which operated in the Vine neighborhood of

Kalamazoo—using funds provided by the residents partnered with grants from Building Blocks.

During my time, I maintained part of the garden's responsibilities of weeding, sign mounting,

and repairs to the garden beds and community pantry.

Resident leaders from each site are given a stipend from Building Blocks to provide for their actions in the groups to compensate for their time and services to their neighbors. This is to give the resident leaders an incentive to participate in a highly organized and structural role for the site while on their time off from work. In this case, individuals who often work for their household budgets are adequately accommodated for their time so that they have accessibility to the project and income.

People within the block site projects who have accessibility issues due to age, disability, or work can still participate. There is a requirement for participation in all meetings for the site and near-all workdays. Often, issues of accessibility are still capable of helping manage tasks, recruitment, or any amount of safe physical work. While Building Blocks projects focus on the physical work of built environments, the impact of *social networks* is significant and is also met.

The resident leaders also help with exterior renovations, and the budget created in meetings accounts for equal opportunity for every house. Systems are in place for the resident leaders with their purchasing power for the projects, and they must keep track of receipts for each house for a final audit of the total budget from all workdays. The resident leaders that are partaking in the projects, including their own homes, have guidelines are followed and enforced to ensure efficiency. Many are proud of the impact on their neighbors and willingly take a lower individual budget from the grant block funds to provide for other property projects.

Funding to support exterior home improvement and beautification projects has been a large portion of the work at Building Blocks. The distribution of this money allows for the support of Resident Facilitators leading the programs. Residents who work as site facilitators in the Catalyst Program undergo an eight-session training to advance their understanding of and abilities in various areas, including community organizing, relationship-building, conflict

resolution, diversity and inclusion, collaborative communication, and many others. The funding also goes towards the project planning and workday support from Building Blocks staff and the volunteer recruitment for community workdays. Each project is allocated a budget, allowing the funds to be used to their fullest extent for neighborhood improvement and advancement.

The projects that occurred while I was the Summer Intern at Building Blocks were impactful to the residents and to me. I worked with six different Block Sites, four of which were Spring Catalyst Sites that were already started, two Summer Catalyst Sites which I assisted with directly, and a Continuation Grant at one of the Spring Catalyst Sites. I also assisted with prior Catalyst Sites to organize and write applications for their eventual community projects. I often focused on my work in the Oak Street Community Garden and their Street Corner Gardens with the Vine Neighborhood.

A final important factor of my internship was discussing how the summer sites' performances and interactions would further influence future projects with the Executive Director, Katie McPherson. This allowed for an outside perspective of Building Blocks through a Kalamazoo native lens and a worker for the organization. Throughout this portion of my time with Building Blocks, I was able to discuss more in-depth how the organization functions with its overarching goals, problem-solving with respect to any issues that may need addressing, and the standard guidelines for each portion of what Building Blocks does consistently to remain beneficial to the community.

Catalyst Block Sites

The Catalyst Block Sites have been the leading interest for residents when approached to apply for a Building Blocks initiative. The Catalyst Block sites function with the organizers and residents to mobilize their neighbors, select priorities, make final funding decisions, and assume

primary responsibility for completing their work projects (Building Blocks, n.d.). Cummings says that self-help and mutual help on small-scale physical projects helped to regenerate *social networks*, in turn build his participatory block-level groupings committed to the long-term revitalization of the street (Cummings, 2000).

Initially, the goal was to increase awareness and empowerment for the student organizers of the class and the residents of the streets in the neighborhoods of Kalamazoo. Building Blocks keeps this close to heart, bringing in student interns, often from Kalamazoo College or Western Michigan University, to work directly with the residents and connect with the community on a block-by-block scale. Upon their exit interviews, many residents have reported feeling "empowered, energized, and connected to their neighbors in new ways after completing this Building Blocks program" (Building Blocks, n.d.).

A fund amount is determined for each home from the overall number of houses, which typically ranges from five to 13. From there, each household develops a budget by dividing the total by the. Community areas may be included, but residences are frequently the focus. The block and neighbors do the workdays together and finish each project over 12 weeks for Catalyst Sites. Change is almost immediate, with each project yielding improvement to the home and, therefore, the community.

Continuation Grants

After the Catalyst Sites are completed, many residents are interested in furthering the ongoing improvement of their block. Once the 12-week period is over for the course of Building Blocks, residents can have three households apply for a Continuation Grant. Flyers are created and distributed to the residents among the Catalyst Sites throughout the final workdays. A point of contact is established with a primary contact resident, who often had been the resident leader

of the Catalyst Site the group had participated in. Further plans for the Continuation Grant are discussed with participating neighbors who work together to decide on a collaborative project or individual home projects.

