



Winchendon Working Together: Connecting Community Health, Wealth, and Power

HEAL Winchendon Baseline Evaluation Report

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Introduction

The health and wealth of individuals, families, and communities go hand in hand. Income is one of the strongest social determinants of health;^{i,ii} low-income Americans are five times as likely to report fair or poor health as moderate- and high-income Americans. The cumulative effects of economic (in)security affect health and well-being throughout the life courseⁱⁱⁱ and across generations. Poor health can drain precious resources, reducing the economic potential of people and communities.

A multi-sector group of leaders from Winchendon, Massachusetts, is actively working to address this cycle. In this low-resource, rural, and newly diversifying community, close to 11% of the population live below the poverty line^{iv} and 33% of residents self-identify as food insecure. Youth, under-resourced residents, and residents of color are the most marginalized. Additionally, the child poverty rate for children under five is 44% compared to the MA average of 17%, and the town experiences high rates of preventable chronic diseases.^v

In 2020, HEAL Winchendon partners (see *Background*) agreed to work together to “**improve health and well-being in the town of Winchendon, MA, through economic empowerment, focusing on building social, financial, and community assets.**” The partners agreed to build upon existing momentum and activities focused on food access. This core focus honored the history and skills of residents in the rural farming town,^{vi} while simultaneously raising the importance of access to affordable, healthy food as a basic need. Moving beyond basic needs, the coalition also decided to focus on creating economic opportunities for residents over the long-term. Inspired by Empowerment Economics (see p. 5), HEAL Winchendon is supplementing and adapting existing financial coaching resources in the region while exploring more systemic ways to address economic empowerment.

In early discussions, the partners noted that small town power dynamics caused some families to feel unwelcome or excluded from community decisions regarding health, land use, and economic opportunities. This acknowledgement elevated social inclusion as a goal in and of itself. From the beginning, HEAL Winchendon was grounded in health (healthy food access). With the Moving Massachusetts Upstream (MassUP) Investment Program award from the Massachusetts Health Policy Commission (HPC), partners began to explore connections to wealth (economic empowerment) and power (social inclusion). Collective impact, the fourth goal, “brings people together, in a structured way, to achieve social change”^{vii} and adequately describes the way Winchendon leaders have connected in new ways. These goals intersect, as shown below in HEAL Winchendon’s theory of change (see *Figure 1* below).

HEAL WINCHENDON'S THEORY OF CHANGE

FEBRUARY 2021

Mission

HEAL Winchendon's mission is to address food and economic security and community cohesion at the individual, community, and systems levels in Winchendon, MA. Community-based events, training, and programming centered around HEAL Winchendon's four focus outcomes--Healthy Food Access, Economic Empowerment, Social Inclusion, and Collective Impact--are the mechanisms for building a strong coalition and greater community, human and social, and financial assets in Winchendon.

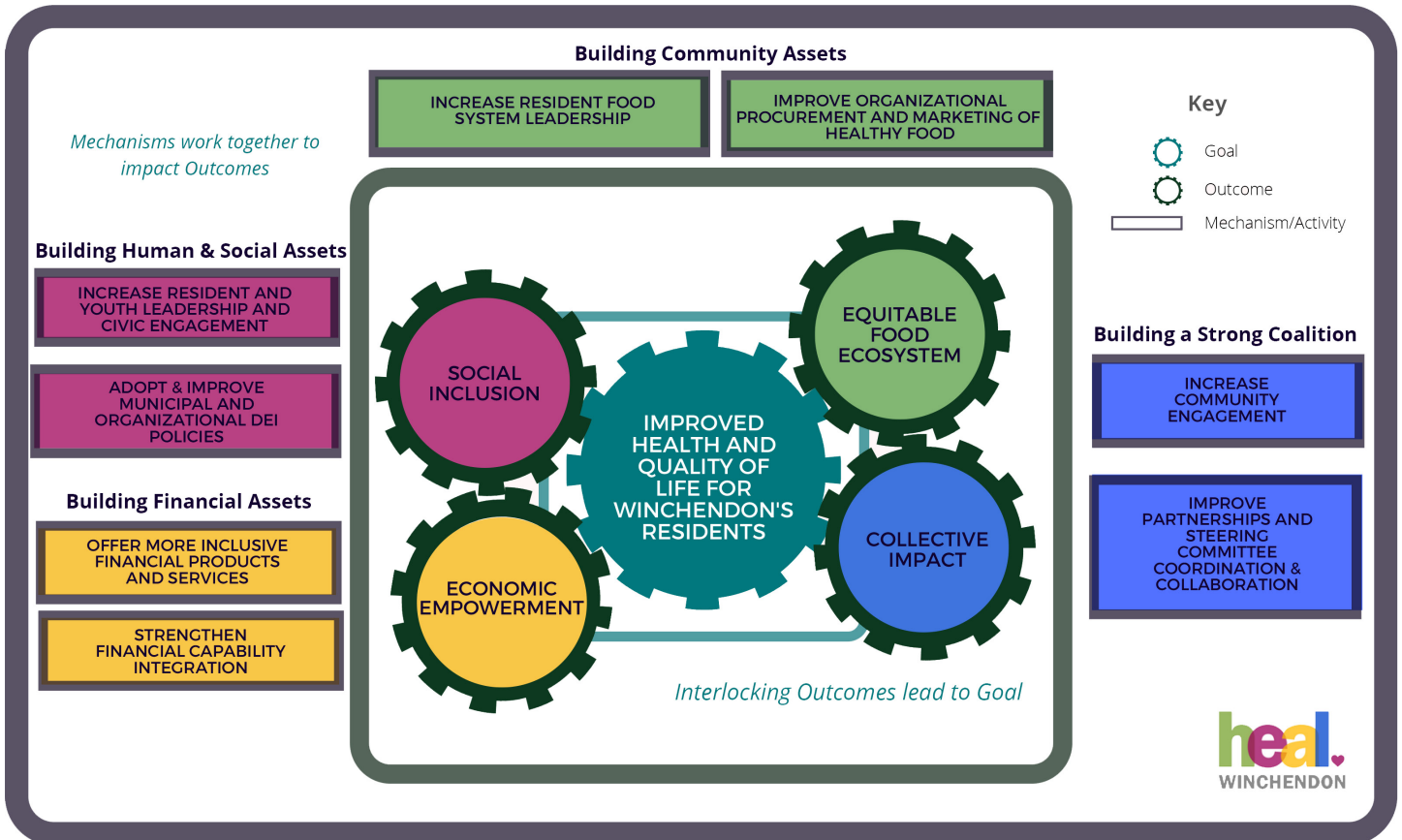


Figure 1: HEAL Winchendon's theory of change

This report serves two purposes. It identifies key findings from our developmental evaluation that help to establish a “baseline” picture of where Winchendon started from in 2020. It also tells the story of the first year of HEAL Winchendon’s work, highlighting key strategies and achievements of the initiative’s four main goals.

Background

HEAL Winchendon

HEAL Winchendon is a member of the Moving Massachusetts Upstream (MassUP) Investment Program, a three-year initiative administered by the Massachusetts Health Policy Commission (HPC) to address “upstream” social determinants of health (SDOH).^{1,viii} The members of HEAL Winchendon collectively determined that the SDOH for Winchendon are economic empowerment, healthy food access, and social inclusion. By working on these upstream drivers of health and well-being, HEAL Winchendon hopes to directly combat the source of the issues rather than the symptoms further “downstream.” HEAL Winchendon aims to address these factors in its external community-engaged work while maintaining an internal focus on generating greater collective impact through its work.

An intergenerational coalition of residents and eight local organizations working for the well-being of Winchendon, the HEAL Winchendon Steering Committee comprises representatives and volunteers from each of the partner organizations as well as Resident Leaders and Youth Changemakers. HEAL Winchendon’s mission is to “address food and economic security and community cohesion at the individual, community, and systems levels in Winchendon.”

HEAL Winchendon’s origins stem from the Healthy Eating, Active Living (HEAL) health initiative, the local chapter of which was organized by the Community Health Network of North Central Massachusetts (CHNA 9) and Growing Places.^{ix} The original HEAL initiative in Winchendon involved local residents in advocating for and developing a local food system. This was particularly important as Winchendon’s sole grocery store, the Central Supermarket IGA, closed in 2017 without replacement.^x More than one in ten Winchendon residents live below the poverty line, which for 2021 is \$21,960 for a household of three.^{xi,xii} With a deep understanding of the intersectional nature of food access and economic empowerment; a goal of highlighting the high number of Winchendon residents who are members of the working poor; and a desire to build on local community, social, and financial assets, members of the HEAL initiative worked together to successfully apply for a MassUP Investment Program award.

HEAL Winchendon Partners

- CHNA 9
- Growing Places
- Heywood Hospital
- The Winchendon School
- Three Pyramids
- Town of Winchendon
- Winchendon CAC
- Winchendon Public Schools

1. The MassUP Investment Program funds four partnerships between health care providers and community organizations to address a social determinant of health (SDOH). MassUP is administered by the Massachusetts Health Policy Commission, with evaluation and technical assistance support provided by the Department of Public Health (DPH).

Empowerment Economics

Open to learning from the beginning, the HEAL Winchendon Steering Committee is informed by Empowerment Economics and other frameworks, including Collective Impact. Originally developed by and for Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities in partnership with Hawaiian Community Assets, National CAPACD, and the Institute for Economic and Racial Equity, Empowerment Economics is a multigenerational, culturally relevant approach to building wealth and power.^{xiii} Empowerment Economics is one crucial way historically marginalized communities can accrue assets in the face of systemic barriers. Traditional financial capability focuses on wealth building at the individual level. In contrast, Empowerment Economics focuses on collective wealth building at the community level. Empowerment Economics creates transformational opportunities for building community self-determination and wealth.

