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THE MAGAZINE OF
THE HEINZ ENDOWMENTS

Issue 2 2022

THE DOORS OF OUR
SCHOOLS HAVE
OPENED. ARE OUR
STUDENTS SAFE?



ISSUE 2 2022

INSIDE

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2 WEARINESS AND HOPE

This issue of h magazine begins with a special section that contains stories describing the challenges faced by children, youth and families as COVID-19 remains a concern even as restrictions are relaxed, and violence in schools and communities dominates news reports. Such conditions can be draining, but organizations and agencies in Pittsburgh and beyond are still fighting for a brighter future.

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The Heinz Endowments was formed from the Howard Heinz Endowment, established in 1941, and the Vira I. Heinz Endowment, established in 1986. It is the product of a deep family commitment to community and the common good that began with H.J. Heinz, and that continues to this day.

The Endowments is based in Pittsburgh, where we use our region as a laboratory for the development of solutions to challenges that are national in scope. Although the majority of our giving is concentrated within southwestern Pennsylvania, we work wherever necessary, including statewide and nationally, to fulfill our mission.

That mission is to help our region become a just and equitable community in which all of its citizens thrive economically, ecologically, educationally, socially and culturally. We also seek to advance knowledge and practice in the field of philanthropy through strategies that focus on our priorities of Creativity, Learning and Sustainability.

In life, Howard Heinz and Vira I. Heinz set high expectations for their philanthropy. Today, the Endowments is committed to doing the same. Our charge is to be diligent, thoughtful and creative in continually working to set new standards of philanthropic excellence. Recognizing that none of our work would be possible without a sound financial base, we also are committed to preserving and enhancing the Endowments' assets through prudent investment management.

h magazine is a publication of The Heinz Endowments. At the Endowments, we are committed to promoting learning in philanthropy and in the specific fields represented by our grantmaking programs. As an expression of that commitment, this publication is intended to share information about significant lessons and insights we are deriving from our work.

Editorial team Becky Brindle, John Ellis, Donna Evans Sebastian, Carmen Lee, Scott Roller, Courtney Tolmer. Design: Landesberg Design

About the cover The illustration by Egle Plynikaite of a student facing different doors — some closed, some with indistinguishable individuals in the doorway — reflects the uncertainty many schoolchildren and their families are experiencing as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic lingers and other societal problems, such as school and community violence, also are prevalent.

Correction In the "Celebrating Art & Culture" story published in the print edition of Issue 1, 2022, the headline for the caption to a photograph of actors performing in a New Horizon Theater production of "The Green Book" incorrectly identified the organization as Pittsburgh Playwrights.



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WEARINESS

AND HOPE

For many school districts across the country, the 2022–23 school year began with news accounts reflecting both weariness and hope. Weariness as some remnants of the COVID-19 pandemic remained, even while schools relaxed mask mandates and resumed classes and school activities as normally as possible. Weariness as once again too many students returned to the classroom traumatized by violence in their communities or the residual effects of school violence earlier in the year. Weariness as some teachers left the profession burned out by past demands of the pandemic and present demands of school officials and community members seeking changes that many claim have upended previous approaches to educational inclusion.

But there also were stories of hope. Hope that often comes with each new school year when everyone — from students to teachers to administrators — can have a fresh start and focus more on the future rather than dwelling on the past. Hope that the page had turned on the pandemic even as debates lingered as to whether the health crisis was actually over. And hope that somehow, despite all the challenges, there would be children who would learn, grow and thrive, not just survive, through 2023 and beyond.

That weariness and hope is reflected in the Pittsburgh region where school officials and community leaders geared up to get the school year on track after two long years of living with restrictions and loss. In the pages that follow are examples of initiatives aimed at supporting students who are trying to readjust to their schools and neighborhoods as the pandemic wanes and violence persists. The full impact of these efforts remains to be seen, but the commitment of those involved provide that important ingredient — hope.

SAVING OUR CHILDREN

Increases in violent crimes in recent years, especially in metropolitan areas, have taken a toll on residents, particularly the youngest and most vulnerable. In the Pittsburgh region, school and city officials along with nonprofit organizations are trying new initiatives in communities and schools to help keep children safe. By Julia Fraser





A bullet-shattered window was a stark next-day reminder of a shooting in April that killed two teens and injured eight others during a party at an Airbnb on Pittsburgh's North Side.

As many as 200 people, many of them students from a swath of Pittsburgh-area school districts, flocked to an Airbnb rental in the city's North Side neighborhood the night before Easter this year. Attendees expected a lively house party, but by the end of night, shots had ripped through the house leaving two teens dead and eight others injured.

A Pittsburgh police officer looks for evidence near an Airbnb house on Pittsburgh's North Side where two teenagers were killed during a party.



AP Images / Gene J. Puskar

About a month later, in an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas, an 18-year-old took his AR-15–style rifle, entered the building through an unlocked side door and shot to death 19 children and two teachers.

Such shocking high-profile acts of violence attract the public's attention but don't adequately define the scope of the danger to America's young. Less visible threads of violence weave through local communities. Shootings on their streets, bullying on social media, fights in school hallways and group chats leading to after-school conflicts are among the threats they face.

"There's a lot of stress, drama, rumors spread around," said Javian Rodriguez, 16, an 11th-grader at Pittsburgh Creative and Performing Arts 6–12. "People can say some really nasty things.

"And then there's violence outside of school. I've been physically attacked outside of school at my bus stop. There's been kids who have gotten beat up by kids from other schools, and it's been so bad they've had to be hospitalized. It's all close by. Near my bus stop, there was a robbery and another fight where a gun was pulled out and someone was shot. Hearing that kind of stuff is shocking, but it's one of those things that we know about and experience."

In Pittsburgh and across the U.S., violence tends to be selective.

"Homicide victimization is concentrated demographically, geographically, socially," said Nick Cotter, an analyst at Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS). "What that looks like is we have 30,000 census blocks in Allegheny County. In any given year, violence occurs in just 0.3 percent of them. That's how concentrated that is."

Violence has roots in poverty, systemic racism, identity, joblessness and other factors. It's a problem that's challenging local communities and schools to come up with effective, sustainable solutions. The approaches to addressing violence take a range of angles including school-code-of-conduct reform and alternatives to suspension, coordinated local government efforts to sustainably fund evidence-based violence prevention programs, and even opening up a gym in the community for kids to play basketball after school in the winter.

"It's going to take a lot of money and commitment to undo more than a century of harm that's led to these concentrations of violence," Mr. Cotter said. "We're talking about sustained commitments for a decade or more. It needs to be prolonged and comprehensive."

The rising homicide rate in Allegheny County (where Pittsburgh is the county seat) amplifies the critical nature of the problem young people are facing.

Homicides held steady or declined from 2016 through 2019 in Allegheny County and the City of Pittsburgh. But rates jumped 27 percent in the county and by 43 percent in the city from 2019 to 2021, according to DHS data.

Each year on average, 66 percent of county homicide victims are Black men. Most are ages 18 to 34. About 12 percent of victims countywide are under the age of 18, according to a recent report by Allegheny County Department of Human Services.

Homicides are higher in certain communities, including the city's Homewood and Larimer neighborhoods and the county municipalities of Penn Hills and McKees Rocks, according to the DHS report. But numbers paint a misleading picture, Mr. Cotter said.

"Within these communities, 99.9 percent of the population is not involved in the violence," he explained. "They're deeply affected by the violence—they lose loved ones because of it—but they're not involved."

Last June, Pittsburgh officials announced a broad initiative aimed at reducing violence in the city under Mayor Ed Gainey's "Plan for Peace," including a program that pairs police officers with social workers to serve as first responders if the situation does not require an armed officer.

DHS announced a comprehensive violence prevention initiative in highly impacted communities, including working with communities to put together violence plans that tap evidence-based programs. One program, "Becoming a Man," hires full-time counselors to provide peer support, cognitive behavior therapy and organized counseling to at-risk young men during the school day.

Reductions in homicides, aggravated assaults with a weapon, nonfatal shootings and shots fired won't be the only measures of progress the county looks at, said DHS Director Erin Dalton.

"We'd love to see changes in perceptions of hope and opportunities," she said. "It matters that people care, even if it's not super easy to measure and hard to achieve."

Schools, too, are rethinking their approaches to stemming violence.

Security cameras, metal detectors, private security guards and police officers placed inside school buildings come standard in many local schools. But many districts in the past few years have added social workers and youth engagement specialists trained to de-escalate and not sanction altercations during the school day.

Pittsburgh Public Schools and other districts in the county used some of their share of money from the federal Elementary

and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER), which was part of the American Rescue Plan, to add more social workers, fund out-of-school programs, and provide training in restorative practices or ways of solving conflicts that try to repair the harm inflicted.

In the Penn Hills School District, located in a municipality east of Pittsburgh, three students died from gun violence within a month in 2021. It created an urgency around how to support students and create alternatives to violence. Crisis resources were deployed to help students deal with trauma. Long-term changes included hiring consultants to help develop policies for mediating conflicts in school and working with families after school.

The district also changed the model used when suspending students. Instead of a three-day out-of-school suspension, a student is assigned to three Saturdays of tailored programs.

“We’re going to give you specific programming that’s targeted to your needs, partner with community mentors and try to build you up, follow up with you after you complete your three Saturdays and see how you’re doing,” said Penn Hills Superintendent Nancy Hines.

In the Pittsburgh Public Schools, Rodney Necciai said conflict resolution strategies have “evolved tremendously” since 1998, when he became an assistant principal. Part of that approach is to identify risks early, such as when a kid skips class or is chronically absent, and try to work with the student to address the issue.

“It’s trying to figure out interventions and building systems that work,” said Dr. Necciai, now an assistant superintendent. “Restorative practice doesn’t mean no consequence. It means sometimes we’re going to have consequences that look a little different. Every fight isn’t going to be a three-day suspension.”

Violence in school tends to be rooted elsewhere.

“School violence oftentimes begins in the community, and schools become the place where violence makes its way,” said Stanley Thompson, senior program director for Education at The Heinz Endowments, which funds a number of efforts

that are emerging to provide a range of support to students while helping to prevent the violence that threatens the region’s children.

An example is 1Nation Mentoring, which offers programs that take place in school and focuses on building relationships with teens.

“We have an opportunity to tap into these kids when they’re in school and support them, so that when they leave school they’re connected to support. Some people don’t know who to ask for help,” said Kevin McNair, co-founder and executive director of 1Nation, which provides mentoring at the city’s Brashear High School and has received funding from the Endowments.

But while 1Nation works primarily with students who may not have interest in or access to after-school programs, Mr. McNair noted that many young people would benefit from activities and support outside of the classroom.

“A lot of the kids who get in trouble aren’t involved in programs once they leave school,” he said. But because outside of school, safe spaces can be elusive, “youth feel like they don’t have places where they can go to have fun, to be themselves.”

Center of Life, a nonprofit in Hazelwood, has over the years developed a wide menu of services and opportunities for kids and families around music, art and education that has helped it earn support from the Endowments and other funders.