When interest in the Continuation Grant is explored, residents are offered the application to fill out, including space for the proposal for community-oriented projects. Residents in the past have taken this opportunity to invest in community spaces, such as areas for children to play, establishing a community or corner garden, and signage for safety on the street, such as "Children at Play" or "Pick up After Your Dog." Residents have also used the grant for further beautification goals, including landscaping, repairing a mutually shared fence, and other individual goals of altering their property.

The Continuation Grant provides an opportunity for the street residents to develop a relationship with each other further and maintain any connections formed throughout the Catalyst Sites. Each group can have up to $500.00 from the grant. However, residents can combine grants from other foundations if the project costs more than the allocated amount or if residents want another follow-up project after the continuation project. The group of residents can split the funds with the whole group and have the purchasing power of their project materials.

The projects on the block use a "hands-off" approach: residents decide how things should be done and only the residents are involved. Building Blocks governing is limited during the course of the projects, though may help with the with volunteers that are needed in the case of physical assistance or project knowledge. I observed the agency of purchasing power in the Continuation Grants projects over my summer internship, as I worked with a site as a purchaser for their supplies and an organizer for the workdays. Each home had a separate idea for their

landscaping projects for their continuation grant and could fully explain to me the desired processes of each of their projects. I was able to assist with my landscaping and botany knowledge, but the group I worked with was self-sufficient and knowingly led their neighbors confidently based on their area of experience.

This mirrors the strategy of *inside-out organization* developed from McKnight and Kretzmann's 1993 asset-based community development style. To employ this form of organization, there is a focus on what a community determines as its needs and priorities, as well as assembling the needed resources within the community. This form of community organization can allow for a heavier concentration on how the problems can be addressed and may result in a more community-motivated system of appropriate solutions.

It is evident that Building Blocks is a strong example of the ABCD strategy in its application of multiple community development processes. Building Blocks can "catalyze" assets from the individuals directly in the community and help lead the growth. Each neighbor taking the initiative to broaden and develop their *social networks* allows for a sizeable connective network of ways, tools, and resources for community development.

Procedures of the Continuation Grant

A minimum of three households need to be involved in the project and identified on the request. Residents are encouraged to use their imagination in selecting project activities that build community and strengthen relationships. Some ideas could be a Block watch party, home security workshop, park beautification, holiday party, parents or playgroup, home repair workshop, winterization, and bulb planting. In the request, residents must: describe how the funds will be spent, describe what activities they would be doing that would strengthen their

block or neighborhood, and describe the timeline they plan to follow to ensure activities are complete.

The application states, "Building Blocks wants to help residents who participated in past Building Blocks projects stay organized, support each other, and have fun working together to strengthen their street [and] to undertake activities that strengthen their group" (Building Blocks, n.d.). Residents collaborating in this manner, outside of the direct influence of Building Blocks, are an essential mobilizing factor. The Continuation Grant allows access to the funding that individuals can use themselves on projects for home beautification and improve their sense of agency while improving the built environment, even if they are not directly aware of these benefits.

Safety Initiatives: Lighting and Security

In the areas where Building Blocks operates, there is an issue of consistent and bright lighting in the streets. There are some forms of lighting but are inconsistent and are old and often clouded. Residents reported them as they did not feel safe in the neighborhood (Wedel, 2020). Residents suggested the solar light initiative, created and implemented in 2020, in hopes of deterring unwanted pedestrian traffic, helping in crime prevention, and adding more curb appeal to the blocks.

Many residents chose to go with solar flood lights, which require no battery changes or plug-in systems and maintain a constant steady stream of light throughout the night. These lights were placed in each block location where there was significant darkness to improve the quality of light on the street and in areas of typically high traffic. Due to the increase in gunshots within these neighborhoods and individuals trespassing in other people's yards, placing the solar lights

is a form of applying a solution through *inside-out organization.* Solar lights are something residents feel positively benefits their community and safety within their *built environment*.

Social Network

The way *social networks* operate impacts a person's health behavior and well-being (Lin et al., 2019); social cohesion may be a factor that increases productivity and social wellness and can provide opportunities through teamwork and networking that an individual may not get by themselves. Through *social networks*, interconnectedness allows access to resources from other people, and further development of these relationships can contribute to beneficial health outcomes.

Humans are inherently social creatures, and often seek out interactions with other people. Social interactions stimulate an individual's mind and are something we all need to flourish. Social isolation is an influential factor in poor health and increasing the risks of neurological and mental health issues (National Academies of Sciences, E. (2020). COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) directly caused social isolation on a global level. People began socializing as the world returned to the current "normality".