Members of the Steering Committee have participated in various Empowerment Economics-related webinars and activities, including a mini virtual summit in January 2021 that focused on the core elements of Empowerment Economics (see *Figure 2* below). The Institute for Economic and Racial Equity team has also presented on Empowerment Economics at several Steering Committee meetings.

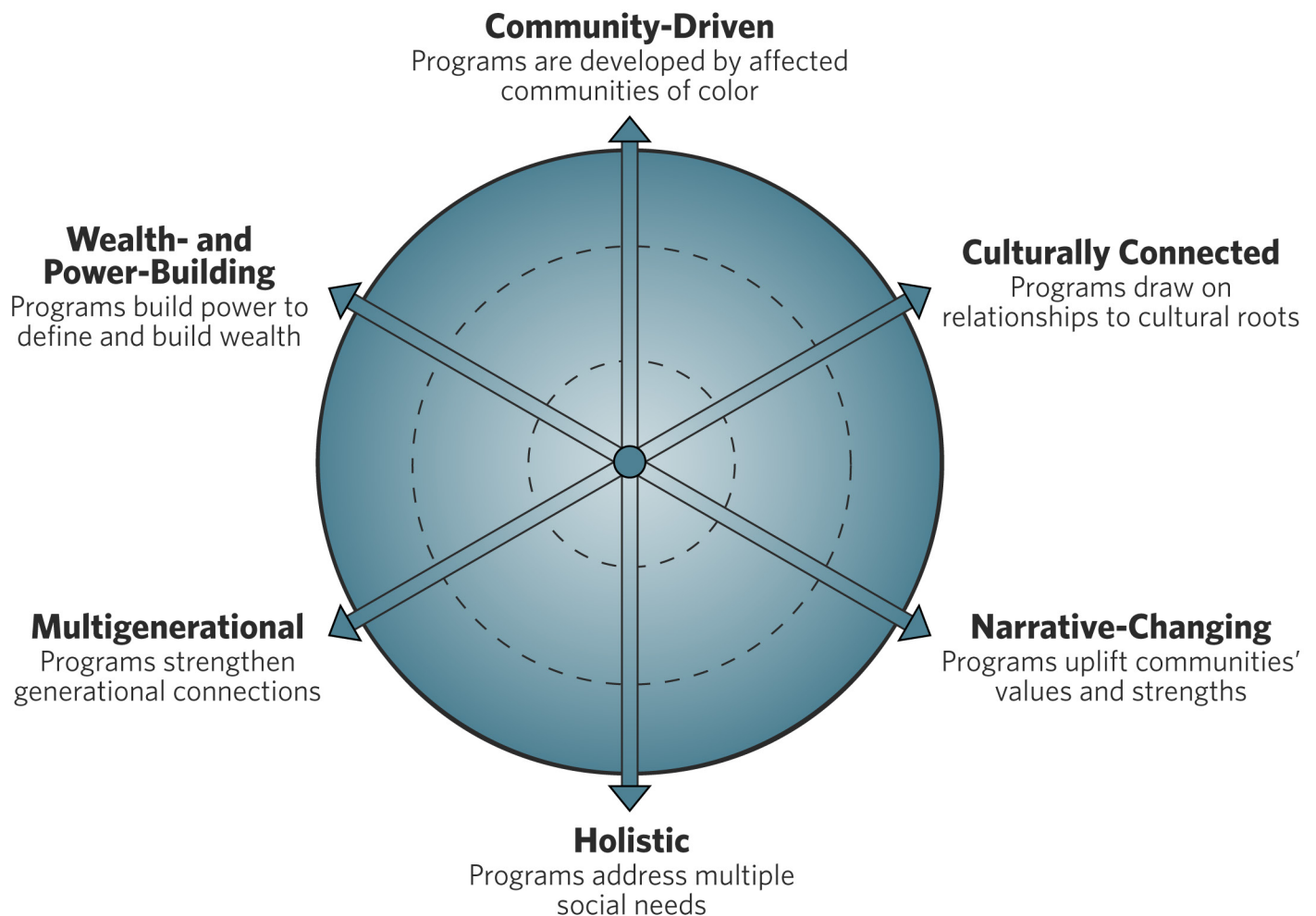


Figure 2: *The Core Elements of Empowerment Economics*

Evaluation

The Institute for Economic and Racial Equity (IERE) was invited to partner with HEAL Winchendon as evaluator and strategic thought partner. Having weighed different evaluation methods, IERE decided that a developmental evaluation^{xiv} would be best suited for this project as:

- It supports innovative and adaptive development;
- It is grounded in systems thinking;
- Its data collection is informed by and geared toward project needs and goals;
- It is suited for complex, dynamic environments;
- It is an iterative process involving intentional, timely feedback; and
- It is a collaborative process between community and evaluators.

IERE worked closely with the Steering Committee on key decisions in this past year of planning, including finalizing the measurement and evaluation plans in Spring 2021 and meeting regularly with Miranda Jennings, HEAL Winchendon’s Program Manager. IERE also tracked the progress of each of the partnership’s working groups by participating in key activities, offering guidance on tools and products, and providing feedback on elements of HEAL Winchendon’s work when invited. IERE co-facilitated a discussion on the Collective Impact framework in November 2020; provided three formal updates to the Steering Committee in September 2020, October 2020, and December 2020 during the development of the measurement plan, incorporating feedback after each update; and facilitated one feedback session around preliminary findings for this baseline report in July 2021.

IERE produced a detailed measurement plan to evaluate each outcome, based on the HPC’s template. The plan includes indicators, a rationale for each indicator, data source(s) for each, approach to data collection, readiness to implement data collection, and approach to data quality assurance and improvement. IERE also created a visual representation of HEAL Winchendon’s theory of change, which was the product of several conversations with the Steering Committee, the HPC, and the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH) (see *Figure 1*). IERE developed an accompanying visual diagram of the measurement plan, outlining outcomes, mechanisms, and indicators for each of the focus areas. These steps allowed IERE to communicate the different aspects of the measurement plan to the Steering Committee, the HPC, and DPH and obtain feedback. Subsequent data collection activities were mapped onto the measurement plan.

“Developmental Evaluation supports innovation development to guide adaptation to emergent and dynamic realities in complex environments.”

- Michael Quinn Patton,
concept creator of
Developmental Evaluation

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the IERE research team conducted all fieldwork virtually. A team of four researchers collected and/or analyzed the following data over the course of one year:

- 7 individual and 2 group interviews with members of the HEAL Winchendon Steering Committee;
- 3 anchor institution interviews (Growing Places- and IERE-facilitated);
- 1 focus group with the Youth Changemakers;
- 4 community focus groups (Growing Places-facilitated);
- 8 partner survey responses (HPC/DPH-administered);
- 109 resident survey responses;
- 290 Winchendon consumer market analysis responses (Growing Places-administered);
- Observation of Steering Committee meetings;
- Co-development of DEI toolkit;
- Content review of Three Pyramids' training curriculum;
- Content review of HEAL Winchendon's shared Google Drive; and
- Analysis of organizational, regional, and public data.

Baseline 2020-2021: How Is Winchendon Doing and How Is HEAL Winchendon Connecting Community Health, Wealth, and Power?

Equitable Food Ecosystem: Food for All and All for Food

Key Baseline Findings:

- Healthy food access is a challenge for many residents, based on factors such as price, transportation, and awareness
- Local efforts to address food insecurity have been siloed

HEAL Winchendon Strategies → Year 1 Achievements:

- Increase communication between HEAL Winchendon partners → More integrated and robust access points for food
- Engage and partner with local farms → Better producer-supplier connections and deeper knowledge of the land
- Develop a network of community gardens → Three community gardens located at three HEAL Winchendon partner organizations' sites and greater community involvement
- Promote increased SNAP/HIP usage → Growing Places received Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) approval to accept SNAP/HIP benefits at its mobile market and weekly produce pick-up/delivery
- Encourage healthy eating → free weekly produce deliveries/selections, development of meal kits, free cooking video lessons

Equitable Food Ecosystem Baseline 2020-2021

For many years, Winchendon residents have found it challenging to afford and prepare healthy meals, which in turn has affected families' overall health and well-being. Winchendon has a substantially higher mortality rate (887.1 per 100,000 people) than Massachusetts (777.3 per 100,000 people), the highest mortality rate of any community in Heywood Hospital's service area of six regional towns, and a cerebrovascular disease death rate nearly twice as high as the Commonwealth's.^{xv} After the January 2017 closure of the town's only grocery store, Central Supermarket IGA,^{xvi} Winchendon became a low-access, food insecure community, and food access problems worsened for many residents.

In a survey of Winchendon residents (n=109) conducted by HEAL Winchendon, food access emerged as the number one concern residents had for Winchendon's future. A lack of transportation and the proximity of local food sellers is a major challenge for many in Winchendon. To better understand the food-related challenges facing Winchendon residents, Growing Places conducted a consumer market analysis (n=290). Growing Places found that Winchendon residents mostly shop at Market Basket, Hannaford, and Walmart, all of which are outside the town and require a car to access. Of the residents surveyed, 129 people (45%) cited freshness and high quality as the most important factor behind their food purchase choices, 68 (24%) cited low price, and 26 (9%) the food being local. Most of the residents

spent \$101-\$200 (46%) on food each week. When asked what would make it easier for Winchendon residents to get the food they want, 157 people (55%) named lower food prices and the desire for establishments that sell food to be closer to their homes.