“It’s not always the programs,” said founder and CEO Tim Smith. “It’s building the relationships with them. What they really need is attention and [for us to] show them that we really care about them, give them a sense of belonging, significance, security. What we’ve found is that once that happens, we can talk to them about continuing their education, changing what they’re doing. We can have influence.”

Even having a neighborhood gym, which Hazelwood once had but no longer does, can make a difference, he said. “You’d be surprised by how many lives I saved just from having a gym,” Mr. Smith said. “Just from being able to do indoor soccer or basketball during the winter.”

What the Center of Life does offer the community is a sophisticated space replete with a music studio and mentors willing to work with young men and women to express themselves through the arts. Such programs hit a high note with students.

“It just feels good to be around people that love and have the same passion as you,” said Elijah Hale, 15, a 10th-grader at Perry Traditional Academy, who attends The KRUNK Movement program, Center of Life’s year-round music youth production company for high school students. “I feel more comfortable being here than I’ve ever been.” **h**

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Kevin McNair, co-founder and executive director, 1Nation Mentoring



Sharnay Hearn Davis, standing and leaning center, and K. Chase Patterson, lower left corner, guide a group of boys ages 9 to 12 in a discussion about pain, healing and forgiveness during the 2017 1Nation Black Excellence Summit at the Jeron X. Grayson Community Center. 1Nation provides mentoring services and support activities to youth in a safe setting.

CREATING SAFE SPACES

Micha Pinnex, 16, a rapper and writer in the Center of Life's student-led, hip-hop music program KRUNK Movement, performs at the community nonprofit's Summer Music Festival & Annual Fund Drive. Micha says his philosophy is, "Change in the world starts with changing yourself."




 A full-page photograph of Neil English, superintendent of the Riverview School District, standing in the center of a school hallway. He is a middle-aged man with a beard and glasses, wearing a dark blue zip-up jacket over a white shirt and a yellow tie. He has his hands behind his back and is smiling at the camera. The hallway is filled with students in motion, their figures blurred to convey a sense of activity. The walls are painted in bright colors like blue and green, and the floor is a solid blue.
 “

We're two years down the line. We have vaccinations, boosters, treatments. The severity of the symptoms is less. So, the urgency is less.”

Neil English, superintendent,
Riverview School District

Neil English is superintendent of the Riverview School District, which serves the boroughs of Oakmont and Verona, northeast of Pittsburgh. Dr. English stands in the hallway of Riverview Junior-Senior High School during the changing of classes as some of the six-year school's more than 400 students pass by.

CLASSROOMS & COVID

School officials across the country, including in the Pittsburgh region, are trying to rebuild functioning educational systems after students have experienced both personal and learning losses during the pandemic. But they are finding that many challenges remain. By Julia Fraser

High school basketball players let loose their final shot before the buzzer in front of empty bleachers. Actors in the school musical reached for the high notes behind surgical masks. Graduating seniors accepted their diplomas sitting six feet apart on a football field.

The COVID-19 virus profoundly changed school activities in the United States after it reached the nation's shores in early 2020. More than two years later, school administrators, educators and parents still struggle to balance mitigating a lingering public health crisis with reinstating "normal" operations while providing a robust education.

Much has changed in that time. The virus, steps to prevent and treat it, public policies, and attitudes have evolved.

"When the pandemic started, there was so much urgency and a lot of stress and anxiety," said Neil English, superintendent of Riverview School District, northeast of Pittsburgh. "The decisions we were making felt really serious,

really urgent. There wasn't protection, there wasn't vaccination, there wasn't treatment. We didn't want school policy to negatively impact families, causing someone to die."

In the fall of 2021, for example, 3 out of 4 school districts in the United States required masks for students and staff attending school in person. But policies relaxing such restrictions were gaining momentum by the end of the school year, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

This fall, the masks came off. Riverview and most other school districts in the Pittsburgh region and across the U.S. instituted mask-optional policies.

"We're two years down the line," Dr. English said. "We have vaccinations, boosters, treatments. The severity of the symptoms is less. So, the urgency is less."

With or without a mask, the public health impact of the pandemic persists.

COVID-19 has claimed the lives of more than a million people across the country,

including more than 3,500 in Allegheny County. More than 200,000 children in the U.S. have lost one or both parents to COVID-19, according to estimates from COVID Collaborative, a nonpartisan public health project to address the pandemic. Omicron, the dominant strain this year, is more readily transmitted, yet the rate of death and severe illness has slowed due to vaccines, the nature of the strain and other factors.

Meanwhile, the pandemic has taken a toll on education. School closures, virtual instruction and other policies designed to stave off the spread of the virus kept children away from the classroom, diminishing academic outcomes and increasing absenteeism. Widespread learning loss has deepened inequity across race, ethnicity and family income levels, forcing educators to weigh health risks with educational outcomes, facing criticism and controversy at every turn.

New guidance issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in August is a shift in policy away from trying to control transmission rates. The agency, for example, scaled back its quarantine advice, recommending people test for the virus if symptomatic and isolate for five days if infected.

“This is a new phase of the pandemic, and the CDC is really focused on preventing severe outcomes and no longer focused on preventing the spread of the infection,” said Dr. Debra Bogen, director of the Allegheny County Health Department. “It is really about hospitalizations, deaths and long-term outcomes now.”

The Health Department has advised school districts in the county since the pandemic began. But Dr. Bogen said that while the Health Department helps school districts interpret CDC guidance, it does not issue additional recommendations.

Districts throughout Allegheny County recently adjusted their COVID-19 policies from what they had in place last school year. Most districts have gone mask-optional with district administrators paying close attention to the CDC’s reported levels of COVID-19 community spread in Allegheny County.

Pittsburgh Public Schools, for example, requires masking for students and staff when levels of community spread reach “high.” Masks are recommended during “medium” and they are optional at “low” levels of community spread. Athletes and performers are not required to wear a mask when competing or performing, regardless of the level of COVID-19 cases in the community.

Keeping students in schools for as long as possible drove decision-making in the district. Last year, if a school building had a COVID-19 positivity rate of 5 percent within a 14-day period, the school was closed. This year, a COVID-19 response team, which includes the district physician, monitors cases and provides recommendations on a case-by-case basis, hoping to avoid school closure.

Students who are exposed to a positive case will no longer be sent home, and positive students will isolate for five days, then wear masks in school through day 10.

“These are the things that will enable us to increase the number of students who can stay in school and continue learning,” said Michael McNamara, chief operating officer at Pittsburgh Public Schools.

Although districts are easing masking mandates, public health practice remains engrained.

“We don’t want to assume it’s over,” said Nancy Hines, superintendent at Penn Hills School District, located in one of Pittsburgh’s eastern suburbs. “We’re waiting and watching. This is good common sense that we’ve always tried to share during flu season. What we’ve done to prevent COVID is good practice, good hygiene.

“I don’t think we’re going to be totally relaxed — hand-washing, distancing, those are good practices. Some people in our organization will still exercise their right to wear a mask if they so choose.”

The endorsement of COVID-19 vaccines for all children older than 6 months by the CDC in June offered another layer of protection for students. The Health Department, local pharmacies, hospitals and health care providers have partnered with districts throughout the county to host clinics to encourage vaccination.

“Vaccination is a way to prevent serious [COVID-19-related] outcomes for children and adults, so that’s where I think schools should continue to focus,” Dr. Bogen said.

The vaccine has been a tough sell in Allegheny County, despite efforts of districts. By the end of August, when the school year in many places was beginning, about 66 percent of children aged 15 to 19, 55 percent of children aged 10 to 14 and 43 percent of children aged 5 to 9 had at least one dose of a vaccine to prevent COVID-19.

“I really hit it hard on vaccinations from the standpoint of education,” Riverview Superintendent Neil English said. “If you’re vaccinated, you’re out of school less. Even with that — pushing the educational line — people get so mad that I bring up vaccination at all.

“There’s a population of people who say: ‘Don’t tell me what to do.’ It is highly politicized and people get very upset. I’ve gotten a ton of pushback in terms of anything related to COVID.”

The pandemic hindered learning throughout the country. Closed schools and virtual instruction led to weeks of learning loss that touched most districts across the U.S. But districts with high poverty rates were hit the hardest. Students in such districts lost the equivalent of 22 weeks of instruction in the 2020–21 school year, according to a study by the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University.

DO THE MATH



Despite virtual instruction and other distance-learning efforts during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, learning loss touched most school districts across the country. Here are some of the numbers:

22 WEEKS

Students in districts with high poverty rates lost the equivalent of 22 weeks of instruction in the 2020–21 school year, according to a study by the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University.

2 DECADES

When results from the March 2020 National Assessment for Educational Progress were compared to those for the March 2022 exams, national reading and math scores for elementary school students were found to have plunged to levels last seen two decades ago.

10 PERCENT

Part of the learning loss students experienced during the pandemic can be attributed to the rise of chronic absenteeism, which involves missing at least 10 percent of the school year.

National test scores in reading and math for elementary school students plummeted to levels last seen two decades ago, based on results of the National Assessment for Educational Progress comparing March 2020 to March 2022. Math scores declined for the first time ever, and reading scores produced the largest falloff in 30 years.

Part of that learning loss can be attributed to the rise of chronic absenteeism — missing at least 10 percent of the school year. Chronic absenteeism increases a student's risk of dropping out of high school, experiencing adverse health outcomes and becoming involved in the criminal justice system. The percentage of chronically absent students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools jumped from 22.7 percent during the 2020–21 school year to 33.7 percent for the 2021–22 school year.

“Keeping the kids in school is our number one priority,” Mr. McNamara said. “It’s a delicate balance between making sure we’re not spreading the virus but also making sure we’re keeping the kids in front of teachers on a daily basis. We need to limit the disruption to learning.”

Help arrived from the federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) funding as part of the American Rescue Plan. School districts in Allegheny County received \$420 million, and many have made significant investments in physical infrastructure to improve air quality and ventilation and other building improvements. Pittsburgh Public Schools spent millions updating HVAC systems and adding air purifiers in buildings throughout the district.