Having a well-connected and invested community is beneficial on multiple levels and is unique for each person. Depending on what connections they have to acquaintances, and the form of their bonds is (i.e., work acquaintance, neighbors, etc.). People are kept together by pre-existing personal connections in these ways, and the connections are developed one at a time. Community is built through these *social networks* and allows for further understanding of the Dahlgren-Whitehead model.
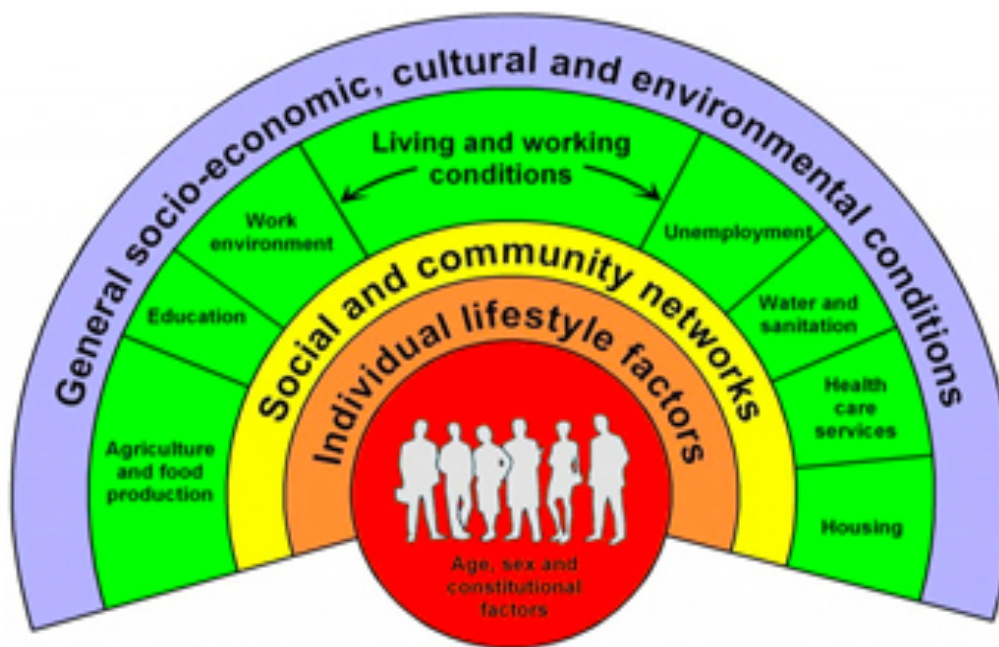
Fig. 1 The Dahlgren-Whitehead model (Dahlgren & Whitehead, 1991).
The Dahlgren-Whitehead model of the levels of the social determinants of health.

As Figure 1 depicts, social and community networks are the third level a person's

individual and interpersonal characteristics that interact with their health. A connection between

society and the community allows for better physical and mental health. (Umberson, 2010).

Mental health significantly affects how a person thinks, feels, acts, responds to. Loneliness is

associated with higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide, social isolation is associated with

about a 50% percent increased risk of dementia. Social isolation is associated with dysregulation

of various biomarkers of health (Holt-Lunstad, 2021).

Social isolation significantly increases a person's risk of premature death from all causes,

a risk that may rival those of smoking, obesity, and physical inactivity (Holt-Lunstad, 2021).

Conversely, "social integration" leads to heath benefits. This term describes a person's overall

level of involvement in both formal and informal social ties, such as those with religious

institutions and volunteer organizations, and informal relationships, such as having a significant

other or close friendship (Umberson, 2010).

Building Blocks is about forming strong community relationships, enhancing resident leadership, and using action-based planning to improve Kalamazoo neighborhoods, especially in areas that are traditionally "underserved". As these assets are managed and established as the communities own compared to being directed entirely by an outside organization, agency is returned to the hands of the people and social networks remain.

Built Environments

The Dahlgren-Whitehead model illustrates the connective relationship between health and the *built environment*. In the United States, many individuals reside in areas that pose a risk to their health and safety due to high levels of violence, unclean air or water, or poor housing. Minority races and ethnicities and those with low incomes are more likely to reside in these areas. Additionally, some people are exposed to health-harming conditions at work. These factors of the environment surrounding an individual influence their life and health, and then can be changed.

Areas that are unsafe physically due to poor sidewalks, inaccessible play areas for children, and lack of light during nighttime can lead to sedentary lifestyles and habits within a community, resulting in deteriorating health and sense of safety. Poor health outcomes then lead to obesity, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and some types of cancer (CDC, 2011).

Building Blocks assists in modifying *built environment* through initiatives mentioned previously, such as the Porch Safety initiative that included newly fitted porch lighting, as well as some fundamental housing changes such as repaving a walkway to the front door and general upkeep on doors. These types of projects can be done through the Catalyst Site groups, individually, and through community endeavors, projects of any size to enhance the improvement of the neighborhood.

