

**The Leonard Parker Pool Institute for Health – A Place-based Approach to Improving Health
The First Social Investment Zone: Census Tracts 18 and 20 in Allentown
December 2021**

Upon his death in 1975, Leonard Parker Pool left the remainder of his estate to establish The Dorothy Rider Pool Health Care Trust, in memory of his late wife. It had assets of \$15 million and a 50-year lifespan, which would end in 2025, and named Lehigh Valley Health Network (LVHN) as its primary beneficiary. The charge was to “initially and primarily” enable LVHN to be a “superior regional hospital” and *improve the health of the citizens of the region*. As the sunset stage of the Trust approached, some of the most pressing health concerns remain for those in our community who are most vulnerable due to social and economic burdens. To more effectively address this, the Board of Trustees and LVHN Executive Leadership leveraged the Trust’s assets to create The Leonard Parker Pool Institute for Health (The Pool Institute for Health) to take a **place-based**, community development approach to improving the whole-health of the residents in our communities over the long-term.

The Pool Institute for Health Approach: Processes and Focus Areas

The Pool Institute will be an honest broker, a convener, facilitator, innovator, and idea importer. It will serve as a reliable source for accurate qualitative and quantitative data analysis, and measurement of health improvement, particularly for the most vulnerable communities in the region. **The Pool Institute’s approach to improving health is to invest in place, focusing on four core processes across four social drivers.**

Benefits of a Place-based Strategy

The neighborhood in which people live has an important impact on an individual’s health outcomes. Research by national leaders like the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) have shown that the average life expectancy of individuals varies by community and the people living just a few blocks away from one another may have radically different life expectancies, partially based on characteristics of the neighborhood.^{1,2} In other words, one’s zip code has more influence on their health than their genetic code.³ Given the connection between place and health, health improvement efforts will be most impactful when approached from a community-wide, population perspective, addressing the drivers of health within a community or neighborhood.

In addition, research suggests that health outcomes take a long time to improve and that individual programs are not going to create long-term sustainable change independently. A place-based approach allows for those root causes of health that are interdependent (e.g., food and housing insecurities) to be addressed together. It provides manageable “space” for larger systems (i.e., education, housing, and health) to develop collaborative strategies that address shared goals in response to the local context of that neighborhood. Residents and other community members have an important role in developing efforts that directly impact them and their families and allows outside organizations to better

¹ <https://www.rwjf.org/en/library/interactives/whereliveaffectshowlongyoulive.html>

² <https://www.ahrq.gov/professionals/education/curriculum-tools/population-health/zimmerman.html>

³ Garth, G. N. (2016). Why your zip code matters more than your genetic code: Promoting Healthy Outcomes from mother to child. *Breastfeeding Medicine*, 11(8), 396-397.

understand the place, people, connections, culture and kinship that make up a community. From this perspective, the work to improve health sustainably is grounded in neighborhoods.

Processes

To enable The Pool Institute for Health to fulfill its vision effectively, Institute leadership used both local inputs and proven best practices from around the country to devise a set of processes to carry out the work. These include:

- Using **data, both numbers and stories, and small-area analysis** to more effectively understand target neighborhoods and the lived-experience of residents.
- Practicing **authentic community engagement** with the goal of forging strong partnerships with residents.
- Strengthening **cross-sector partnerships** across local non-profits to build and enrich place-based approaches to collaboratively address the factors that affect health.
- Development of a **“Backbone”** infrastructure that seeks to add a management support layer for cross-sector collaborations.

Social Drivers

In an effort increase connectivity across community-level programming and interventions, The Pool Institute for Health will support cross-sector efforts around the following four focus areas. We will particularly focus on opportunities that leverage trusting relationships and build on existing individual efforts that have potential synergy for greater impact.

- Community well-being – safety, mental health, overall well-being
- Education – cradle-to-career pipeline
- Housing – permanent, mixed-income housing
- Food and nutrition – economic mobility

It is the intention of The Pool Institute for Health to honor the legacy of Mr. Pool and his commitment to the Lehigh Valley, and to provide the leadership and stability to advance this important work to improve health for decades to come. The Pool Institute for Health will position LVHN as a leader in health, in addition to healthcare.

The Opportunity in Allentown

Several decades ago, Allentown was a bustling city driven by manufacturing, retail and an elite school district. Much like other cities in the “steel belt”, the 1970’s and 80’s brought great economic decline and “white flight”. The impact on the land-locked city’s tax base contributed to blighted conditions and an underperforming school district. As time went on, the Lehigh Valley, the 2-county area that includes Allentown, looked to develop a regional approach to economic development, planning, and transportation in response to these economic changes.

To spark economic growth in Allentown and the Lehigh Valley, a powerful economic development program called the Neighborhood Improvement Zone (NIZ) was created in 2010. The NIZ focused on improving two sections in downtown Allentown. Since then, over a billion dollars of development has occurred. Efforts in the NIZ from corporations, government, non-profits and resident advocates include

new infrastructure improvements, improvements in property conditions, 760 new apartment units, incentives to increase homeownership, and, to date added more than 4,200 jobs.

The success of the NIZ will be enhanced if the surrounding neighborhoods also improve in terms of social and economic well-being, in line with strong community development practice. Based on the “anchor institution” model from the Federal Reserve Bank, where a large organization focuses its investments and resources to foster positive change in the neighborhoods and communities that surround it, the Downtown Allentown Community Development Initiative (DACDI) was formed through a collaboration of 14 organizations located in the NIZ, including The Dorothy Rider Pool Health Care Trust (The Pool Trust). DACDI provides effective and efficient coordination of private sector resources to lead the revitalization of center city Allentown. It serves as a cohesive and stable base for the interface between economic and neighborhood development and is an essential component for the collective quality of life of the City and region.