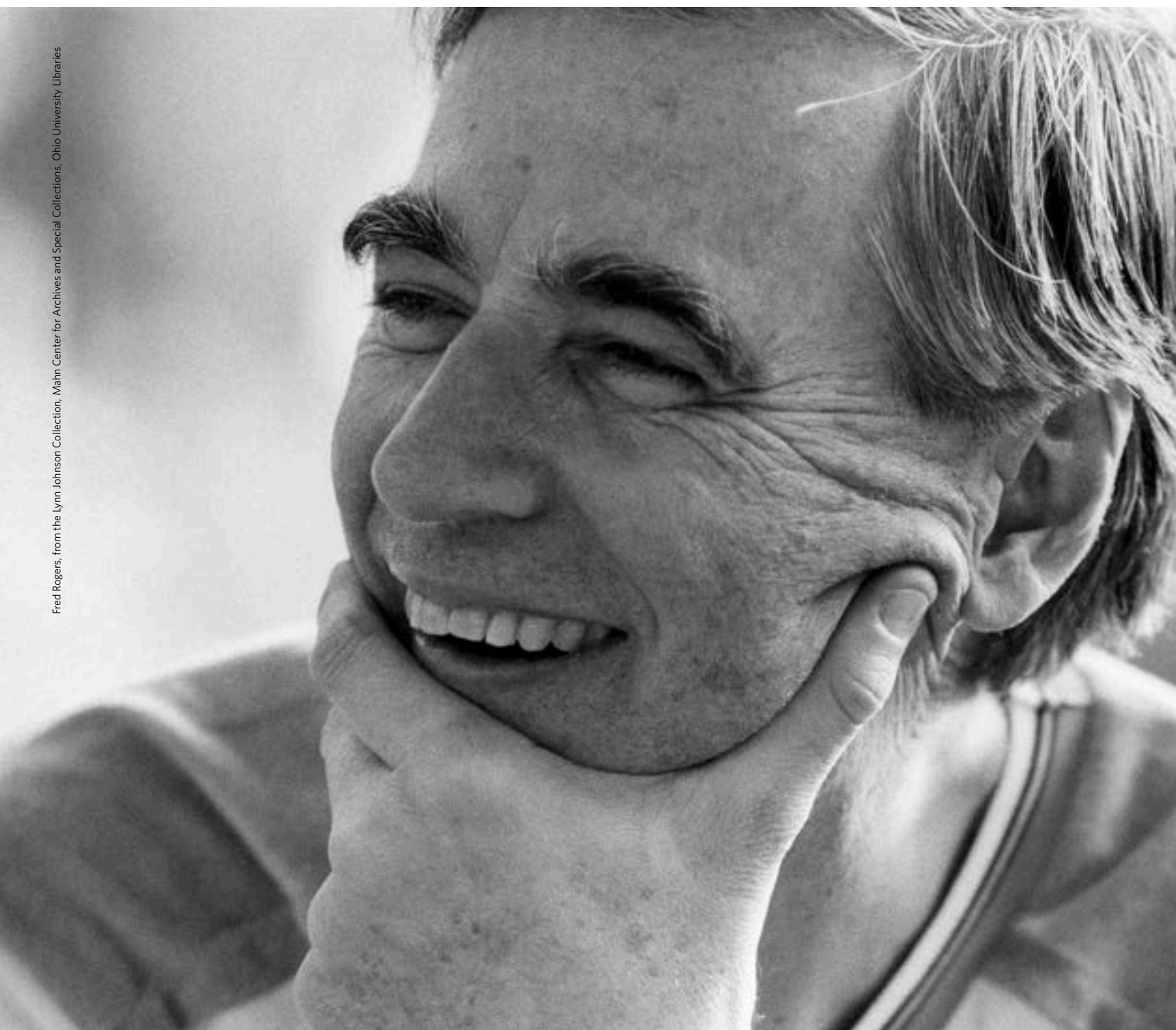
Many districts spent some of the ESSER funds on bolstering the mental health supports offered to students, such as hiring additional school counselors. The Northgate School District, northwest of Pittsburgh, invested \$800,000 over four years in The Chill Project, a comprehensive behavioral support program run by Allegheny Health Network that aims to address trauma experienced by children.

But ESSER backing isn’t a sustainable financing stream to support ongoing mental health programs and maintain infrastructure. The pandemic may have exposed the fragile link between public health and educational outcomes, but strengthening that bond will require more than greater awareness.

“We’ve started thinking of health more holistically,” said James Fogarty, executive director of A+ Schools, an education nonprofit focused on Pittsburgh Public Schools. “How can schools help support health? Whether it’s through better food or better ventilation, it can lead to better learning outcomes.

“It’s an important thing that I think people are more conscious of now. But part of the issue is that we closed schools and went remote when we were opening bars. We didn’t prioritize getting kids back in school. There’s some consciousness, but we’re not there.” **h**

Fred Rogers, from the Lynn Johnson Collection, Mahn Center for Archives and Special Collections, Ohio University Libraries



Fred Rogers, 1983



NEIGHBORLY ADVICE IN TROUBLED TIMES

True to the legacy of children's television icon Fred Rogers, the organizations that bear his name found “the helpers”—fictional and actual — to encourage children as they experienced the COVID-19 pandemic and other life challenges in today's society.
By Cristina Rouvalis

Like most creatures in his neighborhood, Daniel Tiger didn't venture out much at the start of the pandemic. The filming of the PBS show "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood," a beloved spinoff of the iconic "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," shut down during the spring of 2020.

Then, in August 2020, a special episode aired of "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" called "Won't You Sing Along with Me?" The show didn't directly mention the pandemic or COVID-19, but it showed Daniel waving at his pals, including one wearing a mask, through a computer screen. Later in the episode, Daniel was crushed when his mother told him that the neighborhood carnival he loved would be canceled that year.

Instead of downplaying Daniel's sadness and disappointment, his mother told him she too was frustrated by how the world had changed.

The special, which still appears on the PBS app, was praised by viewers.

Ashley-Anne Bohnert, a mother of two young children in Jefferson Hills, a suburb south of Pittsburgh, said she first saw the pandemic episode in the spring of 2021 "when everyone else was moving on with their lives except the parents of kids too young to be vaccinated or even masked. As parents, we felt isolated and forgotten."

"I wept like a child during that first viewing because the simple fact that someone was acknowledging the pandemic wasn't over for everyone made me feel seen."

Ms. Bohnert said her family plays the pandemic episode most weekends. Her son, Edward, 2, dressed up as Daniel Tiger last Halloween.

"My son loves Daniel Tiger, but I would say as adults, we probably love it more," she asserted. "It's lighthearted and it makes it easier for us to tackle some big issues without going down the rabbit hole of book upon book on parenting advice."

The Heinz Endowments has helped young children, their families, educators and others deal with these and other major life stresses through a range of grantmaking, including gifts to two major nonprofits that carry on the legacy of Pittsburgh's favorite neighbor, the late children's television icon Fred Rogers. The Endowments gave \$3 million over the last five years to the two organizations bearing his name: The Fred Rogers Institute, a nonprofit that helps families and other adults to support the healthy development of children, and Fred Rogers Productions, which creates shows, games and apps that inspire enthusiasm for learning.

"This investment is so essential. It has to be ongoing," said Michelle Figlar, the Endowments' former vice president for Learning who recently became executive director of the Pittsburgh-based Birmingham Foundation, which focuses on early childhood education and development. "I have colleagues from other foundations around the country and they say, 'Wow you are right in the heart of Mister Rogers country.'"

"Sometimes I think here in Pittsburgh we take for granted these two great assets: the institute and the production company. We take for granted that Mister Rogers will always be in our neighborhood. It's an asset we should be proud of and that we have to continue to invest in. It's not only impacting our kids here locally, but it's also reaching kids around the country and even kids in other countries."

Heinz Endowments leaders are not the only big fans supporting Fred Rogers programming such as Daniel Tiger.

"A little over a decade ago, the Hillman Foundation was presented the opportunity to support new original children's programming by The Fred Rogers Company [renamed Fred Rogers Productions in 2018]," said Lisa Johns, vice president of finance for the Hillman Family Foundations. "We were drawn to the heart of 'Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood' and its ambition to help young children prepare for lifelong learning by developing social and emotional skills and, perhaps most importantly, kindness. I think I speak for many Pittsburghers in expressing joy that this program with strong Pittsburgh roots and values has been a formative part of so many children's lives."

Fred Rogers Productions also encouraged kids through the pandemic by introducing two new shows that focused on perseverance and resilience: "Donkey Hodie" and "Alma's Way."

Although not directly addressing the pandemic, the programs tackled underlying issues that also could be helpful for some children for whom the changing rules and disruptions during the pandemic felt like whiplash.

“You’ve been inside and told not to go near people. Now you’re back in school in the classroom together,” Ms. Figlar noted. “Those are big adjustments.”

“Donkey Hodie,” a puppet series featuring the granddaughter of the original donkey character from “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood,” debuted in May 2021. In one episode, called “Donkey’s Bad Day,” Donkey starts the morning by spilling a new box of Crunch Doodles cereal. Later, while reading, she drops the book on her toe. Purple Panda tries to cheer her up, and Donkey finds ways to cheer herself up.

“It seemed like the right show at the right time,” said Paul Siefken, president and CEO of Fred Rogers Productions. “Donkey Hodie and her friends focus on topics about resilience and perseverance and problem-solving. Children were getting those messages about how Donkey was finding ways to calm herself down and learn from mistakes. She is willing to change her plans and realizes friends are there to help.”

A few months later, in the fall of 2021, the company unveiled “Alma’s Way,” an animated series about a Latina girl who lives in the Bronx. The show and its

bilingual main character were created by actor Sonia Manzano, who played Maria on “Sesame Street.” Broadcast in both Spanish and English versions, “Alma’s Way” has been renewed for a second season.

In one particularly poignant episode, Alma and her three friends decide to sing a song for an open mic night. One friend, Lucas, who has a great voice, gets stage fright when he hears about the big crowd in the audience. Alma searches for a solution to help him. At first, she blindfolds him, but he stumbles over the other singers in practice. She perseveres until she helps him overcome his fear and the group performs.

“Public broadcasting was a real lifeline for families during the pandemic,” Mr. Siefken said. “Their children were potentially seeing a lot more screen time than they might normally have. And so, we were giving them a lot of shows for the sake of choice.”



In 2020, the Fred Rogers Productions cartoon special “Won’t You Sing Along with Me?” Daniel Tiger’s mother talks to her disappointed son about why the neighborhood carnival had closed, though without explicitly mentioning the COVID-19 pandemic.

“MY SON LOVES DANIEL TIGER, BUT I WOULD SAY AS ADULTS, WE PROBABLY LOVE IT MORE. IT’S LIGHTEARTED AND IT MAKES IT EASIER FOR US TO TACKLE SOME BIG ISSUES WITHOUT GOING DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE OF BOOK UPON BOOK ON PARENTING ADVICE.”

Ashley-Anne Bohnert, a parent from Jefferson Hills, a suburb south of Pittsburgh

Fred Rogers' emphasis on the social-emotional well-being of young children is enduring, which is why the organizations that bear his name should receive consistent support, Ms. Figlar said.

"How do we help children, parents, family, caregivers and teachers understand those emotions, especially during this time of COVID? How do we help children not just cope with COVID but also gain skills to actually feel better? I think that we need this kind of investment now more than ever," she said.

Not only can shows help children to regulate their emotions, but they can also help them deal with frustrations without engaging in violence, Ms. Figlar explained. Many children were able to stay connected with friends and family only via screen during the pandemic, though that probably wasn't enough.

"Online relationships are not like in-person relationships," she acknowledged. "I think it has led kids to struggle with how to get along."

Mr. Siefken said while "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" doesn't address violence explicitly, it does give children strategies to deal with scary things they don't understand. In the episode called "Daniel's Fish Dies," there is a strategy song with the lyrics "Ask questions about what happened. It might help." In the episode called "The Neighborhood Snowstorm," the words in another song are intended to reassure children that "grown-ups are here to take care of you."

For parents, the program's message is to "focus on listening to your children and remind them that the grown-ups in their lives are there to keep them safe," Mr. Siefken said. "It's understandable and OK to be scared, but remind them there are grown-ups and they are there to help them. That's the most appropriate sort of contextual message we can give to young children in the midst of some really terrible things that happen in the news."