In February of 2020, Growing Places conducted a series of listening sessions in Winchendon. One session with 19 Winchendon residents (16 adults and three children) at The Winchendon School revealed a multitude of common themes. Numerous participants cited cost as a prohibitive factor to cooking the meals they like; several shared that access to organic produce and high-quality food is difficult because of the associated costs. Time to cook healthy meals is often nonexistent for many folks, including residents with chronically ill children or greater parenting responsibilities. A participant shared that Market Basket had looked at purchasing the building that formerly housed the IGA but the building's owner refused to make the necessary repairs and wanted a substantial sum of money for it (\$1 million plus \$5,000 in rent per month).² At another listening session held at Dios es Fiel Church, residents shared that unhealthy food options are often cheaper, access to community gardens is limited, and many people whom they see as poor do not qualify for SNAP and HIP benefits. In another community chat, a Winchendon resident noted that they would not purchase items from local stores if they were more expensive than the prices at stores such as Walmart, once again highlighting residents' financial concerns and the difficulties small local stores face in competing with popular big box retailers.

What Is HEAL Winchendon Doing?

To address the poor health outcomes and health inequities caused and worsened by a lack of access to healthy and affordable food, a central goal of the HEAL Winchendon coalition is to improve Winchendon residents' health and quality of life through the creation of an equitable food system. This food system will provide residents with healthy, accessible, local food, connecting farmers with local stores and consumers.

HEAL Winchendon defines an equitable food system as one that makes "healthy food available to all members of the community regardless of socioeconomic status, age, and ability."

HEAL Winchendon is building a regional food hub centered in Winchendon, with "spokes" reaching out to surrounding towns. As one of the lead partner organizations on the equitable food ecosystem, Growing Places has been organizing efforts to collect produce from local farmers, deliver it to Winchendon, pack it into bags with the help of volunteers, and distribute the packaged produce to older residents and families. Growing Places' market analysis laid the foundation for how a continuous assessment of Winchendon residents' preferences and purchasing habits could inform what local producers grow. The use of free or low-cost community gardens is a large part of this effort, with three community gardens set up in Winchendon to date.

². Several supermarket chains have conducted feasibility studies since 2017 and ultimately determined that operating a grocery store in Winchendon would not be profitable.

While the social and economic realities of everyday life render food access a continued challenge for many residents, the efforts of HEAL Winchendon, Growing Places, the Winchendon Community Action Committee (CAC), and Not Just Produced, a local grocery store, have made it easier for Winchendon residents to access high-quality, affordable food. Food access challenges are directly linked with the challenges of aging in place in Winchendon since nearly everyone must drive in order to purchase food and groceries. While Not Just Produced has made accessing healthy food easier

by carrying a variety of fresh produce and precooked meals, it did not initially accept SNAP and HIP. Two HEAL Winchendon partner organizations, Growing Places and the Town of Winchendon, worked with Not Just Produced to successfully implement a plan in which people can use their SNAP benefits to purchase Growing Places' vegetables at the store.^{xvii} On Thursdays, Growing Places parks its mobile market outside the Winchendon Senior Center, providing greater access to older residents and an opportunity for people to use their HIP benefits. As members of the Steering Committee, local farmers are involved in HEAL Winchendon's decision-making process and can invite residents to farm events. Growing Places uses a community-supported agriculture model to provide Winchendon residents with a variety of fresh seasonal produce at community locations and weekly deliveries. In addition to running a community garden, the Winchendon CAC provides fresh produce and other food for residents through its weekly Shelf Food Program.



Above: Growing Places' produce cart

Photo by HEAL Winchendon

"[Not Just Produced] has made a big difference in town for those who can afford it. The systems that are doing it aren't sustainable. The Senior Center providing meals, Growing Places bringing in meals and packing it, CAC putting information out on Facebook—it's piecemeal. Driving five minutes north to Hannaford and Market Basket, a lot of people don't have a car. I see people carrying bags from CVS, Rite Aid, Cumberland Farms. Access is a problem. Supply [is, too]. People being able to afford it. A food system isn't going to be built in Winchendon alone. [It] needs to be part of an effort in North Central Massachusetts, which is trying to build a regional food system with Winchendon as the hub for more supply and demand."

- HEAL Winchendon Steering Committee member

The coalition is working on adding more community gardens to its existing network, which includes gardens at Murdock Community Farm, The Winchendon School, and the CAC. Many of the Steering Committee members interviewed believe that there is interest in community gardens in town. Several members described the value of community ownership of these gardens. One person shared their belief that a community garden would function well if Growing Places managed it. Beyond community gardens, they noted that better coordination among HEAL Winchendon partner

organizations would improve access to a healthy food system. A well-functioning system requires producers who are getting a fair price for their goods, a distribution system that makes it accessible to consumers, and consumers believing that the produce they buy is worth that money. As they pointed out, *“There needs to be both private organization and individual consumers. If you don’t have all of those pieces, then you have a farmer producing and selling their goods in Boston or elsewhere.”* A member of a local institution reflected on the long history of community gardens in the United States, a history that is partially rooted in the Victory Gardens of World Wars I and II. For a community with a strong agricultural history, promoting community gardens would leverage existing agricultural assets such as Winchendon’s abundant land and the community’s robust knowledge of farming practices.

HEAL Winchendon has identified a community commercial kitchen as a way to recognize the talents of community members and empower them to start small businesses, which are critical to the creation of an economically vibrant community. The Massachusetts law that requires that many edible products be made in a commercial kitchen is a barrier to entry for prospective local entrepreneurs hoping to start food-based businesses. With that in mind, the coalition is working with the town on a project to buy a building to run a commercial kitchen that community members can access and use to start their businesses and support their families and the local economy.

Reflecting on how access to healthy food can be improved in Winchendon, a member of the Steering Committee noted that a regional food hub should connect with local farms and include events such as farm-to-table tours to showcase local farms and what they produce. They highlighted the importance of local ownership and resident involvement, saying,

“People are positive about Not Just Produced. I think building a food hub off of that and making it really unique to Winchendon so that we own it—that requires us to have the residents involved in designing it. And then, connect people to the land through the Winchendon community farm and community engagement.”

In interviews, several Steering Committee members shared that changing the narrative surrounding the use of public assistance would go a long way toward closing the “SNAP gap”—the difference between the number of people who qualify for SNAP and the number of people who use it—in Winchendon. HEAL Winchendon’s Communications Working Group is in the process of developing and testing out the coalition’s SNAP messaging.

“We are just far enough out that it becomes a little difficult. I don’t think we have an organization that connects the supply with the demand. I’m hoping that the food hub that we’re trying to do will do that. We have some suppliers, but we need to look at who produces what when and then compare that with the demand and try to fulfill it. We as the community are not connecting the dots right now. HEAL is trying to do that.”

- HEAL Winchendon Steering Committee member

Many people in town harbor negative views about using public assistance programs and therefore forgo SNAP and HIP benefits even if they qualify. HEAL Winchendon is closing the SNAP gap through various means, but several Steering Committee members emphasized that a critical aspect of closing the SNAP gap will be changing the negative narrative surrounding government assistance. They described how HEAL Winchendon is working on changing the narrative in town to a more positive view, pointing out that using SNAP benefits to buy local products keeps money in the Winchendon community and benefits the local economy. At a Steering Committee meeting, several people brought up one of the local public schools needing just 10 more families to enroll in the free lunch program in order for free lunches to become universally available to all students. Members of the Steering Committee brainstormed ways to help with outreach and enrollment efforts, discussing barriers and potential solutions to the issue. Several Steering Committee members emphasized the need to recognize and build upon existing community assets. Others highlighted communication and cooperation among partners as an area of growth for the coalition. A member of the Steering Committee said,

“We want to be able to work through this whole collective impact and what we want is to see a food system that works for everyone. We can’t have different people doing something else—we all have to come together and see what is best for the system and, really, we need to come together and see what is already existing.”

Promoting education, awareness, and belief drives much of HEAL Winchendon’s work. Many members of the Steering Committee believe that food concerns in town are influenced by Winchendon residents’ awareness of and beliefs about food. As one person said,

“The biggest impact for food systems and economic empowerment would be mindset-oriented—bringing resilience and change from within to be able to shift when we can. A couple of leaders are really invested in the food systems themselves. The knowledge is there to think beyond that traditional grocery store, to get out of the mindset of giving out pounds of food to how people can support food systems themselves.”

A member of the Steering Committee shared that they hope to produce

“... a video that shows where produce starts and where it ends with CSA bags. We would talk to producers and people who would provide a certain bag. If people saw how much people cared about the food, maybe they would use it more and less would go to waste.”

One Steering Committee member talked about how HEAL Winchendon is decreasing the SNAP gap and providing education around healthy food. However, they have also noticed that the mobile market in town is not very busy whenever they pass by. Another member reflected that Winchendon residents do not seem to understand why they

“They do what they know and have always done to survive, like go to McDonald’s.”

- HEAL Winchendon Steering Committee member

need healthy food, focusing more on basic survival. They also believe that many people do not know what to do with a lot of the lesser-known vegetables, which was echoed by another member. They pointed out that many people are interested in trying out new vegetables with their families, but just do not know how to prepare them. This person hoped for more resources to be able to label produce packages and provide basic recipes and instructions, which could alleviate the uncertainty around different types of produce. To them, options should be centered around preparing healthy food quickly and efficiently. For HEAL to create an equitable food ecosystem in the long-term, it is critical that increased access, relevance, and community involvement remain the central focus of HEAL’s food justice efforts.

Recommendations

HEAL Winchendon has done great work in building on the original HEAL initiative and Growing Places’ efforts to create a robust local food system. The closure of the town’s supermarket galvanized many residents into action, facilitating greater civic and community engagement.

Winchendon acting as a regional food hub could mitigate the concerns of people worried that the town will not serve

their needs as they age. By building on Growing Places’ delivery services and operating in central, high-traffic locations, HEAL Winchendon can increase accessibility for residents who walk or use forms of transportation besides cars. HEAL Winchendon should consider how best to coordinate efforts of partner organizations to facilitate a common narrative and amplified messaging and services. With the Town’s Master Plan encouraging increased agricultural usage of the land, HEAL Winchendon is well-positioned to build on the successes of this first year.



