



Community First:

Three Ways that RWJF Culture of Health Prize-Winning Communities Foster Inclusion and Belonging

BUNCOMBE COUNTY, N.C.

Courtesy of the Buncombe County Government.

A strong sense of belonging can improve the health and well-being of individuals and their communities. Belonging is a broad term that can be defined in different ways. It encompasses feeling connected to others in the community and experiencing a sense of **inclusion** – where all residents and groups feel supported, valued, respected, and able to access public and private resources. **Belonging** is fully realized when all residents feel heard and represented in decision making that affects their lives, and when residents have the power and opportunities to lead and shape what happens in their community.¹

How Can Communities Foster Inclusion and Belonging?

There is much to learn from places where local leaders, organizations, and governments are taking concrete actions to foster inclusion and belonging. From 2013 to 2021, the [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation \(RWJF\) Culture of Health Prize](#) was awarded to 54 communities across the country that are advancing health, opportunity, and equity. The Prize-winning communities represent towns, cities, counties, regions, and tribal nations across the U.S. They are diverse in size, geography, demographics, economies, cultures, and histories. Each Prize winner has demonstrated accomplishments that exemplify the six Prize criteria (see box to the right).

This brief highlights *how* Prize winners foster inclusion and belonging through three themes:

- **Naming and addressing injustices**
- **Reclaiming and elevating cultural strategies**
- **Cultivating and investing in resident leadership**

The themes exemplify bold approaches from select Prize winners. They also offer different ideas and starting points for increasing inclusion and belonging. However, no single strategy is sufficient on its own. Strategies must be rooted in communities' histories and cultures, embedded across multiple programs and initiatives, and build on one another to create a true sense of belonging.

Elements related to fostering inclusion and belonging are embedded in the six Prize criteria (2013-2021):

- 1 Defining health in the broadest possible terms
- 2 Committing to sustainable systems changes and policy-oriented long-term solutions
- 3 Creating conditions that give everyone a fair and just opportunity to reach their best possible health
- 4 Maximizing the collective power of leaders, partners, and community members
- 5 Securing and making the most of available resources
- 6 Measuring and sharing progress and results

Naming and Addressing Injustices

Community leaders, policymakers, and institutions play a critical role in making inclusion and belonging explicit values within the community. A first step requires building awareness about how past policies and practices have created persistent patterns of exclusion that have led to deep inequities in health and well-being. Many Prize winners are analyzing how racism and other forms of oppression shape current systems, and they are working to change those systems to improve health and well-being for all.

Formal declarations and resolutions can demonstrate a community's commitment to addressing historic and ongoing injustices. For example, a growing number of communities and institutions are [publicly declaring racism as a public health issue, crisis, or emergency](#). More than 10 Prize winners have made declarations and/or passed resolutions. These measures have a greater impact when they include specific actions, provide resources, and incorporate measures to show how they will address inequities.

Reclaiming and Elevating Cultural Strategies

Groups with shared racial, ethnic, and/or cultural identities often have common experiences with discrimination, exclusion, and disenfranchisement. Communities of color in the U.S., especially Black and Indigenous communities, have experienced the co-opting and erasure of cultural knowledge, practices, and strengths. Several Prize-winning communities demonstrate policies and practices that build belonging and agency through strategies to reclaim culture, heal from oppression, uplift cultural assets, and build shared identity and pride.

Strategies include implementing trauma-informed and culturally grounded practices across education, health, law enforcement, and social service sectors; language preservation and education initiatives; and Indigenous healing and land use practices. They often incorporate relationship building across cultural groups and the use of the arts for healing, awareness building, recognition, and celebration. These efforts help validate and honor cultures and build empathy, trust, and a sense of shared humanity.

[Buncombe County, North Carolina](#), a county of about 260,000, was the first southeastern U.S. community to pass a resolution declaring racism as a public health and safety crisis. The [resolution](#) was developed with public health and law enforcement. The County Board of Commissioners passed it in 2020. It calls for the county to treat racism “with the urgency and funding of a public health and safety emergency” and to identify data-informed and evidence-based strategies to address the crisis.

As a result, county commissioners created and adopted a Racial Equity Action Plan in June 2021. Multiple community feedback sessions were conducted to include the priorities of residents, agency staff, and community-based organizations into the plan. The plan is also aligned with the county's 2025 five-year strategic plan.

This work built on [years of collaborative efforts](#) across county Health and Human Services (HHS) and partner organizations to address structural racism. One outcome was workforce training across county agencies and partners to plan, implement, and evaluate equity initiatives. As COVID-19 escalated, this work enabled county HHS to quickly produce and distribute an equitable language guide for the media to counteract false racialized narratives about the pandemic.

Also building on this work, the city of Asheville – the Buncombe County seat – passed a [resolution supporting reparations](#) for the Black community. The city has created an Office of Equity and Inclusion, launched an online tool for mapping racial equity, and established a commission to recommend strategies to increase generational wealth and economic mobility in the Black community.