Fred Rogers Productions also is taking variations of its TV shows on the road.

During the pandemic, Fred Rogers Productions worked with the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh to develop a live Donkey Hodie interactive pop-up. The organization held the pilot event in the parking lot of Washington City Mission, in Washington, Pennsylvania, south of Pittsburgh. Mothers and their children participated in activities such as walking on little stilts — dubbed "hoof dancing" — and going through a donkey-themed obstacle course.

LeeAnne Kreuger, a kindergarten teacher at Pittsburgh Beechwood PreK-5, used fun props to interact with students virtually during the pandemic and encouraged them to connect with each other when they were learning online from home.



Joshua Franzos

TEACHING, LEARNING AND PLAYING IN A PANDEMIC

As a kindergarten teacher during the pandemic, LeeAnne Kreuger had good success in getting her young students to attend class online. She worked hard to keep their attention over the barking dogs, sibling chatter and other distractions in the background.

She knew her students from Pittsburgh Beechwood PreK-5 were learning, but they were also sad because they missed their friends. The children were lonely, but she wasn't sure how to help.

Fortunately, Ms. Kreuger could talk to other teachers from around the world on monthly Zoom calls through the Educators' Neighborhood, a program created by The Fred Rogers Institute. Pre-pandemic, Ms. Kreuger met in person with 12 teachers from Western Pennsylvania, but when the pandemic hit, the group moved to Zoom and drastically increased in size. The diverse group of teachers shared strategies, vented frustrations, offered encouragement and worked through unprecedented issues of the strange new world of pandemic schooling.

Another teacher gave Ms. Kreuger a great idea for letting kids "play together"—setting up an online breakout room where two kids could spend their time eating lunch together. The teacher could monitor the interactions on her screen and let them spend one-to-one time with a friend.

"I didn't have to be there the whole time," she said. "I could pop in and check on them. It was really, really cute."

Ms. Kreuger also shared her own ideas for motivating parents to get involved. Every Friday morning, she would play an episode of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood"—easily downloaded from the Institute.

Parents would often watch with their kids, increasing investment in their schooling.

Whenever an issue would come up with a child's social-emotional development, she also would take advantage of the Fred Rogers archives. "The archivist could pull articles or speeches Fred had written or spoken. It was very helpful."

In addition to the 11 women who lived at the mission with their children, former residents were also invited to the community fun day. Guadalupe Ospina said her 3-year-old son was so happy to get outside and interact with different children.

“Last year was really hard for him because he is very active,” Ms. Ospina said. “He really enjoyed playing with other kids.”

Mr. Siefken hopes to take the interactive Donkey Hodie show to the backyards of other community groups.

Dana Winters, executive director of the Fred Rogers Institute, said the nonprofit’s Educators’ Neighborhood initiative brought together 300 educators around the world on Zoom to discuss strategies based on the teachings of the late children’s TV icon.

During the pandemic, “we very quickly shifted our support back to the basics,” she said. “We started to meet every other week or monthly with our educators, being a support to them when they were managing something they weren’t necessarily trained to do in the first place.”

THE STRATEGY IS HELPING KIDS CONTROL THEIR EMOTIONS. INSTEAD OF ACTING OUT OR HURTING SOMEONE ELSE, THEY DEVELOP COPING MECHANISMS. HOW DO TEACHERS HELP IDENTIFY KIDS THAT MIGHT BE A CHALLENGE?”

Michelle Figlar, former vice president of Learning at The Heinz Endowments and recently named executive director of the Birmingham Foundation

In addition to the Educators’ Neighborhood, the Institute also started a 2022 Educators’ Symposium webinar series, providing information and support to teachers, child care workers and other “helpers.” The 300 to 400 registrants who tuned into the monthly webinar would see curated clips from “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood.” Panelists then shared what they learned from the clips and how they applied it to learning.

“They joined just to be reminded of what is so deep and simple about supporting children because everything felt very complex in those two years,” Dr. Winters said.

For families, the Institute provided tips on forging good relationships with their children’s care providers. Parents also had access to free information on family engagement through videos, online resources and webinars. The Institute partnered with the Pennsylvania Family Engagement Birth through College, Career, Community Ready Framework and the Pennsylvania Early Intervention Technical Assistance.

“Now more than ever, young children and families need a lot of support, and the programming produced by Fred Rogers Productions is meeting a lot of needs of young children today,” said Bill Isler, retired president and CEO of The Fred Rogers Company. Founded by Fred Rogers, the company produced the original “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood.” Under Mr. Isler’s leadership, it expanded the Fred Rogers programming portfolio by creating shows like “Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood” and later became Fred Rogers Productions.

“Likewise, the work of the Fred Rogers Institute is helping teachers of young children better understand children’s

needs and how they can meet the needs,” Mr. Isler said. “One of the reasons that both organizations are doing such great things for children and families is that they have tremendous leaders. Paul Siefken has done a marvelous job of expanding the programs produced by Fred Rogers Productions. Dana Winters has taken the Fred Rogers Institute to a new level with her work with the educational system at all levels, especially early childhood.”

Often, people ask Dr. Winters, “What would Fred do now?”

“Fred never lived in a global pandemic. But we learned what he told families and helpers during times of uncertainty and chal-

lenge. He would remind parents that you don’t have to be perfect in order to be effective,” she said.

“There’s a lot of grief and lost opportunities to be together. One of the things we put out for families immediately was, ‘How do you talk to your children about this?’ It’s okay to say, ‘I don’t know what’s going to happen next. But we’re together, and we’ll do our best to get through this together.’” **h**

top- tier service

For eight years, PAServes has been building its reputation for effectively helping veterans find the practical assistance they need after returning to civilian life. Now, the well-regarded program is getting federal funding to expand its work — and help save lives.

By Mark Kramer

Michelle Shumate, research professor at Northwestern University and director of the Network for Nonprofit and Social Impact at the Evanston, Illinois-based school, studies government and nonprofit networks for a living. In recent years, she's examined PAServes, a Pittsburgh-based veterans assistance program that The Heinz Endowments and other foundations support.



Michelle Shumate

She found the care-coordination program to be “really smart,” “resilient,” “flexible” and “willing to go the extra mile.”

When PAServes is brought up to folks at the [U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs],” she said, “their eyes get really big because they haven’t seen a program that shows measurable outcomes in terms of their effectiveness and efficiency in the way that PAServes does.”

Since its inception in 2014, PAServes has worked as a hub, in a hub-and-spoke program model that connects veterans to services as they navigate a complex matrix of community and government programs that provide veterans with everything from housing assistance to transportation to mental health care. PAServes has assisted nearly 9,000 veterans, so far, according to PAServes team leader Aaron Melius.

Dr. Shumate found that during COVID-19 shutdowns, PAServes increased the number of veterans served while most programs, struggling with diminished staff and resources in uncertain circumstances, served fewer clients. PAServes reached out to veterans directly through weekly phone calls and targeted emails. It also advised service providers on how to pivot their programs to meet immediate needs.

“It’s really just this flexibility and willingness to go the extra mile that made a big difference,” Dr. Shumate said. “They think very carefully about building trust and relationships across organizations.”

The success of PAServes is revealing the importance of quality care coordination as veterans attempt to find programs that are supposed to provide important assistance but too often seem difficult to access. It’s also making evident just how crucial it is that government programs consider veterans’ holistic needs and then carefully measure how well their programs are — or are not — meeting those needs.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs recently gave PAServes a vote of confidence in the form of a \$750,000 grant through the Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program. This renewable grant supports community-based organizations that provide veterans with baseline mental health screenings, education and clinical care, among other services.

Ben Stahl, chief executive officer of the nonprofit Veterans Leadership Program, which houses PAServes, said this organizational “paradigm shift” toward federal funding will enable PAServes to add staff and further expand its footprint, while also strengthening its ability to coordinate suicide prevention programs.

PROVIDING NEEDED, HELPFUL — AND EFFICIENT — SERVICE

PAServes began under the leadership of The Heinz Endowments and Pittsburgh Mercy, a community health and wellness provider. In 2020, the Veterans Leadership Program, which had already been running programs directly related to veterans’ needs, took over and now has three full-time staff coordinating care through PAServes. The Department of Veterans Affairs is by far the program’s biggest partner, Mr. Melius said.

“I don’t know how bold and how large you can write the word ‘huge,’ but [PAServes] is a huge time saver,” said Army veteran Sean Tyler, a social worker with Veterans Affairs. With a caseload of about 30 veterans who have experienced or are at risk of homelessness, Mr. Tyler refers clients to PAServes at least five times each week who are in search of everything from housing vouchers to furniture to skills training, he said.

PAServes, through its network of providers and online tracking system, quickly locates resources that would require him to invest an entire day or two of work, he said. Meanwhile, he’s just one social worker among many at the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System who collaborate with PAServes while supporting approximately 500 veterans, Mr. Tyler said.

“PAServes is really kind of like a catchall for just about anything that we need,” he added.

Endowments Senior Program Officer for Veterans Megan Andros said that when PAServes began its work, few federal staff members were discussing the kind of coordinated care offered by PAServes, which is one of 18 coordinated care locations under the umbrella of the AmericaServes program administered by the D’Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University in upstate New York.

But Ms. Andros sees deep collaboration with the VA, the nation’s largest integrated health care system, and the Fox Suicide Prevention grant program as affirmation that “the VA needs to partner with communities and nonprofit organizations in its efforts to address the social determinants of health.”

“I believe PAServes is paving the way to a future where health and human services are delivered in a coordinated, accountable way,” she added, “making it possible to dramatically improve outcomes beyond what health and human services, when operating without connections to other agencies or organizations, can deliver.”

CRACKING THE CODE

In recent years, the National Institutes of Health and other research and public health bodies have come to recognize that certain conditions affecting people’s living environments, such as the quality of their education, economic stability, and the neighborhood or house they live in, can significantly influence their health outcomes — in some cases even more than the availability of health care.

Research has shown, in fact, that negative social circumstances are more predictive of suicidal ideation among veterans than depression or anxiety, Dr. Shumate said. Through the Fox Suicide Prevention Grant, the Veterans Leadership Program will focus on suicide prevention services for veterans living across Pennsylvania, while addressing those holistic needs.



MEETING THE needs:

PAServes has a solid record of providing significant assistance to veterans that is backed up by statistics reflecting its effectiveness and efficiency.

9,000 veterans

Since 2014, PAServes has assisted nearly 9,000 veterans through its hub-and-spoke program model that connects veterans to needed services.

PAServes data shows that the program has matched veterans to providers within an average of 4.23 days after referrals.

4.23 days

19 percent

During the last couple of years, requests for help with money management and financial support have topped the veterans' lists at 19 percent due to a spike in interest in one-time emergency assistance.

Veterans have reported that they must navigate an incredibly complicated web of social supports in order to meet these needs. Often government programs may not prove adequate, and spending doesn't always lead to significant impact. For example, the Washington Post reported in August that it found that a \$386 million VA education program had helped only 397 veterans secure jobs.

PAServes closely tracks the success of its own coordinated services. In fact, Gilly Cantor, director of evaluation and capacity-building at the D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families, said PAServes seems to have "cracked the code" in serving veterans, in part by tracking needs and measuring outcomes so well.