Above: Fresh produce at the CAC

Photo by HEAL Winchendon

As evaluators, we recommend the following for HEAL Winchendon to reflect and build on as the coalition moves forward with creating an equitable food ecosystem in Winchendon:

1. Leverage partner organizations’ and Steering Committee members’ connections with local farmers and producers in developing an accessible food hub;
2. Reduce the SNAP gap and increase HIP usage;
3. Expand the network of community gardens;
4. Finalize the management of a community commercial kitchen;
5. Coordinate and integrate HEAL Winchendon partner organizations’ efforts to address food insecurity and promote greater food access;
6. Address the transportation issue with and for local residents;
7. Raise awareness about the advantages of healthy eating, value of different foods, and benefits of supporting the local economy; and
8. Schedule more cooking classes and include recipes in CSA produce packaging.

Economic Empowerment: Changing Individual and Systemic Realities

Key Baseline Findings:

- Winchendon faces multiple economic challenges, including a lack of well-paying jobs and public transportation to commute out of town for work
- Residents are well-aware of the challenges and eager for increased economic development
- Understandings of the root causes of poverty are varied
- Economic realities impact other areas of life, including health, food access, and social inclusion

HEAL Winchendon Strategies → Year 1 Achievements:

- At the Steering Committee level, develop a shared understanding of the systemic nature of poverty and impact of greater financial capability on the community → Trainings conducted for the Steering Committee
- Train Resident Leaders to be financial coaches → Two residents fully trained
- Increase residents' belief in the town and themselves and encourage economic development → Taste of Winchendon event, in process to manage a community commercial kitchen, advocacy training conducted for the Steering Committee
- Promote and support local businesses → Taste of Winchendon highlighted several local restaurants and small businesses

Economic Empowerment Baseline 2021

Economic empowerment intersects with and affects multiple social determinants of health. Reducing poverty, creating better job opportunities, stabilizing housing, and addressing food access needs are vital in order to create a flourishing community, which in turn impacts health and well-being. The economic stagnation that Winchendon is experiencing is similar to many post-industrial towns across the region. Winchendon's economic decline from booming manufacturing hub to a town with *“no work, no good-paying jobs, and no adequate transportation”* has indelibly impacted the town's perception of itself and residents' understanding of poverty. The loss of high-quality and well-paying jobs in Winchendon has led to many of its residents thinking of it as a *“bedroom town,”* a stop between traveling to work and spending time in other nearby cities and towns for leisure activities.

Winchendon's economic indicators present a picture of a low-resource community. The poverty rate in Winchendon hovers at around 10.6%, which is higher than the state average of 9.4%.^{xviii} Many residents without cars feel *“trapped”* in town and unable to find work due to the lack of local transportation options. While new residents move to the area each year, citing affordable housing and access to land as their primary reasons, the Winchendon Housing Authority has a 1.5-year waitlist and rent continues to rise in town. Half of Winchendon residents are rent-burdened (spending 30% or more of their income on rent). A 2018 community health needs assessment by Heywood Healthcare revealed that childhood poverty is very present in Winchendon: 18% of children under the age of 18 and a staggering 44.2% of children under the age of five live below the poverty line.^{xix}

The perception of poverty in Winchendon varies greatly. A primarily white working-class town, there is a strong underlying sentiment in Winchendon that people simply need to *“pull themselves up by their bootstraps.”* Many residents are resistant to accepting government assistance due to the associated stigma. Others in the community understand poverty to be a systemic issue and a collection of policies that need to change on a local and federal level to ensure the financial well-being of all residents.

“If you don’t have a livable job or a medium-wage job, you’re not going to get very far. And that’s not something that Winchendon offers. We don’t have that many high-paying jobs here.”

- HEAL Winchendon Steering Committee member

Residents’ explanations for poverty in Winchendon are equally extensive. Some residents believe that poverty exists in Winchendon because *“people don’t want to work”* and *“low-income housing attracts people in poverty.”* Other residents highlighted the lack of jobs—let alone good quality jobs—in town and the lack of transportation to access those types of jobs elsewhere. As one resident said,

“I think that there is poverty in Winchendon because of the lack of opportunity and equity in regards to jobs in the area. I think that everyone has potential and the drive to get a job, but they are not often provided the resources and/or the techniques of the process in order to ascertain an employment.”

Residents talked about how there are *“not many high-paying jobs for people in town to make that livable wage, only minimum wage.”* Research has shown that minimum wage workers, anywhere in the United States, are unable to provide for themselves even while working full-time.^{xx,xxi} Furthermore, it is not only low-income residents who are affected by the current economic landscape, but also the middle-income group who do not qualify for public assistance. One resident shared how they nearly lost their house and had to work 70 hours per week to make their monthly mortgage payments.

Economic empowerment includes “free financial coaching, asset building, and changes in housing and employment policies within local organizations. In addition to ensuring that residents are taken care of now we want to help create a path to long term financial stability. HEAL Winchendon challenges existing inequalities of wealth and power to reduce poverty for families and Winchendon as a whole.”

- HEAL Winchendon

Regardless of individual beliefs on the root causes of poverty, the vast majority of residents agree that a combination of factors contributes to economic disempowerment. Most of the responses on the community resident survey described how the lack of good-paying local jobs, lack of transportation, high costs of childcare, and the welfare system itself hold people back from achieving economic well-being. The resident survey revealed that the top two hopes people have for Winchendon’s future are economic growth and good quality jobs. Residents are looking towards the Town to create better systems that will address their ongoing challenges.

HEAL Winchendon’s understanding of economic empowerment values people as assets and redefines what it means to build wealth, broadening the scope from personal to community wealth-building. Despite the challenges Winchendon faces in revitalizing the local economy, many residents and members of the Steering Committee are hopeful about the future and able to identify what Economic Empowerment looks like to them. As several shared,

“[Economic empowerment] looks like people not worrying about not having a house or food. That should be a human right. Like breathing air, you need it to survive . . . [Economic empowerment] would mean people being able to think a week or two in advance or a month in advance and make a plan for what they want their life to be like rather than stressing about now. It would mean healthier relationships with their families and spouses because they’re not stressed with finances.”

“Economic empowerment looks like having access to the education and training that a person needs to get the kind of career opportunities that they want and not having to go too far or give up too much in order to achieve them. Economic empowerment understands investment and ownership and what kinds of systems we should be participating in to feel that those systems are built for [us].”

“Economic empowerment looks like people feel[ing] comfortable navigating systems to find the resources they need, that they have the support to make these decisions and can thrive economically. Fair wages, fair job opportunities.”

What Is HEAL Winchendon Doing?³

HEAL Winchendon believes that financial security is one of the most critical challenges facing households in town and that economic well-being impacts other aspects of life. HEAL Winchendon recognizes that there is a need for a healthy local economy, one with good-paying jobs, good transportation and strong ties to local networks; improvement in residents’ economic well-being; and inclusive policies. HEAL Winchendon is in the early stages of developing a network of wraparound supports, which will include banking, housing, and social services. The coalition is working on combating the perception of poverty being the result of an individual’s shortcomings. In February 2021, in partnership with IERE, the HEAL Winchendon Steering Committee put together a workshop for the Steering Committee and partners on the root causes of poverty. This training shifted the narrative away from the individual, highlighting instead the systems involved and different ways to think about assets and wealth (e.g., land, ability to navigate institutional structures, networks, etc.). The following month,

3. This area of focus is less developed compared to the others. We believe that this is due to the unexpected loss of Adrian Ford, founder and CEO of Three Pyramids, in January 2021 and GFA Credit Union’s lack of engagement this past year (originally a Steering Committee member, GFA recently rejoined the economic empowerment working group).

Three Pyramids, a HEAL Winchendon organizational partner, led a workshop for the Steering Committee on its model of financial coaching and impacts on the broader community.

HEAL Winchendon is attempting to boost the well-being of all Winchendon residents by advocating for greater economic inclusion. The food hub that HEAL Winchendon is developing is a large part of this work. Besides being a central location for food access and distribution, Winchendon becoming a food hub will also provide opportunities for social connection and education. A barrier to entrepreneurship in Winchendon is the policy forbidding a person in public housing from running a small business out of their home. Other Massachusetts state laws also do not permit individuals to make and sell food from their home unless the goods are prepared in a commercial kitchen. These policies are the drivers behind the commercial kitchen project that HEAL Winchendon is currently working on with the Town. The coalition is in talks with the Town to have the Town purchase a building and outfit it as a community commercial kitchen. HEAL Winchendon would then manage the kitchen and all operations, inviting community members to use the facilities to develop their small businesses and promote greater local food supply and access in town.

Financial coaching is a key feature of HEAL Winchendon’s economic empowerment work. Three Pyramids’ financial coaching approach values dialogue and centers the participant as the driver of the relationship. Three Pyramids recently completed their train-the-trainer model with two Winchendon Resident Leaders, who will then provide free financial coaching to three to five residents each over the next year. The financial coaches will be based out of the CAC, which will function as the financial empowerment hub. This aspect is part of HEAL Winchendon’s attempt to impact existing realities while working for long-term change.

The coalition hopes to continue working towards narrative and behavioral change at the individual, family, and organizational levels. Eventually, HEAL Winchendon’s work may help residents understand that poverty is a result of multiple systems that fail to serve the most vulnerable people in our communities. HEAL Winchendon relies on the adage of *“if you give a person a fish, they eat for a day. If you teach a person to fish, they eat for life,”* and adds nuance to its meaning. Teaching someone a skill is not enough—the person needs access to a fishing pole and a clean lake. This drives home the message that resources and the environment impact an individual’s ability to thrive. Economic empowerment is more than learning how to budget because one cannot budget their way out of systemic poverty. HEAL Winchendon is advancing the counter-narrative that accessing social services does not equate personal or familial failure. By engaging more people in civic activities and promoting



Above: Ilia Diaz and Shaina Cunningham, Winchendon financial coaches

Photo by HEAL Winchendon

greater economic inclusion, HEAL Winchendon is creating opportunities for residents to realize that they have tremendous power to develop new initiatives and policies for Winchendon.

