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The Bronx has long lagged behind the rest of New York and the nation in a number of health indicators. A community development organization tries to narrow the gap.

ADVANCING HEALTH IN THE BRONX

At 'Urban Horizons,' Healthier Living Is A Beautiful Thing



Nancy Biberman

The recent rebirth of the once-blighted Bronx has been a success—at least from the standpoint of making better use of its real estate. New developments have filled the void left behind by the arson fires and abandonment of the 1970s. Yet so far the building boom and gentrification haven't produced a comparable increase in well-being of the local population. "The vacant lots are gone, but when you look beyond the built environment, things are not much better," says Nancy Biberman, founder and president of the Bronx-based Women's Health and Economic Development Corporation, a nonprofit organization that describes its mission as making the Bronx "a more beautiful, equitable, and economically vibrant place to live and raise a family."

In particular, Bronx residents remain among the least healthy in the state—and by some health measures, the worst off in the country. Bronx children suffer from one of the nation's highest pediatric asthma prevalence rates—an estimated 15.5 percent—versus the national

prevalence rate for children under eight—of 13.8 percent. They're twice as likely as other US children to be hospitalized for the disease. About one in ten infants born in the Bronx have low birth-weight, versus about one in sixteen nationally. And Bronx residents overall have an estimated 85 percent higher risk of becoming obese than their Manhattan neighbors.

Biberman and colleagues have been battling those community health problems in the broadest sense since 1991, when their organization was founded with the goal of restoring the Bronx to its former role as the go-to destination for upwardly mobile immigrant families. Today, in a county where the poverty rate is a stunning 28 percent—twice the overall New York State average—the organization exemplifies efforts to address the social and economic determinants of health through the mechanism of community development.

HEALTH IN ALL PROGRAMS

One of the organization's showplace projects is a complex called Urban Horizons, created out of a once-abandoned Italian renaissance-style hospital building. Renovated in 1994, the building today features 132 apartments for low-income and formerly homeless renters, plus an Economic Development Center that provides residents and other community members with various forms of assistance, including advocacy on their behalf with public agencies and financial and legal counseling.

An on-site primary health care center is operated by a partner nonprofit; there are also mental health and substance abuse counseling programs and nutrition classes for teens. Even educational programs here have a health component: The Early Childhood Discovery Center, an on-site Head Start program, teaches preschoolers to exercise.

The renovated building, which in 2007 was further retrofitted to make it more energy efficient, is itself representative of the organization's holistic approach to health. Biberman points to

studies showing that when poor families move to better housing, mothers' mental health improves, and their children exhibit fewer signs of stress. She says that the elegant architecture and clean spaces have the same effect on the building's residents. To boost residents' activity levels and encourage them to "burn calories, not electricity," the organization partnered with the New York City Department of Health to install murals and motion-activated lights in the stairwells. A survey conducted by the city found that a significant increase in stair use resulted.

BUILDING THE EVIDENCE

In all, Biberman's organization has three housing complexes in operation or under development, and forty-two distinct programs—including one that helps women in the community create their own small, home-based "micro-enterprises" offering child care. Every one of these programs, says Biberman, has an impact on health.

She recognizes that the impact is difficult to document. "With health outcomes, you're often talking about a lifetime, not a couple of years," she says. To date, no research has been carried out to evaluate Urban Horizons' impact on health because, to date, no one has figured out how to do that research in a cost-effective way that would yield meaningful conclusions.

Researchers believe that the evidence that such community development efforts lead to specific health improvements can be assembled. Then, says Douglas Jutte, a physician and population health researcher at the University of California, Berkeley, governments, employers, insurers, and "others who are interested in reducing health care costs might be willing to foot part of the bill." In the meantime, as Biberman's organization notes on its website, "Beautiful buildings alone do not transform struggling communities." But most would agree that those aren't bad places to start.