For example, Mr. Melius knows that since the program's inception, 17 percent of veterans' requests for support have focused on navigating government benefits, 14 percent have been for clothing and household goods, and 10 percent have been for employment and education support. Due to a spike in requests for one-time emergency assistance during the last couple of years, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, help with money management and financial support has topped the list at 19 percent.

This data informs how PAServes staff members direct their time and resources. Meanwhile, their data tracking shows that PAServes has matched veterans to providers within an average of 4.23 days after referrals.

Still, PAServes staff members know that at the end of the day, their outcome measurements and technology aren't enough to deliver care. They've met success by cultivating relationships with veterans and with a variety of other governmental programs and nonprofits in order to facilitate connections.

"[PAServes is] not relying too much on technology to do the work that really needs to be done by a human being," Dr. Shumate said.

Mr. Melius emphasized that agencies and their case managers know what value PAServes adds to their efforts.

"They know that they're going to get a veteran who's been vetted, who meets their qualifications and eligibility, and everything is in pristine order for their books, so that all they have to do is say, 'Yes, we want to support them.'"

PAServes is located at 2934 Smallman Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15201. For more information, go to <https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/programs/communityservices/americanaserves/locations/paserves/> or call 1-844-857-8387.



— TRACKING THE Transition

Because data is lacking on how well government programs help veterans after they leave the military, The Heinz Endowments is investing \$2 million in research to analyze the impact.

By Mark Kramer

Each year, about 200,000 U.S. military members leave the service, according to the U.S. Government Accountability Office. For many, the unique challenges of transitioning to civilian life can lead to real problems, from being unable to translate military experience into later professional success and adequate income to suffering from emotional or mental health problems as veterans and their families seek out new community, housing and other resources.

Particularly acute difficulties can lead to real tragedy: Veterans account for nearly one in every seven adult suicides in America, with an average of 17 veterans dying by suicide every day in 2019, according to a 2021 U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs report on veteran suicide prevention.

The U.S. Department of Defense's primary means of preparing service members for civilian life is its Transition Assistance Program (TAP), which provides training on how to transition, including instruction on

accessing Veterans Affairs benefits and other resources. Various federal agencies jointly operate TAP. A 2018 Congressional report with the most readily available cost totals found that the Department of Defense was spending \$100 million on the program, the VA approximately \$60 million, and the Department of Labor \$14 million.

In fact, a July 2020 Government Accountability Office report found that 45 federal programs exist across 11 separate agencies to provide workforce assistance to service members returning the country, and in some instances their family members also, at a cost of more than \$14.3 billion annually.

But is the military adequately preparing service members to transition into the next phase of life? Answering that question is difficult, if not impossible, due to a lack of research, several experts in the field said.

"There's not one system that all veterans are going to show up in after they separate the same way their whole existence is pretty well tracked by the Department of Defense during service," said Gilly Cantor, director of evaluation and capacity-building at the D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University in upstate New York.

Some federal agencies do track outcomes for programs serving veterans, Ms. Cantor said, though inconsistently from one program to the next or not at all.

Neither is the TAP program itself evaluated robustly, according to Jeffrey Wenger, a senior policy researcher at the RAND Corp. In fact, the Government Accountability Office has released multiple reports in recent years recommending greater reporting and monitoring of TAP.

"The fact that [the government] rolled out a big program like this without doing much in the way of evaluation work prior to it kind of boggles the mind," Dr. Wenger said.

In light of this dearth of data, The Heinz Endowments has supported research at the Institute that examines federal programs serving veterans. A recent \$2 million grant to RAND supports a study by the RAND Epstein Family Veterans Policy Research Institute. The analysis, for which Dr. Wenger is the lead researcher, will enable RAND to examine federal policies and programs serving veterans, especially in their transition experiences. The study also will



EVALUATION OR HAVING DEMONSTRATED EFFECTIVENESS IS A WAY OF HOLDING THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABLE FOR THE ULTIMATE GOALS OF IMPROVING VETERAN WELL-BEING."



Elan Mitzrahi

Carrie Farmer, codirector of the RAND Epstein Family Veterans Policy Research Institute

bring together researchers to identify policy priorities and develop a targeted research agenda and strategies that can support those priorities.

“Accountability through research” is how Carrie Farmer, codirector of RAND’s Epstein Institute and a senior policy researcher at RAND, described this work. “Evaluation or having demonstrated effectiveness is a way of holding the federal government accountable for the ultimate goals of improving veteran well-being and being good stewards of our tax dollars.”

Dr. Farmer viewed the gathering of both qualitative research and numerical data as critical for starting “this conversation about how we can better ensure a good return on federal investment in transition programs to ensure optimal outcomes for veterans.”

This research also could lead to the creation of an ongoing advisory panel of veterans that would guide policy decision-makers, Dr. Wenger said. RAND aims to share findings and targeted recommendations with leaders in federal government agencies, Congress, veteran service organizations, and the public by summer 2023, Dr. Farmer explained.

As a nonprofit, RAND does not lobby for specific policies, but the organization can make recommendations, and its researchers are frequently called upon to testify before Congress.

Rajeev Ramchand, a senior behavioral scientist at RAND and codirector of RAND’s Epstein Institute, emphasized the importance of not only having good data but also being able to differentiate data according to varied experiences, given the diversity of backgrounds among veterans.

“I hope what this research does is really show how we can support all veterans, that it takes into consideration the heterogeneity of the veteran population,” he said.

He noted that robust data sets can be refined and analyzed in order to help programs effectively deliver services for veterans. For example, RAND has found that service members that separate with an “other than honorable” discharge are at greater risk of suicide, especially within the first five years of leaving the service, than those who are honorably discharged. With this knowledge,



THERE IS BETTER DATA WITHIN THE WALLS OF GOVERNMENT. WE JUST CAN’T SEEM TO JAILBREAK IT.”



Sam Diephuis, GoodHuman Photography

Dan Goldenberg, executive director,
Call of Duty Endowment

Dr. Ramchand said, suicide prevention programs can better target their efforts.

The Call of Duty Endowment has helped more than 100,000 veterans transition into “high-quality careers” since 2009 and has carefully tracked their outcomes, according to the Santa Monica, Calif.-based nonprofit. In 2021, Call of Duty-supported programs spent an average \$547 for each job placement, compared to \$3,083 spent by the federal government.

Executive Director Dan Goldenberg noted that research has revealed that success in job security can have a multiplier effect by easing burdens in other areas of life, such as health care, in turn lessening costs incurred by other programs or government offices.

An August Washington Post report found that one \$386 million Department of Veteran Affairs education program had helped only 397 veterans secure jobs. Mr. Goldenberg suggested that all veterans could be tracked through a single “dashboard.”

“There is better data within the walls of government,” he explained, “We just can’t seem to jailbreak it.”

The Social Security Administration, for example, could determine how much income every veteran is earning by correlating company payrolls with Social Security numbers. Mr. Goldenberg believes this information could be more reliable than voluntarily provided survey data collected by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

“We need to move from unreliable opinion-based information to actual behavioral data that currently resides in government but hasn’t been published,” Mr. Goldenberg added.

Ms. Cantor said her program is piloting a model that uses the government data that is already available, even if it comes in different forms from different departments or agencies. The information is collected, combined and placed in broad topical categories in order to at least draw general conclusions about what the data reveals.

“While there’s interoperability challenges on the front end,” she said, “there are ways in the reporting side, on the back end, that you can kind of make up for it.”

Dr. Ramchand posed possible questions he would consider in order to collect the data he wants to have on how family needs affect veterans’ choices as they transition and what those choices mean for accessing services, which can vary by region.

“Are they really taking those things into consideration when they decide where they want to move? What does the job market look like in this community? What are the tax breaks [for educational benefits]? Are they being taught that at the TAP class? ... Supporting the families of veterans who are transitioning can really influence the outcomes we of the RAND Epstein Family Veterans Policy Research Institute see for the veterans themselves.” **h**

OPENING DOORS

AFTER THREE YEARS, THE HEINZ ENDOWMENTS' RESTORATION PROJECT, WHICH WAS STARTED TO SUPPORT CRIMINAL JUSTICE IMPROVEMENTS AND REFORMS IN THE PITTSBURGH REGION, HAS SEEN SOME PROGRESS, INCLUDING NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR THOSE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCES WITH THE JUSTICE SYSTEM. BUT THE NEED FOR THE WORK CONTINUES.
BY DEBORAH M. TODD

Anyone who drives through the Fort Pitt Tunnel, sees the gleaming Pittsburgh skyline and then veers east on the roadway along the Monongahela River could easily mistake the Allegheny County Jail for just about any other office or even residential building. It's jarring to associate its clean lines and riverfront views with the absence of freedom.

Exterior appearances aside, there's no mistaking the jail's purpose. It was opened in May 1995 with the express intent of housing individuals pre-trial and serving as a support to the

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections and its web of related institutions.

But throughout Allegheny County, covert pipelines to the criminal justice system lie in schools, neighborhoods with disproportionately high police presence, communities that lack key resources and the inner workings of the judicial system. These spaces all play roles that can nudge an individual's circumstances that much closer to incarceration.

To address the effects of a flawed criminal justice system on local residents and communities, The Heinz Endowments established The Restoration Project in 2019 after receiving approval from the foundation's board of directors the previous year. The three-year initiative invested \$13.8 million in direct grants to 40 organizations with goals to improve, support and hold accountable the region's criminal justice system.

This spring, the Endowments board agreed to invest another \$2 million to continue the foundation's support of reform efforts, including some that were slowed because of the COVID-19 pandemic and others that were more targeted to advocacy and policy work. Still, by the close of the original funding cycle, grant recipients' accomplishments included landmark legal victories, district-wide transformations of student culture, reconsideration of city policies and the exoneration of the wrongfully convicted. Some examples of these achievements follow, and while the initiative's first project timeline has ended, the work, for most grant recipients, is just starting to pick up pace.



It might not be the closure I want, but it's definitely some type of closure. I won't have this hanging over my head."

Greg Brown, client, Pennsylvania Innocence Project



Greg Brown

THE PENNSYLVANIA INNOCENCE PROJECT

By the time COVID-19 shuttered courthouses across the country in 2020, the Pennsylvania Innocence Project was already behind in its work due to the more than 7,000 requests it had received since its launch in 2009. Those seeking assistance included individuals in prisons across the state trying to prove they were unjustly incarcerated, in addition to requests to help those who had been recently exonerated adjust to their new lives outside of prison.

Without an electronic filing system and digitized case files, getting information to volunteers to initiate its four-step review process had become a nearly "insurmountable challenge," Director of Development Sara Nolan said.

Today, thanks in part to \$301,207 in funding from the Endowments, the Pennsylvania Innocence Project has digitized its case files, implemented a shared electronic filing system, improved staff capacity and is slowly addressing its backlog of potential clients. It also cleared the cases of clients like Greg Brown, 45, whom the organization had been working with since 2009.

Mr. Brown was accused of setting a home on fire, resulting in the death of three firefighters, but witnesses later said they were paid to make false statements against him. By 2016, the Innocence Project had gotten Brown's case exonerated in Pennsylvania courts, but, partially due to pandemic shutdowns of federal courts, an ultimate resolution didn't come until this June.