Recommendations

HEAL Winchendon has begun to lay the foundation for greater economic empowerment in Winchendon. One of HEAL Winchendon's stated goals is to encourage financial institutions in town to adopt diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices and provide more accessible financial products and services, which is certainly achievable in the next few years. Two Resident Leaders have completed Three Pyramids' financial coaching training and are ready to begin coaching other residents. HEAL Winchendon is shifting the narrative on poverty through developing a shared understanding of the root causes and systemic nature of poverty on the Steering Committee and targeted external messaging around the SNAP gap and financial assistance.

As evaluators, we recommend the following for HEAL Winchendon to consider as the coalition builds on the economic empowerment work of this first year:

1. Seek to enroll at least one local financial institution as a member of the Steering Committee by 2022;
2. Develop a focus on policy work in Winchendon, working specifically with financial institutions and providers in town to advance DEI practices and increase accessibility;
3. Create a shared narrative on economic empowerment with concrete messaging bites and topics for community education and dialogue;
4. Work with the Town of Winchendon on an economic development strategy that promotes and supports resident entrepreneurship and local businesses;
5. Roll out the financial coaching program, reaching at least 10 residents by 2022;
6. Promote a greater understanding of the systemic nature of poverty in the financial coaching curriculum;
7. Work with the public schools to include financial literacy in school curricula;
8. Develop a directory of wraparound services in Winchendon; and
9. Connect with statewide and national resources around the Empowerment Economics approach to systems work.

Social Inclusion: Small Town Breaking the Mold

Key Baseline Findings:

- Small town insider/outsider dynamics prevent residents from achieving full participation and health
- An awareness gap in understanding social inclusion creates challenges for this work and simultaneously raises its importance

HEAL Winchendon Strategies → Year 1 Achievements:

- Active recruitment of those at the margins → Creation of diverse, inclusive Steering Committee
- Supporting the placement of youth and residents in positions of power → Youth Changemaker and Resident Leader appointed to Winchendon Parks and Recreation Committee
- Traditional leaders stepping back to make room for youth to lead → Youth Changemakers led a Heart and Soul grant application, actively countered racist remarks on social media, successfully advocated for a Pride Month Town proclamation, and organized Taste of Winchendon
- Resident Brave Spaces and Steering Committee education/training → Shared language and spaces to identify and unlearn biases and co-construct new narratives
- Steering Committee co-learns and agrees about critical dimensions of organizational change work → Social inclusion working group created a DEI resource guide, assessment survey, and scoring tool for partner organizations

Social Inclusion Baseline 2020-2021

A predominantly white-working class community,

Winchendon is beloved by many of its residents for having a small-town feel. Many children maintain strong bonds with their peers from kindergarten well into adulthood.

When a family experiences a crisis, the town is known for coming together to support that family. However, the “*small-town feel*” and feelings of support do not apply to everyone. Residents report that this small-town dynamic can sometimes lead to “*small-mind thinking*” in terms of willingness to accept and embrace all members of the growing community. This includes newcomers as well as any residents that do not fit the mold of white, working-class, long-established residents.

Insider/Outsider Dynamics

At baseline, we observed a very clear insider/outsider power dynamic in Winchendon. The primary group of people who feel like they belong in Winchendon (insiders) are white families who have been in town for multiple generations. Some members of this population believe they hold authority to determine who

“Social inclusion is the process of improving the terms on which individuals and groups take part in society—improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of those disadvantaged on the basis of their identity.”

- World Bank

should be living in town and how everyone in town should act, despite the fact that their ancestors were not the original inhabitants of the land.^{xxii} If a family does not have a last name that is familiar to some of these longtime residents, they do not necessarily include them in their social network, even if they have been neighbors for decades. Importantly, these families are the ones who hold decision-making positions in the community. On the other hand, many residents live in Winchendon but do not actively participate in Town matters. Of folks who responded to the resident survey, 55% have never participated in a Town committee, Town board, or general Town meeting. The majority (66%) pay attention to activities and decisions made by the municipal government and are interested but not directly involved while another 18% are not at all involved.

The degree to which people feel at home or connected to their community affects civic engagement. Only 14% of survey respondents reported feeling very connected to Winchendon and the community. The majority feel somewhat connected (55%), while a quarter (26%) feel not very connected and 7% feel not at all connected. Due to entrenched power dynamics, even some residents who were born and raised in Winchendon and pride themselves on being from the town described themselves as being discouraged from claiming Winchendon as their home.

Winchendon is growing both in terms of population and racial and ethnic diversity. In part because of this growth, over time fewer and fewer of Winchendon's residents fit that narrow "insider" mold. In 2010, the total population hovered at around 10,360 individuals, while the estimated population in 2021 is closer to 11,000 individuals.^{xxiii} The town has experienced slow but steady growth over the past decade, with newcomers arriving from other cities and towns in Massachusetts and beyond. This includes a small but growing Latinx population, which makes up 3.2% of Winchendon's community.^{xxiv} Newcomers move to Winchendon for many of the same reasons that established families stay there: Winchendon is quiet, safe, and beautiful and has a strong history of community reliance—all factors that contribute to well-being. When asked what they love most about Winchendon, residents replied:

"I love the small town vibes, knowing if I needed help, it is there."

"You can feel safe because it is a small town."

"We are surrounded by the woods—I like being around the woods and exploring the woods."

Most residents feel able to ask neighbors for help, but some newcomers experience overt discrimination and social exclusion living in town. For example, one resident was called *"half-breed, immigrant, and*



Above: Winchendon's natural landscape

Photo by HEAL Winchendon

worse” while growing up. Another resident talked about how other residents shunned their mother, saying, *“The accent was a reason for people not to engage with her.”* One described being repeatedly racially profiled in town. Comments on one of the Winchendon’s residents’ Facebook group pages include demands that all residents speak English and clear statements that newcomers are unwelcome. Others are excluded on the basis of their physical appearance or disability status. A parent shared,

“I am excluded daily because of my disabilities, as is my child. The residents have made it quite clear that they don’t want us here for many reasons. My son has been attacked at school for his health and his disabilities and I have been verbally assaulted by just about everyone I have met here.”

Poverty, and the perception of self-reliance, is the other major dimension that contributes to othering. The social stigma around poverty is pervasive around town. When asked why there is poverty in Winchendon, most residents attributed this reality to the way resources are distributed or lacking, highlighting challenges surrounding *“education, lack of jobs, lack of food, the economy, and high rent and food prices.”* However, others placed the blame on individuals living with limited resources (*“a lot of people feel entitled not to work”*) and the idea that providing services somehow increases the number of people in poverty (*“low-income housing attracts people in poverty”*). Many residents believe that an inability to provide for oneself and one’s family is a reflection of an individual’s moral character. This “outsider” feeling for folks in poverty can be particularly poignant for children who attend school and rely on free or subsidized meals.

Effects of Social Exclusion and Inclusion on Health

Due to the stigmas surrounding poverty and self-reliance, some Winchendon residents decline to access services for fear of being judged by their peers, despite meeting eligibility requirements. Social exclusion can also cause residents to feel as though they do not have the same access to services offered across town, almost as if the services are only for insiders. For example, offering resources that are made available only in English or are non-accessible to folks with disabilities creates additional barriers. The CAC requested assistance from Spanish-speaking volunteers and saw an immediate increase in service utilization by the town’s Latinx residents, broadening the CAC’s reach and supporting additional under-resourced families.

Adults are not the only ones exposed to the pain that comes from discrimination and exclusion in Winchendon. Winchendon residents report that children are also targeted by their peers and other adults in town, creating a toxic environment. A resident shared that their child felt suicidal because of ill-treatment and bullying at school based on the color of their skin. Compounding matters, this child experienced further racism online from classmates and adults. Unfortunately, this is an experience shared by many students of color across the United States. Bullying has been reported to affect people belonging to a wide range of minority groups, such as students with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ students, religious minority students, and racial minority students.^{xxv}

Stress and other mental effects that come from concerns for personal safety hinder residents from feeling welcomed in the community they hope to set roots down in. Isolation has an adverse impact on an individual's mental, cognitive, and physical health.^{xxvi} Racism and bullying are both associated with negative health outcomes, including low self-esteem, depression, loneliness, increased likelihood of dropping out of school, and increased risk of developing chronic physical health conditions.^{xxvii} No one should be made to feel subhuman or unworthy of accessing resources they need to support themselves and their families. No one should feel like they are better off dead than interacting with their neighbors.

On the other hand, when individuals are welcomed, included, and valued within their communities, this can mitigate the feelings of isolation. Social inclusion can create an environment in which people are able to truly connect with one another and expand their social safety nets. Social inclusion can lead to improved health outcomes because it enables people to seek out resources they may feel too ashamed to receive. It also enables people to establish trusted contacts that they can rely on for emotional, physical, and financial support. Social inclusion work ensures interconnectedness of neighbors and community members through positive social ties.

Awareness Gap in Understanding Social Inclusion

Interview and survey data indicate a gap in the levels of awareness that many residents have about their neighbors' experiences with race and ethnicity, disability, and queer identities. Three levels of awareness came to light. In the first, residents are unaware of the discrimination and harassment that is occurring or reject it as a reality, even when they are told it is happening:

“[There is] definitely not a lack of inclusion. All are invited. Definitely not inequality. You reap what you sew (sic) and no one owes you anything. Go earn it and quit whining.”

“[Winchendon is] quiet and friendly. People don't care what color, creed, ethnicity, or social whatever you are. You are a person, as every other person is in Winchendon. And most people treat everyone the same and do not require additional social justice, no matter what the TV tells you. Most (sic) everyone is a good person, as they should be.”

