

Inclusive & Equitable COVID-19 Responses

Strategies from 2020-2021 RWJF Culture of Health
Prize-Winning Communities & Insights for the Future

2020-2021 Prize-winning communities:

Addison, Illinois
Alamosa County, Colorado
Chickaloon Native Village
Drew, Mississippi
Howard County, Maryland
National City, California
Palm Beach County, Florida
Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Thunder Valley Community –
Oglala Lakota Nation
(Ocefi Sakowin Territory)
Worcester, Massachusetts

Overview and Purpose

The 2020-2021 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) Culture of Health Prize was awarded to 10 communities from across the country. To be selected for the Prize, applicants must demonstrate that they are working at the forefront of advancing health, opportunity, and equity for all. Prize winners exemplify the six Prize criteria, demonstrating a wide array of strategies and approaches to improve community conditions for all residents in collaborative, inclusive, and sustainable ways.

Given a hallmark of the Prize is community commitment to advancing equity and that the 2020-2021 winners competed for the Prize during an unprecedented pandemic, it is no surprise that their accomplishments include how leaders are ensuring fair and just responses to COVID-19. The 2020-2021 Prize winners implemented systems changes and community-driven solutions to meet resident needs in ways that can have a lasting impact after the pandemic. This brief highlights strategies from 2020-2021 Prize winners that illustrate the following themes:

- **Leveraging Partnerships to Address Inequities**
- **Implementing Collaborative Funding Strategies**
- **Providing Social Support through Cultural Assets**
- **Building Digital Inclusion and Equity**

These themes and the strategies featured for each were identified through an analysis of 2020-2021 Prize-winner accomplishments from the Prize application process. The selected examples demonstrate several ways that Prize winners are responding to the pandemic. Examples are intended to provide insights and inspiration for other communities working on their own improvement efforts.

RWJF Culture of Health Prize winners are selected based on how well they exemplify the six Prize criteria:

- 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

Strategies Prize-Winning Communities Are Using for Inclusive and Equitable Responses to COVID-19

Leveraging Partnerships to Address Inequities

The 2020-2021 Prize winners leveraged existing partnerships and systems to collaboratively respond to COVID-19 with an emphasis on reaching those most impacted by the pandemic.

In **Addison, Illinois** many governmental partners are co-located to encourage collaboration. To develop a coordinated response to the pandemic, partners met weekly to share data and information to meet residents' needs around employment, food insecurity, and trauma and mental health. The library hosted job-seeker events and career counseling for financially impacted residents, and partnered to improve food distribution models. School districts leveraged their existing infrastructure and partnerships around restorative justice and trauma to address the pandemic's mental health effects. They extended restorative justice training to all staff, shared strategies for creating trauma-informed environments and virtual classrooms, offered a virtual parent night to support caregivers in addressing the emotional needs of their children, and sponsored virtual discussions on racial and economic inequities. These efforts led one school district to create the Committed to Academics, Resilience and Equity (CARE) team to support staff and students in processing trauma and staying connected.

In **National City, California** nonprofits, schools, and restaurateurs collaborated to enhance existing efforts to address food insecurity. Multiple food distribution and delivery channels were added to meet resident needs due to COVID-19, and the city is developing ways to support this infrastructure beyond the pandemic. City government partnered with the county, universities, and first responders to promote and administer COVID-19 vaccines. The city also engaged in a clinical vaccine trial to bring access to residents and to spur development of a single-shot vaccine. City agencies and schools used heatmap data to prioritize and expand broadband access to areas without it.

Drew, Mississippi partners built on their existing relationships with churches, academic institutions, and state and federal funders to increase the capacity of the food pantry in response to the pandemic. With this groundwork, their COVID-19 response included both expanded access and hours and provided additional resources – personal protective equipment, information about COVID-19, clothing, and food – to residents across the region. Drew increased their pantry service numbers two-fold during the first year of the pandemic. In addition, Drew built new partnerships to fill a major gap in healthcare access; now, a mobile clinic provides free primary care and sexual and reproductive health services.

Implementing Collaborative Funding Strategies

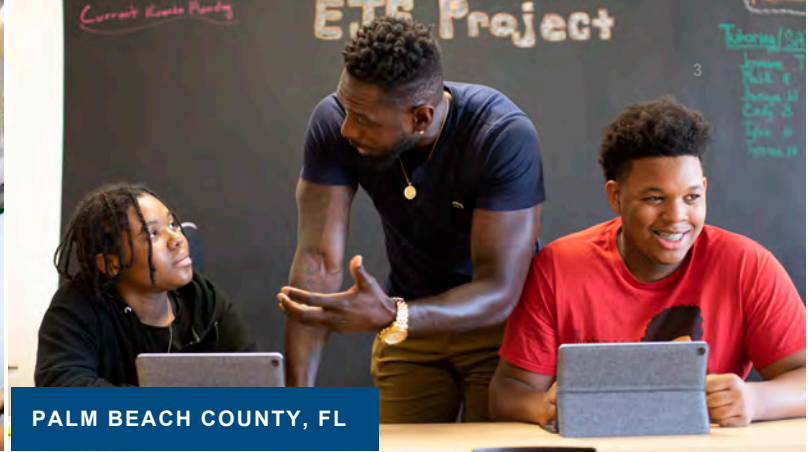
The enormity of responding to the pandemic resulted in funder collaborations in 2020-2021 Prize-winning communities, challenging the status quo of traditional funding structures and creating new models to address local needs and challenges.