Mr. Brown accepted an Alford plea in June, which allows his conviction to stand but also lets him maintain his innocence and get on with his life without the further threat of incarceration.

"It might not be the closure I want, but it's definitely some type of closure," he told a television station after taking the plea agreement. "I won't have this hanging over my head."

LANDFORCE

After having been incarcerated on and off since 2013, Eric Givens, 32, wasn't sure what to expect when he took a job as a laborer with Landforce, an environmental restoration and workforce development organization that supports individuals who are reentering society.

But once he saw the fruits of his labor after building his first trail, he gained a sense of purpose that he felt could lead him to his first career.

"We would go into these neighborhoods and make a trail, and the next thing you know people are walking around on them and enjoying it," he said.

Ilyssa Manspeizer, Landforce's executive director, said Mr. Givens' experience exemplifies what the organization strives to do for all of its clients. It is dedicated to habitat restoration and trail reconstruction throughout the city, including in typically underserved areas where some of the workers might have come of age and also could benefit from witnessing the impact of their efforts.

"We hire people who have been excluded from the economy, returning citizens, people trapped in cycles of generational poverty, those who grew up 'in the wrong ZIP code' and may be struggling from mental health or substance abuse issues," she said.

Ms. Manspeizer said funding from the Endowments, which totaled \$450,000, helped Landforce hire for positions that allow it to increase communications and connect with potential government organizations. The support also will help the organization to expand its efforts to another social enterprise business that provides employment.

For Mr. Givens, the experience has spawned an opportunity for a job as a laborer for Pittsburgh's Department of Parks and Recreation. It's a position he never saw himself in prior to incarceration, but one where he can see a future that allows him to support himself legally and pay it forward to his community.

"I really like working in the inner city because it gives back, and inner-city kids don't get to see stuff like that. They've never seen an all-Black crew, and they're working on parks and making trails.

"They're like, 'You look just like me and this is what you're doing and what you're creating,'" he said.

Landforce workers built a new trail in 2019 that connects Hartwood Acres, a 629-acre park that is 12 miles north of Pittsburgh, to the Rachel Carson Trail, a 45.7-mile hiking trail that runs north and east of the city.

“

We hire people who have been excluded from the economy, returning citizens, people trapped in cycles of generational poverty, those who grew up ‘in the wrong ZIP code’ and may be struggling from mental health or substance abuse issues.”

Ilyssa Manspeizer
executive director,
Landforce

JUST DISCIPLINE PROJECT



Dickson Preparatory STEAM Academy, which serves several of Pittsburgh's eastern suburbs, was the site of a Just Discipline Project pilot program that yielded impressive results.

In 2015, when James Huguley of the Just Discipline Project completed an assessment of Allegheny County's "school-to-prison pipeline"—the connection between school discipline practices and young people cycling in and out of the criminal justice system into adulthood—the stark findings rattled the region's educators, parents and stakeholders.

"In Allegheny County, Black students [were] suspended at seven times the rate of non-Black students," Dr. Huguley said. "In urban districts, we have excessively high suspension rates compared to the state average. The average is 11 students per 100. We found districts that were over 60 suspensions per 100 students. There was one district one year [where] the Black students had more than 100 suspensions per 100 students."

The report led to connections between the Endowments and a pilot program with the Woodland Hills School District for the Just Discipline Project, an intervention program designed to place specially trained "restorative practice coordinators" in schools to improve relations between students and teachers and revitalize the overall culture. Coordinators recruit teams of 30 to 40 student leaders who are trained in conflict mediation so classrooms and hallways are soon filled with young leaders working toward the same mission.

Changes at Woodland Hills Intermediate School, now known as Dickson Preparatory STEAM Academy, were swift and significant. Over a three-year period, there was a 28 percent reduction in suspensions and a 30 percent decline in referrals, Dr. Huguley said. Students gained an extra 1,000 hours in classrooms due to those reductions, which led to increased achievement at the school. And the Endowments has been committed to the project since the beginning, awarding several grants that total nearly \$1.2 million, so far.

This fall, Dr. Huguley said the program is expected to serve more than 7,000 students in 12 schools and is conducting training in schools across the state to implement it in the future.

"It's been a seven-year journey, and we're going from writing and talking about it to serving a major portion of the youth in our region," he said.

OVER A THREE-YEAR PERIOD, THERE WAS A 28 PERCENT REDUCTION IN SUSPENSIONS AND A 30 PERCENT DECLINE IN REFERRALS.

**28
PERCENT**

Recovery is a bumpy process and to know you can always turn to someone for help and support with your journey is very helpful."

Julie Evans, counseling coordinator, MAYA

MAYA ORGANIZATION

The MAYA Organization is a nonprofit based in Swissvale, Pennsylvania, east of Pittsburgh, that employs teams of perinatal counselors and doulas. When the organization was about to begin individual mental health counseling services in the Allegheny County Jail, it seemed natural to start with pregnant women. However, by the time MAYA connected with the Endowments in 2016, its mission had expanded to include "any woman who has been incarcerated at any time," said MAYA's ACJ Counseling Coordinator Julie Evans. Through the Restoration Project, the organization has received \$210,000 for its work with incarcerated women.

To address "disconnection" among services for women transitioning through the criminal justice system, MAYA began offering group and individual counseling at the jail and expanded the services to women transitioning out of jail and those who were back in communities, readjusting to their new lives.

"We were trying to build relationships so people could come back and do their healing—as oftentimes people have to do it—in stages," said Ms. Evans.

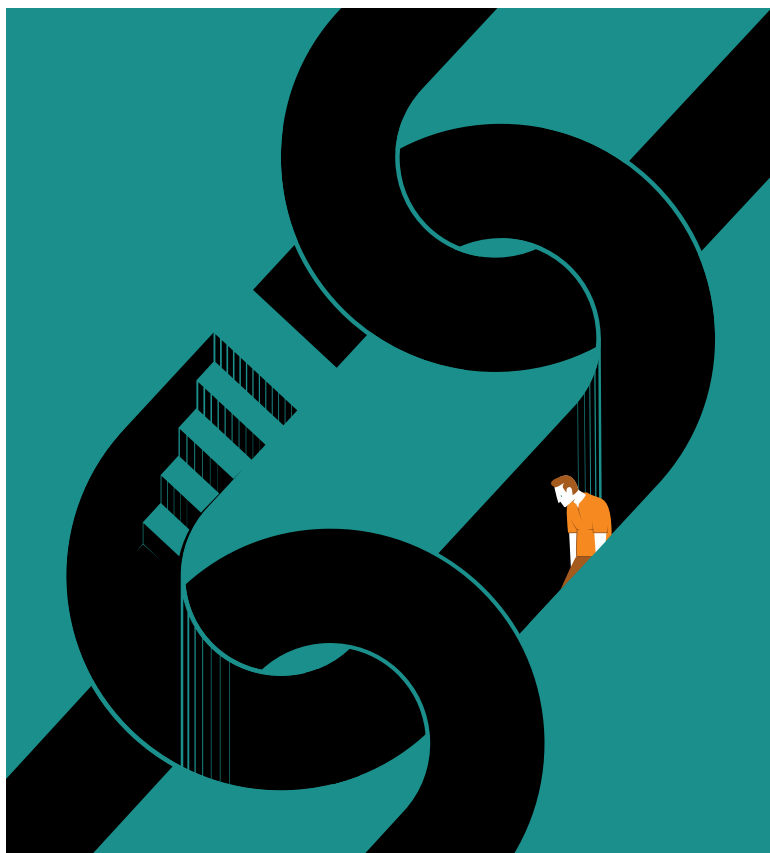
Considering that as many as 94 percent of women who are incarcerated have experienced sexual or physical abuse prior to incarceration, consistent counseling can help them to address and heal from those traumas so they don't impact their futures, she explained.

"Recovery is a bumpy process and to know you can always turn to someone for help and support with your journey is very helpful," she said.

While pandemic delays briefly disrupted the programming, MAYA still provided weekly online mental health groups and self-directed programs during the lockdown that women not only utilized but also followed through with upon their release. Unfortunately, staffing shortages caused the jail to temporarily suspend the online programs.

In the meantime, MAYA has doubled down on its efforts to support returning citizens and to meet them where they're likely to find them.

"Our focus is on the reentry side of things, the discharge and release side of things, and building relationships with the clinics that people are likely to go to for support, trying to have a presence there," Ms. Evans said. "Where [do] people, when they go back to communities, tend to go for support and how can we help augment that?"



ABOLITIONIST LAW CENTER

By 2020, the Abolitionist Law Center was more than familiar with the inner workings of the Allegheny County Jail. It had resolved a lawsuit against the facility in 2017 for housing pregnant detainees in solitary confinement, reaching an agreement that prohibits the jail from housing pregnant women in solitary cells except for specific circumstances that require clearances from administrators and medical professionals.

The Pittsburgh center has received Restoration Project grants totaling \$575,000 with funding in 2020 used to support a joint class-action lawsuit against the Allegheny County Jail with several other organizations demanding the jail utilize space from a 20 percent population reduction to enforce social distancing.

The center also supported the class action lawsuit *Howard v. Williams*, which challenged common uses of force, such as restraint chairs, in the institution. A series of community listening forums highlighting former inmates who had been disciplined using these practices sparked a referendum allowing voters to decide whether or not to end the policies. The referendum passed in May 2021 with 70 percent of voters approving it.

"In 2019, ACJ had 339 people in the restraint chair. There were zero people in that chair this year," said Lead Staff Attorney Jaclyn Kurin. "There will be zero people in that chair next year, and they no longer have the restraint chairs at the jail. This is an example of how that litigation ended up influencing legislation."

PITTSBURGH TASK FORCE ON PUBLIC ALGORITHMS

During a time when digital data is enabling corporations and institutions—including law enforcement agencies—to conduct real-time assessments of individuals and communities, it has become crucial to a growing number of citizens across the country to ensure that data is being used without bias and in ways that do not cause unintentional harm.

Recognizing the nature of the issue in 2020, the University of Pittsburgh Institute for Cyber Law, Policy, and Security (Pitt Cyber), with the support of \$172,162 in Endowments funding, launched the Pittsburgh Task Force on Public Algorithms. Among the group's members were city and county government officials, public advocates, academic experts and criminal justice scholars. The task force was designed to provide recommendations and serve as a resource for oversight in an area not many people realized impacted their neighborhoods.

"There were certainly community activists and more engaged people who did know, but mostly it seems the public didn't have a huge awareness," said Pitt Cyber Executive Director Beth Schwanke.

The task force assessed the processes used to put algorithms in place in systems used by Allegheny County Department of Human Services and by the Pittsburgh Police Department in a pilot project. The goal was to ensure that transparency, potential biases in data and other key issues were addressed prior to implementation. When task force members noticed they couldn't find much publicly available information about the algorithm used by police, they wrote a letter to then-Mayor Bill Peduto, who confirmed the algorithm was being suspended.