The second level of awareness is when residents are aware but feel like it does not affect them directly, which also causes them to question whether the town is welcoming:

“I feel that this town is welcoming. I cannot see what others see as far as bias, so I am unaware of any unwelcoming situations.”

“I've only heard stories that have horrified me.”

The third level of awareness is when residents have personal experiences, either experienced directly or by people they love. Winchendon consciously or unconsciously perpetuates harm by gaslighting the experiences of residents who are being treated poorly for simply existing in the body that they have. It

is not enough to name the abusive behavior that is occurring in town—action must be taken to actively reject bullying and harassment.

“I’ve encountered a lot of people here who are racist against people who weren’t born in America.”

“They are not very accepting of different people and diversity.”

Some residents of Winchendon believe that work towards social inclusion creates divides in and of itself and want to *“get rid of social justice race baiting education.”* This is a typical response for many white folks when longstanding patterns of power and privilege are brought to the surface. But there are also active voices in town that counter that incorrect narrative, residents who believe that there should be *“zero tolerance for racism and prejudice based on sex, race, religion, identity, etc. . . . If someone cannot show tolerance of others they should not have to be tolerated.”*

There is a lot of work that needs to be done around town to build the idea that diversity is an asset to Winchendon. The need for intense upstream work to enhance awareness and increase social inclusion in Winchendon is great. The sentiments that many of the residents feel about the topic, as demonstrated above, reflect what much of the country is going through right now. Hate crimes are at the highest they have been in more than a decade,^{xxviii} all while some lawmakers are actively seeking to limit teaching about race and racism in public schools.^{xxix}

What Is HEAL Winchendon Doing?

HEAL Winchendon is attempting to build trust among residents in order to reimagine Winchendon as a safer, more inclusive, more equitable community for all residents. However, the topic of social inclusion is currently so divisive in Winchendon that the Steering Committee was initially hesitant to prioritize it. Some members wanted to prioritize the economic empowerment and equitable food ecosystem areas and incorporate social inclusion after HEAL Winchendon’s presence was more established in town. Folks feared that emphasizing social inclusion would drive people away from engaging with HEAL Winchendon. However, in one Steering Committee meeting, a member pointed out that keeping silent creates racist systems. They strongly encouraged that the Steering Committee reconsider and prioritize social inclusion. After an hour and a half of discussion, the Steering Committee agreed to prioritize social inclusion and actively call out racism and other forms of bigotry as part of HEAL Winchendon’s work. That alone was an incredible step for a collaborative project that is still in the early stages of forming. As one HEAL Winchendon Steering Committee member aptly stated, *“Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion work is a journey, not a destination.”* One of the Steering Committee’s goals is to connect with people with whom they interact daily *“with heart, intention, humility, and courage,”* to listen and engage with their neighbors, friends, and families to co-create a more inclusive community. This goal is rooted in wanting to make Winchendon a more welcoming town *“before people get here rather than waiting until they get here.”*

In just one year, HEAL Winchendon has effectively created a welcoming space for many people who formerly felt like outsiders. HEAL Winchendon has practiced social inclusion within the coalition through intentionally recruiting residents who may not traditionally have had a seat at the table or held power roles in the town. Treating both residents and youth perspectives not only as equal to, but even sometimes more important than, the organizational partners at the table have empowered residents to act on their desire to create a more welcoming

“When I’m with HEAL Winchendon, I feel comfortable knowing that it is an inclusive environment. But if I’m on my own, I’m often concerned that I might be put in an uncomfortable or dangerous position to face discrimination.”

- HEAL Winchendon Steering Committee member

community. For example, the Youth Changemakers have taken the lead on presentations to the Board of Selectmen, joined the Town’s Parks and Recreation Committee, co-led a successful application for the Community Heart and Soul grant, co-organized the Little Justice Leaders initiative, and spearheaded the Taste of Winchendon celebration. The youth have been encouraged and actively engaged in the work that HEAL Winchendon is doing, adding a much-needed multigenerational perspective to the partnership.

The collaboration between youth and the older residents in Winchendon is creating change in town. The Youth Changemakers led a movement to have Winchendon formally recognize June as Pride Month. A member of the Steering Committee shared,

“Most recently, back in June, the Board of Selectmen for the first time read and acknowledged Pride Month and everything that goes with that. [These are] little gestures that we can do to ensure that this is a safe place.”

The youth are the future of Winchendon and are boldly accepting their awesome responsibility to create a more socially inclusive town. Trying to encourage other youth to join has been difficult for some of the Changemakers. They note that a lot of their peers feel negatively toward Winchendon. One youth remarked, “I feel like people need to realize our town has potential . . . There’s definitely a lot of progress to be made.” Unlike many of the adults with whom they interact, the youth are clear that feeling welcomed might vary depending on a person’s race:

“If you are white and new to town, you are fairly welcomed. At school, you might be talked to less or bullied because you are new. People of color may be talked to less. There are definitely kids I can think of that would racially profile and treat [people of color] differently.”

Developing a strategy for DEI work has been an ongoing and iterative process. HEAL Winchendon has had to be flexible and adaptive to the town’s needs. The coalition has also provided ample opportunities for learning. Resident Leaders have been holding Brave Spaces—spaces for folks to engage in

conversation—to discuss topics centered on social inclusion. Several Steering Committee members are currently working on developing a DEI curriculum in partnership with Mount Wachusett Community College. The social inclusion working group also worked with IERE and external consultants to develop a resource guide for DEI organizational assessments, which informed the creation of a DEI survey and scoring grid, which will be administered to all partner organizations in Fall 2021. This process allowed participants to engage in critical dialogue to agree on the most important dimensions of organizational change work.

Recommendations

HEAL Winchendon must build on the incredible momentum the coalition has developed around social inclusion. Steering Committee members need to continue to build awareness that discrimination occurs and analyze their own internal biases. The intergenerational work that HEAL Winchendon is doing is critical to Winchendon's future. The upstream changes that the youth and resident leaders are making will lead to long-term change. HEAL Winchendon has had many small wins over the past year. HEAL Winchendon's proactive presence at community events, thoughtful responses to skeptics over social media, narrative work, and power changes within the Town's committees are the foundation to meeting the goal of becoming a more socially inclusive community.

As evaluators we recommend the following to continue to push this work of social inclusion forward:

1. Have Steering Committee members model deep reflection practices and dialogue for community residents to engage with one another across differences and find common ground to establish shared values;
2. Identify concrete ways that HEAL Winchendon's social inclusion work creates stronger network ties and/or provides benefits at the community level;
3. Develop and increase accessible and relevant communication tools to reach a wider audience;
4. Empower individuals with knowledge—destigmatize ignorance around social inclusion and create an understanding that everyone has a lifelong duty to unlearn the biases and prejudices that they hold;
5. Build Little Free Libraries^{xxx} across town and stock them with books for children and adults written by diverse authors;
6. Provide opportunities for community members to volunteer and welcome new residents in town;
7. Town of Winchendon and HEAL Winchendon partner organizations recruit new and diverse leadership on committees;
8. Host formal and informal events such as community potlucks, community cleanups, and other social events that welcome everyone in Winchendon; and
9. Tackle bullying directly, dealing with the fact that there are people in positions of power in Winchendon who do little to address the negative consequences of bullying and/or are perpetrators themselves.

Collective Impact: Structuring Partnerships and Aligning Values

Key Baseline Findings:

- The vision of HEAL Winchendon partners is strongly aligned and the initiative is well structured to ensure implementation and adaptation
- Trust is, and may continue to be, one of the most essential challenges facing HEAL Winchendon, but deeper work around social inclusion and cohesive communication can address that

HEAL Winchendon Strategies → Year 1 Achievements:

- Four intentionally diverse working groups and experienced program manager → multiple perspectives informing the work, consistent small wins
- Resident Leaders, Youth Changemakers, and internal dialogues about shared values → Connectedness with community, adaptive approach, and exploration/alignment of values
- Clear internal communications → Enhanced clarity and transparency

Collective Impact Baseline 2020-2021

Many of the HEAL Winchendon partners had been working together for years before receiving the MassUP Investment Program award. However, as described above, the group intentionally prioritized expanding to include residents, youth, and others who may not have previously held decision-making roles in Winchendon. Guiding a large group of people is not always easy, and it becomes even harder if partners actively seek to disrupt harmful patterns and traditional power dynamics. HEAL Winchendon has made collective impact one of its four goals, believing that a strong coalition amplifies the work and impacts on the community. Despite the challenges of COVID-19, the Steering Committee faithfully met virtually every month, collaborated on outreach and work efforts, and organized dedicated working groups. Collective impact is an internal area of focus and therefore evaluated for the coalition only. Findings stem from interviews and baseline data from the MassUP Partnership Survey, a data collection tool conducted by the HPC in collaboration with DPH that was first released in April 2021.⁴ In the case of HEAL Winchendon, the Partnership Survey was distributed to Steering Committee members for completion.

Representation

The working groups of the Steering Committee are not yet fully representative of Winchendon. One Winchendon resident and Steering Committee member noted that the time commitment needed to fully engage with HEAL Winchendon is a barrier for several residents due to family commitments and work schedules. Another would like to see more people who are politically involved in Winchendon join the Steering Committee to further advocacy efforts on local issues. A third shared that the Steering Committee primarily comprises women and that additional male involvement on the Steering

4. Supporting a MassUP program-wide evaluation, the Partnership Survey will be administered every six months for the duration of the program, allowing for multiple points of data collection.

Committee would make it more representative of the town. One way that HEAL Winchendon is working to increase representation is through quarterly community partnership meetings with Winchendon residents and institutions. These meetings are well-attended and often offer a greater representation of Winchendon's population.