Building Blocks promotes enhancement project's, anything from planting and maintaining the community garden to children's play areas and solar lights for nighttime visibility. They provide the financial and organizational support of neighborhoods for revitalization, safety, and beautification of the areas. For instance, in the Vine Neighborhood, the Oak Street Community Garden, can host several garden plots for participating individuals and a communal area for all neighborhood use. This garden beautifies an otherwise empty plot of land and enables exercise, both gardening and just being outside enjoying the space. The Oak Street Community Garden will often create "sales" for their garden, such as food and drink stands or Do-It-Yourself baked potatoes using ingredients from the garden. These bring awareness to the neighborhood about the garden and its use- as a communal space for anyone to use.

Building Blocks grants have been used to put up signage, improve the garden beds, and install a Little Free Library book-sharing box, and a community food pantry for both fresh and dry goods. Building Blocks also helps with maintenance and bulk pick-up of any trash. The Oak Street Community Garden has used Building Blocks grants for items necessary for an urban garden's success, including a sizeable rotating composter, locks, a tool shed, and volunteer workers. The Oak Street Community Garden is near the exact center of the Vine neighborhood, where many students at Kalamazoo College or Western Michigan University. Students currently renting in the Vine neighborhood are aware of the Community Garden, a local hub to walk to observe the flowering plants and rest while having an excellent location to explore.

Beautification is not to be overlooked. Areas with a heightened visual appeal allow for a sense of pride within the neighborhood and will promote outdoor and physical can lead to an improvement in health. Studies also show that being outside in nature is relaxing, reducing stress, cortisol levels, muscle tension, and heart rates – all of which are risk factors for

cardiovascular disease (Avitt, 2021). The physical benefit of being outdoors is an improvement to an individual's physical wellness, but the community's mental wellness can also be improved with the neighborhood's beautification.

People may not sit outside on their porches due to their social fear that their home is not up to par or due to the sheer lack of safety. Improving these aspects of their physical environment increases the use of the outdoors and likely increases mental and physical well-being. Several residents from Building Blocks have mentioned that since their involvement with their Catalyst Block Sites, they have enjoyed their beautification projects and feel pride when observing their hard work.

Building Blocks allows resident leaders to get the neighbors' thoughts and feelings about community projects before the project is implemented, which allows for focus on community-determined issues as a priority. Some examples of community projects that have benefited safety and allowed for growth in wellness through the change in the *built environment* have been the Ring Doorbell initiative to add additional deterrents to "nuisance individuals", Children at Play signs for streets with children, and fixing community areas including gardens, playgrounds, and alleys.

Being able to be in a safe physical environment and have comfort within that space allows for the flourishing of a community. These physical improvements in the *built environments* enable residents to feel pride in their community. This pride can then be connected back to *social networks,* as when an individual feels pride in their physical environment or community and expanding interaction with other community members.

Residential Reception to Building Blocks

As an organization that focuses on improving neighborhoods, Building Blocks seek feedback on how the participants think and feel about the goals accomplished. Over the 12 weeks, many projects are done, and many improvements to homes as well as communal areas. At the beginning and end of each site, a survey is conducted to gather the responses from all participating residents by asking a series of questions for participatory community action. These questions address the physical features that need or have had improvements and social measures of pride and connectedness. The surveys are completed without interference and are anonymous so that residents can give honest and crucial feedback.

The post-surveys offer a significant advantage to gathering residential reception to Building Blocks outside the data collected ranging from Never, Rarely, Sometimes, and Often. The survey was conducted on site of the first meeting while filing out the information packet, and the last workday. The surveys were collected upon completion and were not viewed until all were collected after the project's completion. The option for residents to have a phone feedback survey allows for an opportunity for individuals who feel comfortable to discuss any comments, either positive or negative, to have a full opportunity to provide more information about Building Blocks. The questions offer chances for residents to discuss their experience thoroughly and to mention their observations of what worked and what did not.

A significant perspective from the conducted phone surveys was the connection with each person's community on their block, as it was a chance to interact with the neighbors that they would not have gotten since some of the neighborhoods where Building Blocks focuses do not have a neighborhood association or other community group to rally with. A comment mentioned in several phone interviews was the opportunity to be outside and work together to

become experienced in their home projects and think about individual homes and the streets as a complete unit.

The phone interviews provided a better outline for Building Blocks and how it operates so that the organization can improve each of the five neighborhoods. In these interviews, many comments focus on the ability to map and use assets effectively. The connection between residents includes those within the Catalyst Sites and their street or community members who were not involved in the targeted block. Many of the individuals who provided tools and services are now contacted by their neighbors when needed, allowing each neighbor to build their *social networks* in this manner.

Each response the residents mention is documented with the intent to further develop and improve the organization in a way that benefits the residents more. While many of the interviews focus on how Building Blocks functions fruitfully, it is also an opportunity for residents to broach the topic of what needs to be changed or reorganized for future Catalyst Sites.

Each site is managed by a resident living within the block and functions as the workday coordinator. Residents from the interviews have discussed the difficulty for these resident leaders to keep people on track. Participating residents can be unreliable with their schedules, leading to unpredicted issues with having a large group for intensive tasks. This specifically can cause an issue at times based on how many people are involved; often, those who are present may take on more than others and participate more than others in the physical labor of workdays.