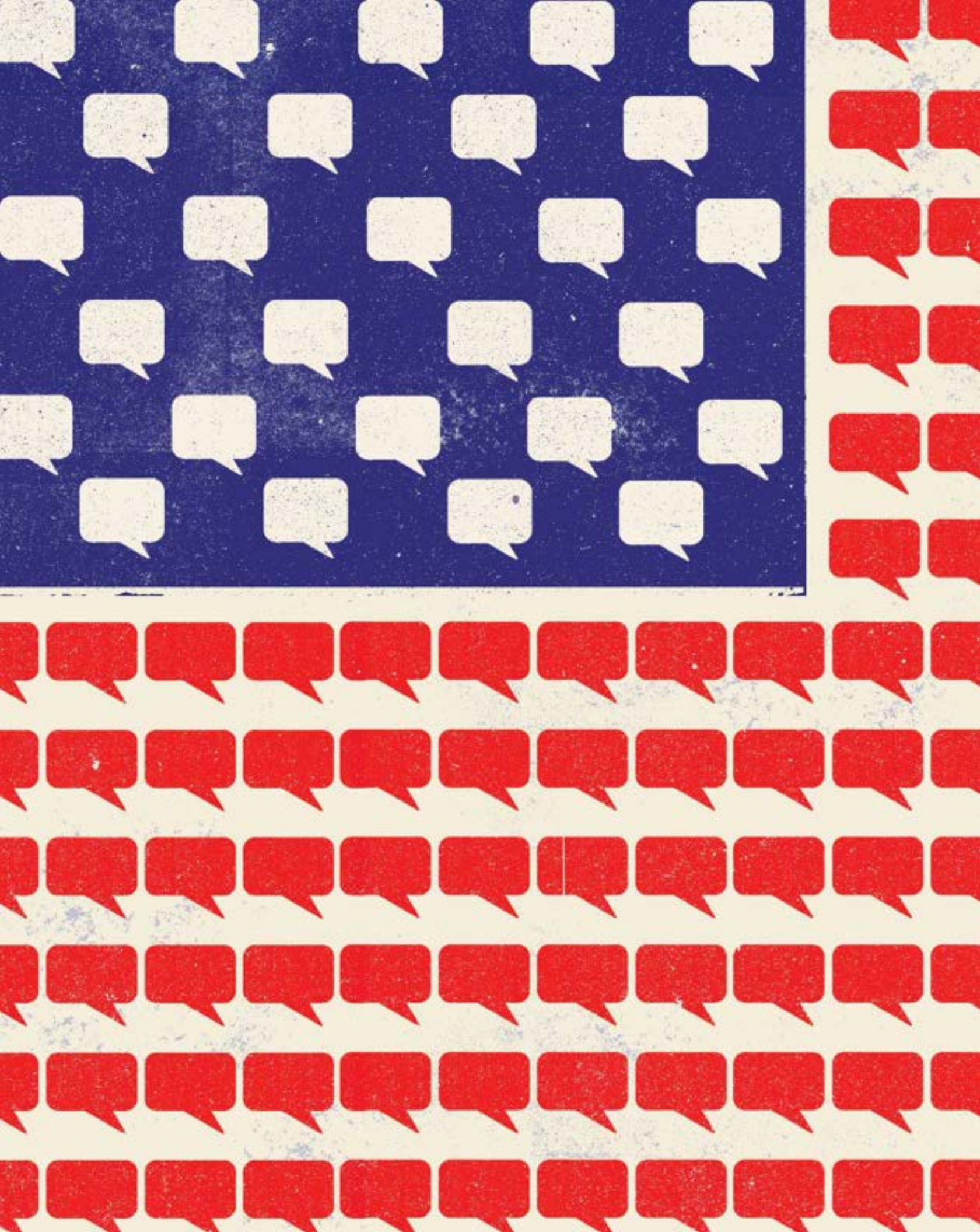
David Hickton, Pitt Cyber's founding director, said city and county officials continue to reach out to the task force for assistance, and the relationships being built were part of the overall goal.

"These [algorithms] are helpful and efficient but, if misused, can be dangerous and can exacerbate inequality," he said. "We can't go backward on the technology curve. We need to continually leverage technology, but we don't need to have the false choice between leveraging it poorly and leveraging it well." **h**



WE NEED TO CONTINUALLY LEVERAGE TECHNOLOGY, BUT WE DON'T NEED TO HAVE THE FALSE CHOICE BETWEEN LEVERAGING IT POORLY AND LEVERAGING IT WELL."

David Hickton,
founding director, Pitt Cyber



Over the past several years, community nonprofits across Pennsylvania have been in the trenches trying to ensure that all citizens have access to voting, and 2022 was another pivotal time for the work and democracy's future. By Jeffery Fraser

THE VOTERS' VOICE

When Pennsylvania adopted election-reform Act 77 in October 2019, it was reason to celebrate for groups whose work includes making sure all of the state's citizens exercise their diverse voices in shaping what Abraham Lincoln described as government "of the people, by the people and for the people." They've had little time for a victory lap since.

Within months, a presidential election, the need to familiarize voters with election reforms—including no-excuse voting by mail—and a pandemic that restricted their traditional means of outreach were upon them. At the same time, state and congressional districts were being redrawn in ways that could profoundly influence election outcomes.

Three years later, their work appears to have paid off. Turnout in this year's midterm election topped 2018 statewide turnout, making Pennsylvania one of only eight states where more voters went to the polls, according to a Washington Post elections analysis. But the work is far from done.

Voting still isn't a simple task in Pennsylvania. It requires registration; knowledge of ward, precinct and polling place; and an understanding of how to apply for a mail-in ballot and other rules and instructions. Pending lawsuits are challenging no-excuse voting by mail, creating uncertainty around that option and the logistics of voting in general. Adding a rule that would demand voters produce a government-approved identification card to cast their ballots is a topic of noisy political debate.

Gaps in voter registration leave certain groups underrepresented at the ballot box, particularly people of color and low-income residents. Moreover, although this year's election results are still fresh, they will have national, statewide and local impact because voters have elected members of Congress and the state House and Senate, a governor, and countywide officeholders whose decisions will influence the quality of life of their constituents down to the quality of the air they breathe and the water they drink.

Jeff Fraser is a Pittsburgh-based freelance writer. His last story for *h* ran in Issue 1 of this year and explored how the Pittsburgh neighborhood of Hazelwood is being transformed by residents, nonprofits, foundations, businesses and universities that are working together to ensure that changes stretch beyond redeveloping a former mill site on the community's riverfront.

Much of the work of protecting and improving access to voting and rallying Pennsylvanians to engage in civic life has been done by community nonprofit organizations across the state, many of which have small staffs and rely on volunteers and philanthropic support to get the job done.

The Heinz Endowments supports such efforts through a three-year-old Democracy and Civic Participation initiative intended to help build the capacity of the nonprofits to fulfill their missions.

“Our goal is not to influence the outcome of an election but to ensure voices are heard and there is full participation in elections and civic life,” said Andrew McElwaine, the Endowments’ vice president of Sustainability.

A fundamental step is getting more people to register to vote, particularly historically marginalized populations, which is a never-ending job. More than 800,000 eligible voters of color in Pennsylvania were unregistered in 2020, according to an analysis by Pennsylvania Voice, a statewide partnership of

knocking on doors and registering immigrants at their citizenship ceremonies to using social media and other means of digital outreach they honed during the pandemic. Much of the groups’ influence has been rooted in the fact that they have worked within communities of color, are familiar to residents and have developed relationships that lead to trust.

“We’ve seen in the work of our partners that a message from someone you trust is more effective than a TV ad or a political campaign that comes into a community, knocks on doors and tells them, ‘This is what is important,’” said Pennsylvania Voice Executive Director Salewa Ogunmefun.

The nonprofits’ work also positions them to spot election irregularities. Network partners, while tracking whether registered people of color were voting in 2018, caught a voting tabulation problem in Berks County that was bumping many registered Hispanic voters off the rolls.

“When people had Spanish surnames that had special characters in them, their registrations were being rejected, although

all of the information on their forms was 100 percent correct,” Ms. Ogunmefun said. Pennsylvania Voice has since worked with the county to correct the problem and double-checks voting data outcomes across the state for other signs of irregularities.

In addition to voter registration efforts, the nonprofit partnership took part in the years-long redrawing of state political districts, which produced a

new map considered to be more fair than previous versions. Pennsylvania, once one of the most heavily gerrymandered states, earned a B for “better-than-average” partisan fairness, according to a report card graded by the Princeton Gerrymandering Project.

Students on American college campuses are another population of eligible voters that nonprofits work to register and more generally engage in democracy. Few have much exposure to voting and civic participation when they first step on campus. Voter registration among U.S. 18-year-olds is low.

In Pennsylvania, registration rates range from more than 35 percent of voting-aged students to less than 1 percent across 500 school districts, according to a study by The Civics Center, a California nonprofit. In the Pittsburgh Public Schools, 14.5 percent of students were registered. Elsewhere, rates ranged from 29 percent of voting-aged students in the Shaler Area

Voting still isn’t a simple task in Pennsylvania. It requires registration; knowledge of ward, precinct and polling place; and an understanding of how to apply for a mail-in ballot and other rules and instructions.

nonprofits whose work includes making sure the voices of all citizens are heard. And Pennsylvania’s non-white population is growing at a healthy pace.

White residents remain the largest group, accounting for 75 percent of the population, according to 2020 decennial census data. But their numbers decreased by more than 6 percent from 2010 to 2020, according to census data. Meanwhile, the state’s Black population grew by more than 3 percent, the Hispanic and Latino population rose by nearly 38 percent, and the Asian population increased by more than 46 percent.

Pennsylvania Voice taps into the collective experience and strength of more than 50 community nonprofits to expand the role of communities of color in the democratic process. The diverse statewide partnership includes such groups as Pittsburgh United, a coalition of labor, faith, community and environmental organizations.

Partner nonprofits took several approaches to registering eligible voters leading up to this year’s election, ranging from



Rachael Warriner

Several Heinz Endowments-supported voter advocacy nonprofits participated in a November 2020 Count Every Vote rally in Philadelphia that included youth activists with the Sunrise Movement, an environmental justice organization.

ENGAGED IN democracy

School District to less than 1 percent in six other Allegheny County school districts.

“It is pretty appalling,” said Robert Brandon, president and CEO of the Fair Elections Center, a nonpartisan nonprofit focused on equitable voting access. “High school is a place to learn how to be a full citizen.”

The Fair Elections Center works with colleges and universities to be more proactive in educating students about voting rights and processes and improving their participation in civic matters by taking steps such as hiring students to help organize registration and get-out-the-vote campaigns and folding voter registration into high-traffic events, such as during freshman orientation and when students register for their classes. The nonprofit works with 30 colleges and universities in Pennsylvania that have an estimated total enrollment of 375,000 students.

Interest in voting soared on America’s campuses in 2020, when 66 percent of college students voted, setting a new turnout record according to a study by the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education. In 2016, the turnout rate was only 52 percent.

“We’ve seen the gap between young and older voters narrowing,” Mr. Brandon said. “On college campuses, it has narrowed even more.”