As the business and economic growth expanded in Allentown, the public health and human services community in Allentown also concentrated on the areas surrounding the NIZ. The Pool Trust conducted a social reconnaissance in both 2012 and 2018, to create a “community profile” of the dynamics at that time. Although these studies revealed a great sense of optimism for Allentown, they also identified the essential need to address the growing disparities and inequities in Allentown, as well as create new ways for leadership to develop. Based on the findings from the social reconnaissance and a desire not to repeat ineffective approaches to community development from the past, The Pool Trust identified ways to invest in capacity building for leaders to work across sectors and agencies.

In 2014, The Pool Trust supported The Rider-Pool Foundation in creating the Collective Impact Fellowship program to make measurable improvements to complex quality of life challenges within neighborhoods surrounding the NIZ. More than 70 local leaders have been trained over 7 years, and are now Fellows, actively participating in collective effort that has leveraged public and private funds and enabled groundbreaking work. The Fellowship is now being rebranded as The Pool Fellowship for Health.

In 2020, the City of Allentown published the Allentown Vision 2030 Strategic City Plan using a community-engaged processes that focuses on many of the same social drivers that The Pool Institute is looking to address. The plan emphasizes a place-based approach based on defined neighborhoods in Allentown. Allentown is a city composed of various neighborhoods with unique partnerships to address health challenges in both a locality-based and systemic fashion, with authentic participation of key leaders from the community, business, and public sectors.

The Opportunity in Census Tracts 18 and 20

There are census tracts or sections in Allentown where publicly available data highlights significant and important health disparities. There is also, concurrently, a readiness for meaningful community development investments, making them ideal for developing cross-sector strategies to improve health. One area - Census Tracts (CTs) 18 and 20 - and the neighborhoods within them, rose to the top as the initial geography to use a place-based approach to health improvement. There are just over 10,000 Allentown residents living in these two census tracts. In addition, we know that about 35% of the population is living in poverty, about 26% of the population over the age of 25 does not have a high school degree, and about 65% of the population is Hispanic.

At the same time, there are many, important community assets located within these two census tracts. Some of the many assets within this section of Allentown include (see Appendix A for a map visualization):

- A strong Lehigh Valley Health Network presence. These neighborhoods are between LVHN's 17th Street campus and its headquarters at One City Center in downtown Allentown. LVHN was one of the first organizations to move into the NIZ, motivated by the opportunity to have a greater impact on the patients in these neighborhoods.
- Valley Health Partners, a community health center (FQHC) established in 2020, is also located at 17th and Chew St. and is providing access to primary care and school-based health services to the residents in and around CT 18 and 20.
- Hays Elementary School, a new, state-of-the-art school that includes a school-based health center, mental health services, Head Start classes, and access to food and other social services.
- A number of strong non-profit service organizations, many of which include leaders who are Pool Fellows, that work with residents from those neighborhoods and provide local leadership capacity (e.g., Ripple Community, Inc., St. Stephen's Outreach Center, Community Bike Works, Pinebrook Family Answers, Community Services for Children).
- Other parallel collaborative activities:
 - A Neighborhood Partnership Program working towards establishing a youth community center and other youth-focused services
 - Early stage formation of a Purpose Built Community, a "best practice" framework that helps local leaders create healthy and sustainable neighborhoods that allow the lowest income families to break the cycle of poverty
 - Permanent housing plans for those who are housing insecure

Leveraging National & Local Efforts

We recognize that to be successful and reach the level of impact we are aiming for, The Pool Institute for Health will need to work across local communities, organizations, and systems, as well as with national experts.

For most of its history, Allentown was defined by its neighborhoods, as was the case in many other small cities across the US. Each had a distinct identity and civic fabric that has deteriorated since the downturn in the 1970's and 80's. Supporting the re-establishment of neighborhood identity and civic fabric is critical to building a sense of place and must be done by the residents before The Pool Institute for Health can be seen as an authentic partner in this work. Several efforts are in place to ensure authentic engagement of residents and recapture the neighborhood identity.

Organizational and system work, catalyzed by The Pool Fellowship for Health, will occur through the strong relationships among the Fellows and the various collaborations that have come from its leadership development. The Pool Institute will continue the Fellowship program for many years to come and will continue to support the capacity of leaders within these organizations and systems by continuing to bring in experts and peer groups that we can learn from and push our thinking about creating long-term health improvement.

Finally, on-going relationships with these national experts at organizations like the Centers for Disease Control, Purpose Built Communities, BUILD Health, Build Healthy Places, StriveTogether and Enterprise Community Partners will allow The Pool Institute for Health to learn from and participate in national

models as well as promote the innovative work occurring in Allentown. These relationships and opportunities are important because they will help us to continually pressure-test our strategies, bring rigor to our work, and expand our perspective and mindsets.

There are many opportunities for unique partnerships to address health challenges in both a place-based and systemic fashion, with authentic participation of key leaders from the community, business, and public sectors. Ideally, Census Tracts 18 and 20 will be the first of many social investment zones. It is our intention that the model created here over the next 10 years will be shared and replicated for similar-sized communities in the region and maybe even across the U.S.

Appendix A: Asset map