The [Thunder Valley Community](#) is part of the Oglála Lakḥóta Nation – Očhéthi Šakówiŋ (7 Council Fires) territory, with about 30,000 tribal members living on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. The Thunder Valley Community centers its work around the pursuit of liberation from colonization. The community also grounds all policy, systems, and environmental changes in Lakḥóta lifeways. In Thunder Valley, community members are living their liberation, led by healing and hope, and grounded in reclaiming their Lakḥóta identity.

For example, a new housing development in the community was designed and built according to Lakḥóta geometry, numerology, and stellar theology, reconnecting tribal members with the traditional spatial and familial organizing structures that were decimated by colonization. The homes were built by community members, participants of the Thunder Valley Workforce Development Program, and local skilled trades workers. Tribal agencies provided financial support for new homeowners and advocated that county and state policymakers preserve home ownership and affordability. Community development efforts incorporate environmental preservation and restoration based in traditional Lakḥóta ecological knowledge.

The community also promotes education and workforce training grounded in Lakḥóta traditions and healing. Language reclamation is incorporated through multigenerational efforts including a language immersion Montessori school and network, positive youth development programs, adult education program, curriculum development, and the design and creation of a Lakḥóta School. The approach incorporates an entire philosophy that reflects Indigenous wisdom.



THUNDER VALLEY COMMUNITY

Courtesy of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Cultivating and Investing in Resident Leadership

Being able to shape one's community is a critical element of belonging. Residents gain a sense of ownership and agency when they are involved in prioritizing issues, identifying solutions, and implementing changes that affect them. Prize winners regularly draw on the strengths and assets that exist across the community and examine who has been left out of institutional decision-making processes. They continue to remove barriers to civic participation and foster resident leadership.

They also actively promote civic engagement through strategies to increase voter turnout, community organizing, resident advocacy, and participatory decision making. To shift power to those who are closest to community challenges, Prize winners work to cultivate, support, invest in, and follow the leadership of communities of color and other historically excluded groups. They create new leadership pipelines and implement policies and practices to increase diversity and representation.

[National City, California](#) is a city of about 61,000 in southwestern San Diego County. A thriving, multi-ethnic community with residents of predominantly Mexican, Chicano/a, and Filipino/a heritage, the community has embraced cultural unity and worked to bring more voices from historically excluded groups to decision-making tables.

For example, the city government removed citizenship requirements for residents to serve on boards and commissions and implemented two-way Spanish-English interpretation to increase participation in city council meetings. Several local non-profits have invested in leadership development and promote resident advocacy, especially in ways that bring forward the lived experience of those facing community challenges. Community partners, such as the Environmental Health Coalition and Olivewood Gardens and Learning Center, coordinate efforts to engage residents in community improvement projects and to create leadership pipelines. Organizations work together to prepare and recruit resident leaders to committees, boards, commissions, and elected positions – to increase racial and ethnic diversity, gender representation, and voices from neighborhoods experiencing inequities.

Their collaborative efforts have resulted in high voter turnout, even amidst a pandemic, and shifts in leadership with more women, people of color, and young people assuming formal leadership roles within the city and county. One marker of their success was the 2018 election of a mayor who is the first female, Latina, and life-long resident of the city's underrepresented Westside neighborhood to serve in this role.



NATIONAL CITY, CALIF

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Conclusion

These examples from Prize-winning communities offer ideas, strategies, and solutions that can inform and inspire others working to foster inclusion and belonging. They represent ongoing efforts to infuse belonging in communities – using strategies that reinforce one another, and that center the experiences of those most often excluded from formal decision-making processes. These examples also demonstrate the need for policy, systems, and environmental changes that restructure the way institutions work and shift power dynamics to address longstanding inequities. Only then can communities truly offer a place of inclusion and belonging for all who live there.

To learn more about the RWJF Culture of Health Prize, visit www.rwjf.org/prize.

Credits

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Notes

1. Descriptions of inclusion and belonging were adapted from the Othering and Belonging Institute: [2020 Inclusivity Index](https://www.otheringandbelonging.org/2020-inclusivity-index/) and [The Problem of Othering: Towards Inclusiveness and Belonging](https://www.otheringandbelonging.org/the-problem-of-othering-towards-inclusiveness-and-belonging/) (powell & Menendian, 2017).

About the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute

The University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute advances health and well-being for all by developing and evaluating interventions and promoting evidence-based approaches to policy and practice at the local, state, and national levels. The Institute works across the full spectrum of factors that contribute to health. A focal point for health and healthcare dialogue within the University of Wisconsin-Madison and beyond, and a convener of stakeholders, the Institute promotes an exchange of expertise between those in academia and those in the policy and practice arena. From 2013-2021, the Institute led and managed the RWJF Culture of Health Prize in collaboration with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. For more information, visit <http://uwphi.pophealth.wisc.edu>.



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