For the Spring and Summer Catalyst Sites of 2022, respondents felt that more details about what the program can provide, how it would operate, and expanded information would give more substance to resident recruitment. This would also entail providing an improved

outline of projects typical for Building Blocks that would showcase the standard procedures and operations for what it may take to have a successful Catalyst Site.

Building Blocks uses exit phone interviews to develop further community organizing approaches that allow residents to be recognized. The community's reception to Building Blocks allows for improvements from their own experiences within their community while conducting future projects. Having open communication channels to identify areas for improvement for the organization ensures that residents are satisfied with or can help improve Building Blocks and, in some cases, motivates residents to carry on after their site is finished.

Improvement of Social Networks and Built Environments

The impact of Building Blocks within each of the five neighborhoods in Kalamazoo is influential. It has become a well-known organization that has had success for nearly two decades, functioning both as the original class at Kalamazoo College and as an independent organization. Functionally, Building Blocks' motto is beautifying household exteriors and revitalizing the community. Through their site programs and employing their community initiatives, Building Blocks supports neighborhood residents to meet each other and develop those connections to help build and strengthen social capital.

Building Blocks uses Asset Based Community Development to increase civic engagement and bridge individual and collective leadership in community building. These factors influence *social networks* and *built environments* under the guidance of the community. While Building Blocks only operates at the sites in the neighborhoods for 12 weeks for each Catalyst Site, it can provide the necessary tools for each resident to further success after the Building Blocks projects are complete. The data gathered from the pre- and post-surveys are

collected to determine how the residents' perspectives and experiences represent a larger picture

of how Building Blocks influences and operates in the Kalamazoo neighborhoods.
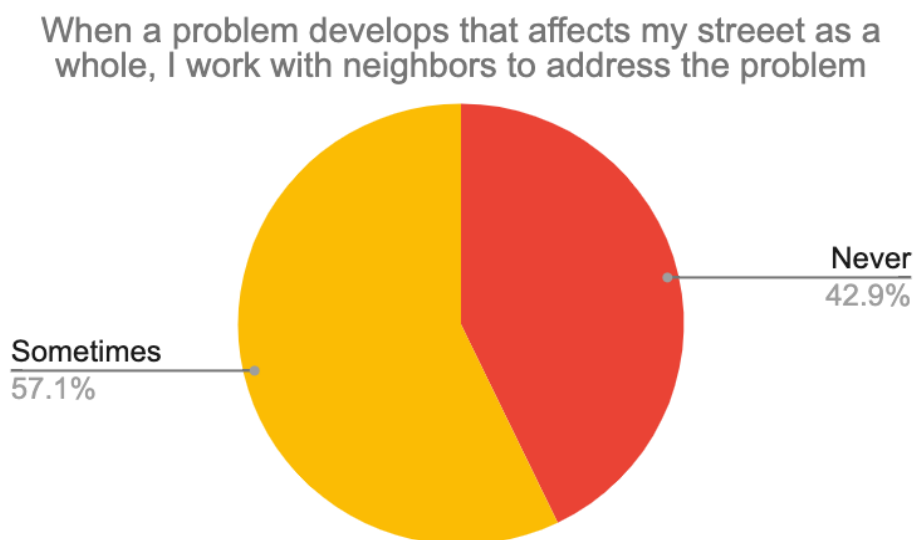

Fig. 2 Pre-Survey pie chart addressing community engagement.
Data was collected from all Spring and Summer Building Block Catalyst Sites of 2022
during initial meetings for each block. Survey responses range from Never, Rarely, Sometimes,
and Often. N = 120

Figure 2 showcases pre-survey data gathered from the Spring and Summer sites that

suggest that before Building Blocks, residents felt unsecure with their civic engagement in their

community with their neighbors. By mapping the assets in each community and using them

throughout the beautification project's completion, this knowledge is retained within the

community. After Building Blocks, the community can use the resources provided and maintain

connections with a stronger sense of *social networks*. Figure 3 provides insight after completing

the Catalyst Sites, therefore suggesting that the *social network* was improved. Building Blocks

also informs residents of other ways to get financial assistance for these projects within/outside