Vision and Mission

Partner organizations feel comfortable describing the mission of HEAL Winchendon, have a clear understanding of the vision and mission of the coalition, and agree that HEAL Winchendon's vision and mission aligns with theirs. HEAL Winchendon partner organizations agree that the coalition builds power for positive change in Winchendon and that the partnership helps them feel more connected to the Winchendon community.

Reflecting on the vision and mission of HEAL Winchendon, partners said:

“HEAL Winchendon embraces a broad vision of bringing together all members of the community of all ages and identities to celebrate our diversity, improve prosperity and quality of life for residents of all levels, and lay the foundation for Winchendon's future.”

“HEAL Winchendon is ultimately striving to bring our community together and empower the community to be connected, strong, and prosperous (financially and emotionally).”

“HEAL Winchendon seeks to build a thriving and engaged community through participation in an equitable food system, financial empowerment, and social inclusion. By cultivating diverse community leaders and respecting the dignity of all resident life experiences, all members of the Winchendon community will co-create a community that celebrates our assets and shared values.”

Overall, partner organizations are clear about what HEAL Winchendon is doing to accomplish social change. The language the coalition uses could be simplified or reinforced in different ways so that everyone is able to feel that they have ownership of the work. Nevertheless, responses indicate an understanding of shared values and core goals, which is excellent for such an early-stage initiative.

Trust

Despite aligning around a shared vision for the future of Winchendon, baseline trust levels within the community and Steering Committee vary. As one member of the Steering Committee said, *“[There] needs to be a trust-gauging process first; it's [Winchendon]—a tight-knit, non-trusting community.”*

In interviews, Steering Committee members offered numerous insights on how trust in the town of Winchendon impacts HEAL Winchendon, shapes community interactions, and builds community. When a group of high school students spoke before the Winchendon School Committee last year, one student said, *“We need our community to believe in us.”*

Reflecting on this, a member of the Steering Committee member shared,

“The reality is we need a community that believes in itself. We don’t have that right now—a community with a sense of belief, optimism, ambition [that] there’s infrastructure around to make that happen. HEAL on its own doesn’t have the bandwidth.”

Trust in complex partnerships like HEAL Winchendon requires a long-term commitment to create space for relationship-building, engagement, and continuous assessment of strategies to capitalize on the coalition’s strengths and address challenges. A Steering Committee member highlighted the need for an iterative process to achieve long-term impact and social change, a critical part of collective impact:

“We should learn not to be overly committed to the plan that’s written out because you’ve got to stop and assess and figure out how to integrate well what we learn from the Heart & Soul interviews about the route that we’re on. We need to do it in ways that are more and more inclusive so that people are developing the skills. It comes down to ‘Winchendon Working Together’ and having a mindset of experimentation and not execution.”

Overall, Steering Committee members reported a good amount of trust between HEAL Winchendon partner organizations, but a lot of work remains if HEAL Winchendon is to fully engage all partners in the decision-making process and ensure that every organization is on the same page as the partnership works toward systems change. Since HEAL Winchendon comprises numerous moving parts and stakeholders, it is often difficult to determine if everyone is on the same page.

Within the Steering Committee, trust levels are fairly high, although data show variation in levels of participation and commitment, which is natural but can foster distrust. Partner organizations on average agreed that the contributions of all partners are valued equally, partners keep the promises they make to the partnership, HEAL Winchendon partners are supportive of each other, partners’ roles are clearly understood, partners fulfil these roles, the partnership is highly productive, and partner organizations behave in ways that benefit the partnership. Partner organizations did not think that other partners withheld information of relevance to the partnership or brought their own agendas to the partnership. On average, partner organizations did not see partners’ time and energy as wasted due to mistrust. However, the range of answers to that question varied widely, as seen below:

“This is somewhat uneven among partners. This is an intense project requiring a high level of commitment. Some were more prepared for this than others, and the most productive members are those whose own organizations’ missions closely align with the HEAL mission.”

“We, at HEAL Winchendon, are a very cohesive group that manages to effectively collaborate on nearly everything!”

Communications

Continuous communication ensures that HEAL Winchendon is building trust and strong relationships among participants, which will ripple out to create a baseline of trust in Winchendon as a town. Partner organizations agree that members communicate honestly with one another, feel like their opinions are valued as much as any member of HEAL Winchendon, and feel that they have enough opportunities to voice their opinions during meetings and feel comfortable doing so. As one partner put it, *“I think that as a group we excel in terms of communication!”*

On average, partners felt as informed as they should be about the activities in which they are directly involved. Several Steering Committee members shared that communication among partner organizations that offer similar services can, at times, be a challenge. They believe that increased communication between partner organizations whose missions overlap would help Winchendon residents access critical resources and improve coordination and trust throughout HEAL Winchendon.

Opinions varied about the level of information available about partner activities that folks were less involved in:

“There are a lot of moving pieces in this Partnership and its work. Much is still evolving, taking shape. I see lots of efforts in emails, Google docs, etc. to reach out to people—but it is hard to track and stay on top of everything . . . and therefore to know how or when to participate.”

“There is a LOT of communication. I don’t always keep up on all of it, but I know where to look or who to contact for anything I need to know.”

What Is HEAL Winchendon Doing?

HEAL Winchendon has effectively moved from a loose collaboration of organizational partners towards a more structured, inclusive collective impact model. To manage the complex goal of challenging inequities in wealth and power to improve health and quality of life in Winchendon, HEAL Winchendon is structured for maximum engagement while simultaneously acknowledging that not everyone will engage in the coalition’s work in the same way.

Collective Impact is “the process of bringing people together in a structured way to achieve social change.”

- Collective Impact Forum

The coalition has a Steering Committee, a program manager with robust community connections and nonprofit organizational experience, four working groups (Social Inclusion, Economic Empowerment, Healthy Eating, and Communications), and two resident-led groups (Youth Changemakers and Resident Leaders). Each of these groups comprises multiple content experts drawing on lived and professional experiences who live in Winchendon and/or represent partner organizations. For example, the Healthy

Eating group benefits from the expertise and connections of Growing Places, a local farmer, and the leader of a local institution, besides multiple resident voices. HEAL Winchendon has strengthened community connections and leveraged community members' knowledge through the Resident Leaders program, which brings together Winchendon residents to address local challenges. The



Above: Youth Changemakers and advisors

Photo by HEAL Winchendon.

Steering Committee also benefits from the involvement of the Youth Changemakers, a group of mostly high school-aged youth who work to advance HEAL Winchendon's core mission. Several of the working groups are cross-sector and count staff and volunteers of various North Central Massachusetts non-profits and Winchendon's public institutions as members. Each working group fosters intergenerational connections by involving at least one Youth Changemaker. The composition of working groups helps HEAL Winchendon efficiently leverage their collective knowledge and obtain continuous feedback from community members about which strategies are successful and which warrant adaptation.



Above: Beals Library signboard listing HEAL Winchendon's Little Justice Leaders event

Photo by HEAL Winchendon.

HEAL Winchendon has done a tremendous job in building strong internal and external communication. In June 2021, HEAL Winchendon launched an internal newsletter to keep Steering Committee members apprised of working group activities and track action items and updates for the coalition. The communications working group has successfully marketed HEAL Winchendon events such as Taste of Winchendon and programs like Little Justice Leaders and a family play group, drawing participation from previously unreached residents. HEAL Winchendon's website showcases the coalition's work, featuring an overview of healthy food access, economic empowerment, and social inclusion efforts as well as ways to get involved with HEAL Winchendon and the community.^{xxxi} Through this website, community members can easily access meeting invitations to community conversations on social inclusion, economic empowerment, and healthy eating/food

access. HEAL Winchendon also offers community office hours for residents to drop by with questions or concerns.

Prior to HEAL Winchendon, numerous organizations that served Winchendon were siloed, with little opportunity for cross-sector collective impact. HEAL Winchendon has changed this by bringing together

a coalition of local and regional cross-sector partners to address challenges in a deliberate, organized, and intersectional way. As evidenced by the extensive involvement of the Youth Changemakers and community members in critical activities such as the successful application for the Community Heart & Soul Seed Grant, HEAL Winchendon is effectively experimenting with power sharing and involving key stakeholders every step of the way.

Recommendations

Overall, HEAL Winchendon is off to a great start, and the initial stages of the coalition's collective impact work have been positive and successful. Effective and clear communication is critical as HEAL Winchendon moves forward, ensuring that HEAL Winchendon members stay aware of what is happening within each working group, and all have ample opportunities to weigh in and shape the direction of the work. HEAL Winchendon is well-positioned to build community trust, as long as members acknowledge that this takes time. If folks from Winchendon express fatigue or frustration with the community, they should not be dismissed or viewed negatively. In contrast, these moments of honesty, if handled well, can generate key insights for HEAL Winchendon and engage residents with critical perspectives. Acknowledging and learning from critical residents is an essential aspect of collective impact work and will help to bridge existing divides. Increasing diversity in the Steering Committee over time will ensure continued community engagement and open opportunities for traditionally marginalized folks to assume central positions of power.

As evaluators, we recommend that HEAL Winchendon focus on the following as the coalition works toward greater collective impact:

1. Streamline HEAL Winchendon internal communications for increased accessibility and ability to match volunteers with critical areas of need;
2. Anticipate the deeper challenges associated with systems change and continue to seek out consultants, resources, and tools to assist with this next level of trust-building work;
3. Continue to cultivate an adaptive, experimentation mindset within the Steering Committee and in each working group;
4. Use Steering Committee meetings to reflect and co-generate ideas;
5. Narrow down and simplify goals in the three outcome areas (equitable food ecosystem, economic empowerment, and social inclusion) and identify a core set of shared metrics or measures of success that apply to each of these areas;
6. Use shared metrics to facilitate a conversation on how well HEAL Winchendon's working groups, communications strategy, and organizational structure are serving the coalition's overarching goal; and
7. Build internal capacity to track the progress of working groups, communications, and organizational structure to supplement and inform the broader IERE evaluation, conduct strategic planning, and engage regularly with local partners around lessons learned.

