

Community Conversations for Healthy Investment Conversations

The Georgia Health Policy Center (GHPC) at Georgia State University (GSU) engaged community stakeholders in conversations about healthy communities, social determinants of health, and potential solutions. The work focused on continued engagement with community-based experts in the southwest MARTA corridor in Atlanta, which identified a complex network of health issues stemming from structural socioeconomic inequities, and explored investment in urban farmers of color as a strategy to foster healthy community development across multiple domains.

Over the course of many conversations, the role of high-quality employment and career opportunities rose to the surface as a critical community health determinant that was largely lacking from the area. Additionally, these experts identified vital aspects of career development that distinguished the opportunities that could fully support physical and emotional health. In particular, healthy opportunities are self-directed, lead to employment with living wages and benefits, address the whole person, and prepare individuals for long term career growth and/or entrepreneurship. What’s more, these opportunities primarily work within or help support the local collaborative economy, helping to foster the growth and sustainability of community-focused social enterprises which hire locally, center wellbeing in their mission, and support peer enterprises through vending, training, and more. These enterprises are predominately owned by Black and Brown entrepreneurs and embody an inclusive, resilient, and joyous culture which is essential to mental wellness. Many organizations of this type are engaging in economic and career development activities, such as training, mentoring, and co-investment.

The following individuals/ organizations, representing different aspects of the collaborative, community based economic development discussed above, contributed expertise as thought partners or through interviews:

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| <p>South West Atlanta Growers Cooperative (SWAG)/ Patchwork City Farms – Jamila Norman http://swagcoop.weebly.com/ https://www.patchworkcityfarms.com/ @patchworkcityfarms</p> | <p>Truly Living Well – Carol Hunter https://www.trulylivingwell.com/ @trulylivingwell</p> |
| <p>ECO-Paradigm – Charles Geenlea https://www.ecoparadigm.net/ @ecoparadigmatlanta</p> | <p>Marddy’s Shared Kitchen – Keitra Bates https://www.marddys.com/ @marddys</p> |
| <p>Gilliams Community Garden – Jasann Lovey Gilliam https://gilliamscommunitygarden.org/ @gilliamscommunitygarden</p> | <p>Village Micro Fund – Donte Miller https://www.villagemicrofund.com/ @villagemicrofund</p> |

Be sure to support these fantastic organizations!

Community Conversations for Healthy Investment Revelations

These partners provided the following concepts which may be used to guide funding opportunities, including grants, capital financing, and equity investments.

- There is an ecosystem of community-centered organizations, predominantly Black and Brown led, which function as a cooperative economy within the larger economy, based on historical relationships, mutual support, and reputation as well as financial exchange. Investing anywhere within this system has a multiplier effect, because the funds and capacity will be distributed within it as much as possible.
- Some organizations are playing key roles in building capacity and facilitating self-development, and represent high leverage funding opportunities.
- This system should be a priority for community development: community centered organizations are connected in such a way to understand and address issues in comprehensive, liberating, self-sustaining ways.
- There is unrealized potential for these systems to address health, equity, and resilience. Partnership with other organizations or coalitions focused on complementary issues could exponentially increase the impact of both. Coalitions such as TransFormation Alliance could humbly serve as a connector between these organizations and the community development complex, policymakers, and more, amplifying the value and benefits, facilitating connections, advocating for policy change, and collaborating on evaluation or other desired services.
- The social enterprises within the systems need better access to grants and capital, markets, and supportive policies. This includes making the capital and grants pipeline much more available to micro businesses, small nonprofits, and new organizations, with phased terms and funding amounts. It also means evaluating parts of the system to demonstrate success to funders and policymakers, and provide feedback to organizations.
- There are also too many barriers to economic stability for these enterprises and individuals benefiting from employment with them, such as the legal distinctions between for-profit and not-for-profit entities, or insufficient access to vital needs such as childcare, banking, and transportation. We can work to transform policies to better support the system, and connect to legal and financial resources that may facilitate use of social enterprise tools.
- In community and economic development (CED) circles, increasing opportunities in economically excluded communities is often described in terms of bringing in external services or programs. Through this ongoing work, those approaches have raised concerns as lacking in community control, diverting much of the investment and capacity-building outside of the community where it is wanted, and producing limited or temporary results. Conversely, large CED interests should look to the investment initiatives created in and by the community.