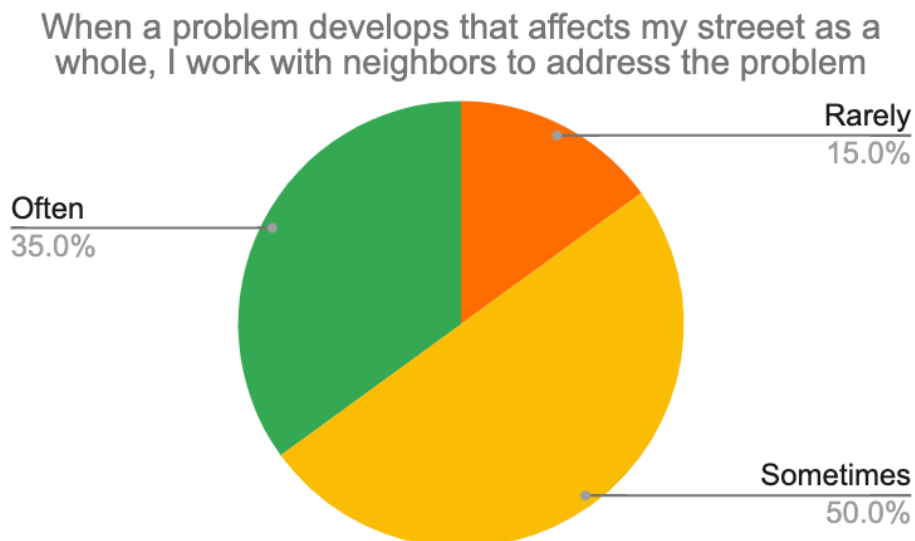of the organization for further development of the *built environment*.

When a problem develops that affects my streeet as a whole, I work with neighbors to address the problem

Rarely 15.0%

Often 35.0%

Sometimes 50.0%

Fig. 3 Post-Survey pie chart addressing community engagement.
Data was collected from all Spring and Summer Building Block Catalyst Sites during final meetings for each block. Survey responses range from Never, Rarely, Sometimes, and Often. N = 120.

The low- to low-middle-income areas often have poor upkeep of areas due a lack of income, resources, time, and funding. Building Blocks provides the neighborhood community a chance to access funding and resources directly, as well as future means to continue the development of the street. In Figure 4, a half of the residents sometimes feel pride in the physical appearance of their street before their Building Blocks Catalyst Sites, while 15% responded saying that they rarely felt pride.
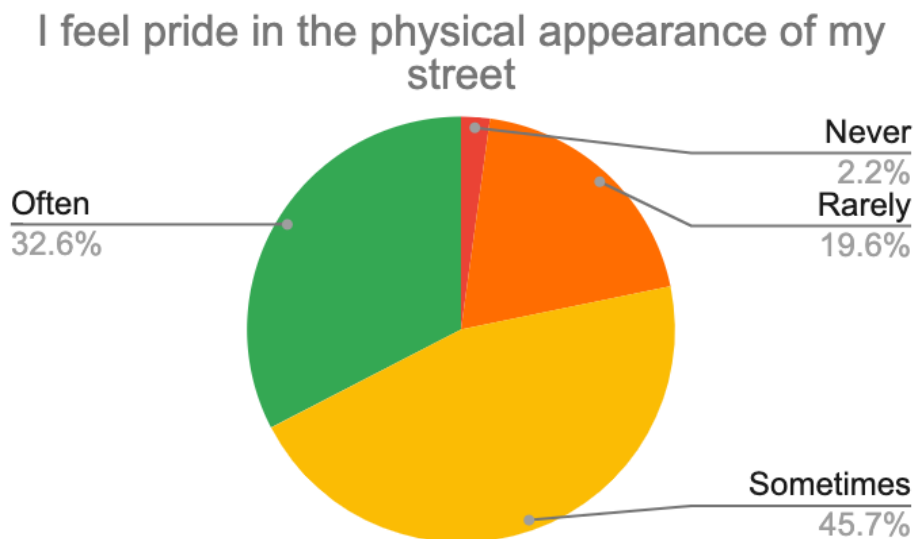
Fig. 4 Pre-Survey pie chart addressing pride within residents' *built environment*.
Data was collected from all Spring and Summer Building Block Catalyst Sites of 2022 during initial meetings for each block. Survey responses range from Never, Rarely, Sometimes, and Often. N = 120.

After each site is completed, many residents mention that they can visually see a

difference in the way their street looks. Figure 5 documents the change from the pre-survey to

the post-survey and the data reported here suggests that the improvement from before to after is