Making Connections: Small Wins, Big Impacts

Although HEAL Winchendon’s collective impact work is structured with working groups and outcome areas, members of the Steering Committee are not afraid to take on activities that may not have been included in early plans. Most activities and achievements actually fulfill more than one goal, which is a strong indication of success for an early-stage partnership. The core values and goals of the initiative are clear enough and there is enough trust and communication among members of the Steering Committee for people to feel comfortable assuming leadership roles. This is especially promising from an intergenerational perspective—as youth leaders become more involved in HEAL Winchendon, they develop a stronger stake in and begin to shape the future of their community. As adults watch the youth become empowered change agents, they see positive changes in Winchendon’s future. Three particular change moments stand out as *“small wins”* with big impacts on advancing HEAL Winchendon’s vision (see accompanying Vignettes).

Vignette 1: Pride Month Restores Faith

“I would love to see a Pride flag hanging from Town Hall, from our schools—tiny signs for people to see walking down the street that ‘it’s okay to be like that here.’”

In June 2021, the Youth Changemakers decided to approach the Town of Winchendon and ask for the Town to officially recognize Pride Month—something they considered an *“issue that should have been addressed a long time ago.”* They and other members of the Steering Committee were aware of the town’s longstanding power dynamics and some loud conservative voices that would not support this public display of LGBTQIA+ rights and solidarity. But backed by research and supportive adults, the youth took a risk—and it paid off. Perhaps they could see that the well-worn story of entrenched power dynamics had been a mechanism to uphold the status quo rather than an actual barrier to change. Perhaps they wanted to push boundaries. Perhaps it was just time.

HEAL Winchendon members were shocked and incredibly impressed when the Board of Selectmen unanimously passed the proclamation. Many adults did not think that Winchendon would ever officially recognize Pride Month. But if the town could change in this way, what else might be possible?

“If you were to tell me five years ago that the town would recognize Pride Month, I would have said, ‘No way.’ To see that happen, I just got goosebumps talking about it. That’s phenomenal and restores my faith. The town has always wanted to be more than what it portrays itself and it is slowly starting to happen. I would like to think HEAL is part of that.”

Pride Month in Winchendon will now be recognized going forward, significantly changing what it means for Winchendon to be a welcoming and inclusive community. Although this example does not directly impact the food system and economic empowerment goals, it represents important upstream work. Perhaps in the future, LGBTQIA+ residents will be more likely to actively participate in the local food

system, economy, Town matters, and community. Perhaps this municipal decision will be replicated in other ways to publicly acknowledge different members of the Winchendon community who have historically been silenced. Shifts in power can set the stage for new policies and narratives that grow health and wealth.

Vignette 2: A Stake in the Ground—Taste of Winchendon

“I think that people just started believing in the town.”

Taste of Winchendon, held in June 2021, was a weeklong celebration of diversity in Winchendon through food, music, dancing, and community connections. Events were well-attended and widely praised as a beautiful representation of HEAL Winchendon’s mission and core values. Taste of Winchendon culminated in a cross-cultural celebration on the Beals Memorial Library lawn on June 12. The Youth Changemakers successfully applied for a CHNA 9 grant, which enabled HEAL Winchendon to invest several thousand dollars in this event, paying participating local restaurants to prepare and serve different foods and purchasing supplies. Winchendon residents also contributed food dishes that honored their cultural roots, inviting other residents into conversation as they sampled the different options. Residents jumped into a salsa lesson, local artists performed live music, and several organizations provided their support in ways ranging from sponsoring raffle baskets to providing tables and banners.

Taste of Winchendon offered a diverse set of residents the opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to and ownership of the town. The six Youth Changemakers who organized the event ranged in age from 15 to 21. One Steering Committee member called the event *“transformative.”* Taste of Winchendon’s success is also an indicator of Winchendon residents’ willingness to try new things and suggests that a more diverse leadership is in the town’s near future. As several Steering Committee members shared,

“I hope to have a more diverse group of people participate in how the community runs. People who have something to say should come forward and say it and have a stake in improving their town. I’m here or there, I could be gone tomorrow; I’m hoping that the community takes ownership moving forward.”

“I was amazed at the people that came together and appreciated each other’s heritage and culture and different dances and different music and different foods. It really opened a lot of doors. I saw a lot of change that I never would have seen 20 years ago.”

Taste of Winchendon showcased what HEAL Winchendon is trying to accomplish in the town. As one member of the Steering Committee put it, “High visibility and tangible/concrete projects manifesting the goals of HEAL Winchendon must happen all along the way to tie the more abstract pieces together for residents. This is starting to happen as it’s been a little more difficult with pandemic restrictions.” Taste of Winchendon connected the three focus areas—equitable food ecosystem, economic empowerment, and social inclusion—in an integrated way. The event brought residents into contact with restaurants and cuisines that they had not tried before, invested in the local economy, and united the community in

a beautiful celebration of welcoming and inclusion. A Steering Committee member reflected that *“our Taste of Winchendon event was what we need to be doing to build community. It was heartwarming to see so much progress.”*

Vignette 3: Intergenerational Power

“We’re looked at as co-workers, not kids.”

The intergenerational nature of HEAL Winchendon creates incredible opportunities for change and growth. This summer, HEAL Winchendon launched its Little Justice Leaders initiative, a weekly club for children and families that features learning activities focused on social justice themes. The Youth Changemakers play a major role in leading this club. Reflecting on their involvement with HEAL, one Youth Changemaker shared,

“Miranda does a great job of making sure we’re included. An example was the Heart & Soul grant. A lot of the adults were working on it, but Miranda had us invited and working on it. She explained it to us and we understood it more. We haven’t had a lot of the experience that the adults have, but Miranda goes out of her way to make sure we feel invited and included and informed. She doesn’t automatically assume the youth don’t want to be a part of something.”

The Community Heart & Soul Seed Grant is a great example of how resident and youth leaders came together to share their hopes and vision for Winchendon. The Youth Changemakers presented on the grant opportunity to the Board of Selectmen, following which the Town released a proclamation in support of the grant application. With guidance from Ayn Yeagle of Growing Places, the Youth Changemakers and Resident Leaders successfully applied for the grant, which will engage all of Winchendon in collectively shaping the town’s future.

The youth appreciate working with the adults on the Steering Committee and learning from their wisdom and experiences. In turn, the adults treat the youth like *“colleagues”* and appreciate their energy and imagination. Together, the intergenerational Steering Committee has come up with bold and creative ideas for a better future. As one adult mused, *“Maybe the problem is too many adults making the decisions!”*

In a beautiful moment of realization, one youth reflected,

“A lot of the adults are really open to the idea of the youths’ future—‘This is what they’re creating and what they’re going to be living in.’ A lot of people want us to live in the future that we want to. There are more people in Winchendon than I thought that are passionate about making it more progressive or accessible. I didn’t think any of this was happening. I thought that we were just stuck in our little Winchendon. It’s opened my eyes to how many people care about this town. A lot of people just genuinely want to make it better.”

As HEAL Winchendon continues growing its collective impact, the intergenerational model will only strengthen the work. With the youth envisioning a different future for the town and the adults providing life experience and support, HEAL Winchendon is poised for big wins.

Conclusions and Next Steps

HEAL Winchendon is doing very well as a coalition and in making progress on its overarching goals. The coalition has shown that it is adaptive and responsive to changing needs and realities but also firm in its stance on social justice and vision for inclusion. HEAL Winchendon is doing well in connecting community health, wealth, and power through its work on an equitable food ecosystem, economic empowerment, and social inclusion. The Steering Committee continues to be open and receptive to feedback and learning, and major progress is evident in terms of establishing a functioning collective impact model for the partnership.

As HEAL Winchendon moves into its second year, we offer the following questions for reflection:

1. **Health:** How can HEAL Winchendon increase its focus on the upstream/structural factors driving downstream effects, always keeping in mind the SDOH impacting Winchendon? What other areas of health (e.g., mental health) can HEAL Winchendon begin to address and/or construct a shared narrative and understanding of those areas?
2. **Wealth:** How can HEAL Winchendon move towards upstream, systemic action, acknowledging and addressing the structural barriers that result in socioeconomic inequities? How can the partnership focus on individual, familial, community, and systemic empowerment? How can HEAL Winchendon bring in more financial institutions in town as partners in the work?
3. **Power:** Who currently takes up too much power and who needs to take more? How can HEAL Winchendon funnel residents into organizational leadership positions? What can the partnership do to foster increased intergenerational connections? How can HEAL Winchendon position racial and ethnic diversity as an asset? How can HEAL Winchendon increase awareness of the existence of white supremacist structures and voices in town and combat it accordingly?

HEAL Winchendon has had many “small wins” over the past year—continue with them! On a systems level, each of these change moments may appear small. However, they are in fact big wins as each has contributed to HEAL Winchendon’s goal of furthering social inclusion in Winchendon, restored people’s faith in the community, generated significant momentum, and cultivated a drive to propel the work forward. The coalition’s inclusive environment empowers members of all races, ethnicities, ages, gender identities, and socioeconomic backgrounds to play critical roles in making decisions for the town.

Recognizing that all three components of HEAL Winchendon’s work are deeply interconnected and that the coalition has an expansive focus, as evaluators, we recommend prioritizing social inclusion and focusing on further developing trust within the partnership. Based on our assessment, HEAL Winchendon’s social inclusion work has had the most upstream effects so far and appears to be the key driver for change in Winchendon. Building on this foundation will pave the way for greater collective impact in each of the other focus areas, multiplying the effectiveness of HEAL Winchendon’s work.

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