In **Howard County, Maryland** nonprofit organizations worked together to align resources in responding to the pandemic. Local funders collaborated to create a repository of funds from the larger community. Over \$700,000 was initially raised and distributed to service providers that addressed existing and emergent community needs. The group is committed to work together in the same way for any future emergency. In addition, small nonprofits aligned with a larger nonprofit based in the countywide school system to equitably distribute federal CARES Act funding and created COVID-19 relief grants to meet all their students' needs.

Worcester, Massachusetts organizations formed Mutual Aid Worcester to share resources and support across the community in response to COVID-19. Additionally, funders formed Worcester Together and collectively generated more than \$11 million for rapid response, recovery, and re-imagining a way forward post-pandemic. The re-imagining phase is supporting nonprofits in identifying and planning for bold and innovative ways to disrupt and shift the systems that are contributing to the root causes of inequities.



THUNDER VALLEY COMMUNITY



PALM BEACH COUNTY, FL

Providing Social Support through Cultural Assets

2020-2021 Prize winners centered cultural understanding when responding to residents' needs and provided social support in ways that were convenient, familiar, and trustworthy to community members.

In **Alamosa County, Colorado** a culturally-informed and responsive community health worker program was rapidly formed to provide personal protective equipment and COVID-19 education to farmworkers and their families. Through this program – Los Promotores del Valle de San Luis – resident leaders brought trusted information in Spanish and resources to farmworkers, including emergency food and supplies during quarantine. The promotores or community health worker model was expanded to the five other counties in the region.

The **Thunder Valley Community – Oglala Lakota Nation (Oceti Sakowin Territory)** used their cultural and traditional practices to support community members throughout the pandemic in multiple ways. The Lakota Response to COVID-19 program, a partnership among Generations Indigenous Ways, Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation (TVCDC), and a number of other nonprofits, harvested and distributed traditional Lakota foods, plants, and medicines, including instructions on how to use the medicines, to elders. As a part of their response, the community focused on the impact of the pandemic on youth and how to bridge the gap in youth-serving programs. For example, the community connected children impacted by suicide to healing camps grounded in Lakota traditions to build their self-esteem and coping skills. Also, the TVCDC implemented in-person Youth Distance Learning Support Groups – a safe and supportive environment for groups of 10 children with adult mentors to provide homework assistance and physical and mental wellness activities since virtual only education was not meeting the needs for all youth.

Building Digital Inclusion and Equity

2020-2021 Prize winners prioritized ensuring residents had the information technology capacity needed to fully participate in society.

Chickaloon Native Village, or Nay'dini'aa Na' Kayax, enhanced technology services and solutions to support staff and students in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As the tribe moved students to an online platform early in the pandemic, they increased Wi-Fi services and students received Chromebooks for virtual learning. The tribe also moved their racial healing community dialogues to an online space, rather than postponing them due to the pandemic, which allowed the community to continue to build momentum toward addressing systemic racism.

Palm Beach County, Florida launched a digital inclusion project during the pandemic. Beginning as an infrastructure committee to connect more than 25,000 students to the internet, the project deployed 73,000 Chromebooks, 5,600 internet subscriptions, 2,400 hotspots, and technical navigators in three neighborhoods. Through advocacy efforts, funders and the business community joined forces to build critical infrastructure, starting with the most digitally disconnected community in the county. Partners plan to expand these comprehensive solutions countywide.

Rocky Mount, North Carolina hired a Chief Technology Officer during the pandemic to improve city responsiveness to residents' issues, ensure more equitable access to city council meetings, and support civic engagement for those with limited computer skills. Improvements included changing the social media platform for city council meetings to improve recording quality and accessibility, holding technology rehearsals prior to meetings, training older adults to use video conferencing to meet with council representatives, allowing public comment by phone, and designating staff to organize, support, and follow up with those who requested to speak.

Insights

What can we learn from these communities to guide and inspire others?

The 2020-2021 Prize winners reflected the Prize criteria in their inclusive and equitable COVID-19 responses. Here are four key insights from their work that other communities can learn from and apply to any crisis as well as community improvement efforts in general.

- Building a foundation of trusted relationships and existing partnerships enables effective and inclusive responses to any community crisis.
- Leveraging existing assets and knowledge within the community, including culture, in innovative ways aides a nimble and holistic response to crises.
- Assessing and applying equity considerations across efforts helps communities identify and remove barriers to information, testing, healthcare, social supports, and resources, and contributes to a sense of trust and belonging for all residents.
- Developing a strong understanding of local residents and contexts –demographics, assets, strengths, and resource distribution – is crucial, as is the capacity to assess the complex root causes and conditions to respond with equally complex and effective policies, programs, and systems changes.

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

Credits

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