dramatic. Having such a significant change to the *built environment* allows for beneficial health
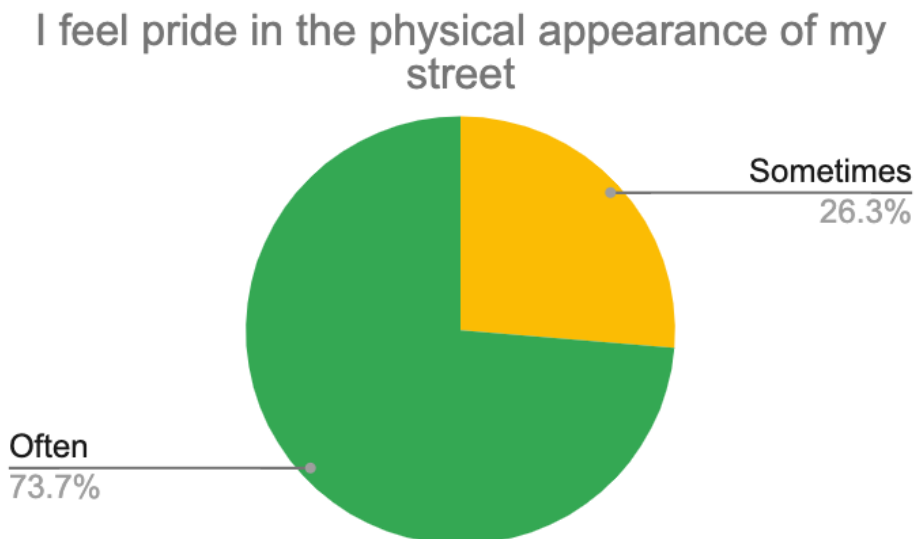
outcomes.

I feel pride in the physical appearance of my street

Sometimes
26.3%

Often
73.7%

Fig. 5 Post-Survey pie chart addressing pride within residents' *built environment*.
Data was collected from all Spring and Summer Building Block Catalyst Sites of 2022 during final meetings for each block. Survey questions range from Never, Rarely, Sometimes, and Often. N = 120.

These surveys offer essential data about the neighbor's beliefs before and after their time with Building Blocks so that their experiences can inform future decisions for the organization. Post-surveys inform Building Blocks of what was successful that year and what could be done to better the organization. Functionally, these surveys suggest that Building Blocks improves both *social networks* and *built environments*.

Uniqueness in Building Blocks of Kalamazoo

Participatory social justice initiatives can confront the root causes of health inequities in the distribution of disease and illness through public health practice (National Association of County and City Health Officials [NACCHO], n.d.). Addressing the social determinants of health is an essential component of this, and a focus on the *built environment* and *social networks* is a unique feature of Building Blocks. This comes alive in the interactions of residents

of the community when mobilization of their neighbors and themselves for the improvement of their homes, streets, and community.

Since participatory social justice is a joint obligation of individuals in the socially unequal systems they live in and perpetuate (Soja, 2010), having an organization that has succeeded in participatory social justice, as well as maintaining it throughout time, is influential in addressing the inequity of health burdens within the community.

Building Blocks follows the Asset Based Community Development strategy of community mobilization. *Inside-out organization*, where local community members are in control of the development of their community, or what can be called bottom-up management, allows for the connection between neighborhood organizations, resident leaders, and residents.

Unfortunately, many areas in the five core neighborhoods of Kalamazoo do not have access to resources that can impact their communities. Building Blocks can directly influence this as a modifiable social determinant of health in many ways. Firstly, Building Blocks provides funding for projects and resident leaders through grants, and stipends, to the participating neighborhood blocks. This relieves the monetary stress, a large issue within areas of low- and low-moderate incomes, specifically within Kalamazoo.

Secondly, Building Blocks has access to and previous knowledge about projects that may have been limited to specialists otherwise. Building Blocks has been operating for almost 20 years, as a class and as an organization, that developed extensive knowledge of asset mapping. Any lack of resources or accessibility to the resources, such as inclusion in community events or projects, is also a factor in which Building Blocks carries significant uniqueness compared to other organizations.

Finally, the projects were completed because the workdays were organized and set to work around every resident's schedule. Participatory social justice works when everyone is involved. The high number of residents attend the workdays has resulted in an immense expanse of community engagement, improving the resident's *social networks* as a social determinant of health.

Future Goals of Building Blocks of Kalamazoo

Building Blocks of Kalamazoo focuses on a prominent issue within any community or city: As a nonprofit currently in a growth phase, Building Blocks is continuously building the communities in Kalamazoo and pressing forward in its new development initiatives, such as the Ring Doorbell and Porch Safety initiatives. Building Blocks is constantly streamlining initiatives to effectively implement these programs in each neighborhood community. Resident feedback and attention to best practices help develop the most meaningful ways to provide assistance to communities that are likely to need it.

Certain projects have been taken over by Building Blocks from the City of Kalamazoo in hopes of establishing a much-needed improvement in the physical environment of each neighborhood. Building Blocks has mastered the techniques needed to establish a strong rapport with citizens of the neighborhoods.

Every year, Building Blocks broadens its range in each neighborhood with additional new Catalyst Block Sites They currently are at 20 sites, going to 28 total over the next year. An excellent question to consider is how many more sites Building Blocks can maintain at its current size and how likely it would be to have a city-wide assistance program through Building Blocks in the five core neighborhoods of focus within Kalamazoo.

The current location of Building Blocks is a shared space with another nonprofit. Due to the small headquarters, this location is a good size for its number of sites. Increasing the sites amount by much more may result in needing larger office space and open opportunities for jobs at Building Blocks. Since many of the decisions for the organization are made by the Board of Directors, the space would likely be functional at its current size for up to 35 sites. As more activities are being routed to Building Blocks, through either its implementation or taking over initiatives started by the City of Kalamazoo, more space may likely be needed.

Building Blocks is currently only in Kalamazoo, focusing on the five neighborhoods previously mentioned, but Building Blocks could branch out. To fully replicate another city's version of Building Blocks, it may be suggested that cities of similar size would be more apt to this type of organization than larger nonprofits that have prospered in larger cities. It could be essential to note that many cities could have larger or smaller areas of health disparities which may influence what specific areas of the Dahlgren-Whitehead model their version of Building Blocks addresses, as well as how they go about promoting these changes.

The uniqueness of Building Blocks is essential to note here for future development in other cities in the implementation of a resident leader's program. The agency of change as a driving factor determined by the neighbors and community members is what I have claimed to be of great effectiveness in developing the needed areas. Problems that are distinctive to each neighborhood or block can be directly addressed by the residents and prioritized based on their choice. To further implement Building Blocks in other cities, it would be essential to carry on with this approach of Asset Based Community Development for mobilizing the community in its changes.

Institutions and organizations that implement the Asset Based Community Development approach have been growing and fostering the individually unique needs of a community. It may be likely that before the implementation of Building Blocks outside of Kalamazoo, this structure needs to be made more secure for branching out. There may need to be another office in that location outside of Kalamazoo so that the community members feel connected to the organization rather than it being an outside force.

Building Blocks residents all tend to have a direct connection with their current Executive Director, Katie McPherson. It is influential that the residents and resident leaders can interact with McPherson and develop a direct connection with her. Often, McPherson will come to several sites to aid in the transport of materials or work on the projects together with the neighbors. This direct relationship is a factor that many other nonprofits may not have, and I believe to be influential to Building Blocks' success. McPherson has strong organizational skills and people management, which is necessary when it comes to Building Blocks, mainly directing and supporting the site's needs and wants.

Further development of Building Blocks in other cities may warrant a similar position to McPherson's so that the community would feel a sense of dedication to their projects. This dedication serves a larger purpose: fueling connection and fostering human relationships that continue onwards with both factors of social determinants of health that have been discussed. Through the direct connection of McPherson, the residents feel their social networks expand to those in positions of power to later assist in issues within the community. Asset mapping is a large portion of community mobilization; therefore, the involvement of Building Blocks staff would greatly benefit the neighborhoods within other cities.

Asset mapping in this manner would improve *built environments* through working with the groups on their projects and *social networks* with the implementation of interpersonal skills and allowing for discussions where residents take the direct lead with the initiatives that the community and neighbors decided to address on their own accord that follows the parameters of the organization. Allowing for a deeper personal connection from the organization to the residents and *inside-out organization* is part of the uniqueness of Building Blocks of Kalamazoo. It may play a critical role in the success of any future expansion to organizations following suit.

Conclusion

The contributions of the original literature on Building Blocks of Kalamazoo, designed as a class for participatory community organizing by Dr. Kim Cummings, allow for a sound basis for any number of communities to further successfully advance through means of exterior home and communal area improvements and beautification. Through the class, they were then transformed into Building Blocks of Kalamazoo as a community organization and neighborhood intervention group.

As previously stated, a substantial number of people live in communities that are unsafe for their health due to increased rates of violence, polluted air or water, or other environmental reasons. People of low socioeconomic status and minorities of all races and ethnicities are more likely to inhabit these locations. These aspects of a person's surroundings may be altered and impact their health and quality of life. Building Blocks works towards addressing inequalities of the physical environment and uses developing relationships to continue this after the projects are done.

Building Blocks of Kalamazoo as a neighborhood intervention group appears to have a small-scale impact on public and community health with *social networks* and *built environments*

within the focus areas. From its original model, as written by Dr. Kim Cummings (2000) and the Dahlgren-Whitehead model (1991), we are then able to see how agency from each notion can further develop the community as led by community members using approaches derived from Asset Based Community Development (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993).

For further development of the organization, Building Blocks would benefit from further research and to create data that provides significant clarity on the benefits of exterior home beautification and community revitalization as two aspects of *built environments* and *social networks.* This research would allow for a better grasp of understanding of how these effects are influential to the health outcomes of individuals within low- to low-moderate-income neighborhoods.

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Appendix

Pre- and Post-Survey Questions

I feel pride in the physical appearance of my street.

I feel pride when I participate in street projects with neighbors.

I trust my neighbors who live on my street.

The neighbors on my street know who I am.

When a problem develops that affects my street as a whole,

I help with neighbors to address the problem.

I receive help from the neighbors.

I provide help to the neighbors.

My local Neighborhood Partner Organization manages concerns and/or issues that occur on my

street.