Other democracy-supporting efforts by nonprofits, in addition to creating and promoting voter registration and participation initiatives, have included running campaigns to raise public awareness of social, economic and environmental issues their work addresses. Some, like a coalition of Western

Pennsylvania’s environmental nonprofits, also try to bring political candidates up to speed. The coalition this year began work on a guide to enhance a candidate’s understanding of regional issues, such as air and water quality, as part of an effort that will include an informational website and could include candidate forums.

“Elections are something a lot of us have shied away from in previous years,” said Ashleigh Deemer, deputy director of Penn Environment, a nonprofit in the coalition. “A lot of our groups want to be nonpartisan and not get too close to that line. But there is a way to do this. We want to reach out to every candidate running, regardless of party, so they understand the issues and how important they are. We want informed candidates and informed voters.”

Allegheny County voters have had a particularly strong hand to play in how air-quality issues are dealt with. Air pollution has long been a problem in the county, where major sources include one of the nation’s largest coke works. In most cases, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency gives state agencies the authority to draft, implement and enforce pollution regulations and controls. But in Allegheny County, that responsibility rests with the county Health Department.

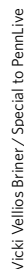
Next year, the county executive and county council members who hire or appoint the department’s director and board are up for election.

“Allegheny County has some of the largest point-sources of air pollution in the state if not the nation,” Mr. McElwaine said. “Voters at the local level have power to influence future decisions.” **h**

NEXT-GENERATION Watchdogs >>>>>>>>>>

As independent journalism declines across the country, some media outlets in the Pittsburgh region and elsewhere in Pennsylvania are devising innovative approaches to news coverage to improve public accountability and transparency. By Jeffery Fraser





Spotlight PA, a nonprofit investigative news organization supported by the Endowments and other foundations and donors, forms partnerships with news outlets across Pennsylvania to cover critical issues in the state.

What was readily available to flesh out how much the state's 253 legislators spend and why amounted to a jigsaw puzzle missing most of its pieces. And it was clear to the 3-year-old nonprofit news organization that lawmakers weren't keen on helping the journalists put it together.

Reporters asked, negotiated and dealt with government lawyers, and filed some two dozen Right-to-Know Law requests trying to pry loose records of expenses and the details justifying them. When the journalists did succeed, documents tended to be rife with redactions that made it difficult to determine the purpose of trips and meals and who lawmakers met with on the taxpayers' dime.

“To get the legislature in Pennsylvania to respond and do anything regarding its transparency and its own use of tax dollars has historically been incredibly difficult,” said Christopher Baxter, executive director and editor-in-chief of Spotlight PA, which he founded in 2019. “We had to have a big fight over what should be basic government transparency.”

Spotlight reporters, working with colleagues at The Caucus, a small Harrisburg-focused news outlet, waged a yearlong battle with lawmakers and their lawyers until the legislature relented, turning over some 10,000 unredacted documents. The stories that followed ran from March 2021 through March of this year. Spotlight offered the articles free of charge to news outlets throughout the state, and their findings were revealing.

In all, lawmakers spent \$203 million on themselves and staff over three years. Some legislators were prudent. Some were big spenders, Spotlight reported. Rep. Chris Sainato, for example, averaged \$59,000 a year in expenses — an amount greater than the median household income in Lawrence County which he represents. The democrat lost his reelection bid in November.

Not long after the stories circulated throughout the Commonwealth, the state Senate for the first time began posting the expenses of its members online for all to see. And a bill was proposed in the House requiring its members to do the same.



iPRESENTE!

iPresente! Pittsburgh Latino Magazine explores issues such as how the Latino population continues to grow in Coraopolis, northwest of Pittsburgh. It's a community where Darlin Recinis, left, attends a soccer game at AHN Montour Junction Sports Complex in Coraopolis in July while holding Kenji Santizo, a friend's 8-month-old child.

NEWS MAKERS



PITTSBURGH MEDIA PARTNERSHIP

The Pittsburgh Media Partnership supported a collaboration between "The Allegheny Front" and Soul Pitt Media, a Pittsburgh-based urban community website and print magazine, that produced a print and audio news feature on four urban farmers in the region called "Sowing Soil with Soul." Among those interviewed was Kent Bey, right, president and CEO of Project Love Coalition, which owns Peace and Friendship Farm.



The health of the kind of independent journalism that forced that concession to transparency is in decline in the United States. Newspapers, in particular, are closing their doors, laying off staff and limiting coverage at a troubling rate, betrayed by traditional business models that have left them vulnerable to a sharp decline in the advertising revenue they rely on.

Spotlight PA is one of a number of emerging news organizations trying to fill the reporting gaps by rethinking how to support the work they do to hold the powerful accountable and keep the public informed. Spotlight forgoes advertising, relying instead on individual donors and foundation grants to stay in business.

The Heinz Endowments has joined other local, statewide and national philanthropies in giving Spotlight operating support. The funding is part of a series of investments the Endowments has made to help independent

journalism survive, thrive and provide the watchdog and explanatory coverage that helps bolster democracy at all levels.

This has included support for Pittsburgh-based public radio station WESA FM, and PublicSource, a regional nonprofit newsroom that focuses on in-depth reporting about people and places whose stories are not often told. Others receiving support include the Pittsburgh Media Partnership, a network of local media outlets and a source of grants and technical assistance that is overseen by Point Park University's Center for Media Innovation.

"It is no secret that the field is challenged and has been going through real shocks and changes as the traditional print media advertising model has become less viable as a funding stream," said Matthew Barron, the Endowments' senior program officer for Sustainability. "We've seen a lot of local newspapers across the country close their doors or be bought by large conglomerates.



WESA FM

Among the subjects covered by "The Allegheny Front," a Western Pennsylvania public radio program about the environment that airs on WESA FM, is the work of 412 Food Rescue co-founded by Leah Lizarondo, pictured above. The organization delivers surplus food to nonprofits that serve people facing food insecurity and runs a zero-waste kitchen, the Good Food Project, which helps to turn food waste into dinners for those in need.

In such an environment, you often see a lack of daily news coverage in communities. We want to avoid that.”

U.S. newspaper revenues fell from \$50 billion in 2005 to \$20 billion in 2021, a Northwestern University analysis of the state of the industry reports. Since 2005, more than one fourth, or 2,500 of the newspapers in the country have closed. Most communities that lose a newspaper don’t get a digital or print replacement. From 2006 to 2021, newspaper employment fell by 70 percent to 104,000 workers.

Local news coverage is shrinking. Northwestern researchers estimate that 70 million Americans live in places that have very limited access to local news or are on the verge of becoming one of those communities. Most of those “news deserts” are communities that tend to be poorer and older, and to lack affordable and reliable high-speed internet.

The decline comes at a time when the spread of misinformation, disinformation and political polarization is rising, which places a premium on vetting what the public consumes as news. But among the alternative news sources gaining popularity are social media platforms, which lack the editing, fact checking and other steps news outlets have adopted to guide accurate and truthful reporting. A Pew Research Center survey found that 23 percent of Americans often get their news from social media, such as Facebook and Twitter. Another 30 percent “sometimes” rely on such platforms for news.

The struggle to survive is leading local news outlets to think more broadly about their operations. That includes sharing ideas and collaborating on coverage with competitors—something that does not come naturally to newsrooms in an industry known for its zeal for besting rivals in pursuit of scoops, subscribers and viewers.

But some 20 southwestern Pennsylvania media outlets are doing that under the umbrella of the Pittsburgh Media Partnership. The grant-supported nonprofit helps sustain the local media ecosystem in a number of ways. It provides paid interns, which bolster newsrooms while giving young journalists real-world experience. It awards small

grants for infrastructure improvements and collaborative reporting. It offers technical assistance, such as workshops on search engine optimization to raise awareness of the outlets’ stories on the internet, and on how best to promote stories on social media.

“There are a lot of questions, such as ‘We’re doing these stories—how can we make sure more people can see them?’” said Andrew Conte, director of the Center for Media Innovation at Point Park University. “The gaps are growing between the national news outlets, like the New York Times and the Washington Post, that are able to figure that stuff out and do it well, and small news outlets that don’t have the resources to figure it out.”

Collaboration is being more readily embraced by news outlets in the Partnership network, Dr. Conte said. When the Fern Hollow Bridge collapsed in Pittsburgh earlier this year, several news outlets volunteered to share photographs, sources and quotes.

“To me, that’s the future of what we’re trying to do. When a big story breaks, you don’t need a bunch of journalists standing in the same place, asking the same questions. Especially now, when news outlets have a fraction of the resources they used to have.”

That collaboration extends to more in-depth reporting and coverage of people and places that attract little media attention. In August, the first article in a series profiling several Latinx communities in southwestern Pennsylvania was published by a team of journalists from Pittsburgh City Paper, an alternative weekly publication; Gazette 2.0, a tiny community paper based in McKees Rocks; and iPresente! Pittsburgh Latino Magazine, a bilingual publication focused on Latinx communities.

The region’s immigrant communities are largely neglected populations when it comes to local news coverage, according to a 2021 study of the Pittsburgh media landscape by the nonprofit American Journalism Project. Yet, the arrival of an increasing number of foreign-born residents is one of the few bright spots in a southwestern Pennsylvania population that struggles to add people. The number of foreign-born Allegheny County

residents rose 30 percent from 2010 to 2020, U.S. Census Bureau data suggest.

The series, which is published in English and Spanish, began as an idea Jamie Wiggan brought with him when he left Gazette 2.0 to become City Paper’s news editor. Maria Manautou-Matos, founder and CEO of Presente Pittsburgh Media, LLC, joined the project, adding her knowledge of the Hispanic community, contacts and translation abilities. A small Pittsburgh Media Partnership grant allowed them to hire a photographer.

“We probably would have done something on the Latino population, but it wouldn’t have been nearly this large,” said Lisa Cunningham, who was City Paper’s editor-in-chief at the time but has since left the paper. “We wouldn’t have had the finances to get translations. The stories wouldn’t have reached as many people. And we wouldn’t have been able to afford the photography.”

Sustaining a high level of professional news reporting is the challenge of the moment for many local news outlets, particularly for-profit operations that rely on advertising dollars. “I won’t lie. It’s stressful running a media outlet,” Ms. Cunningham said as she described how the City Paper’s newsroom had shrunk even though the staff’s drive to provide a needed voice in the community continued.

The nonprofit Spotlight PA enjoys more favorable circumstances. Its newsroom has more than doubled to 17 reporters and editors. It added a bureau in State College. It has published more than 100 investigative articles, several of which spurred changes in Harrisburg and elsewhere across the state. More donors and foundations have come forward to support its work.

And the list of partners with agreements to publish Spotlight’s reporting has grown to nearly 90 news outlets with a combined circulation of 35 million readers and viewers. That has allowed its reporting to reach hundreds of communities large and small, urban and rural, across the state.

“It’s read everywhere and lawmakers hear about it,” Mr. Baxter said. “Whatever people think of representative democracy, the reality is, lawmakers still respond when their constituents react.” **h**



CREATING ART AND OPPORTUNITY

Pittsburgh's Cultural Treasures, a shared foundation initiative to bolster and celebrate Black-led cultural groups in Western Pennsylvania, has moved into its second phase, and that means more support for more organizations.
By Elwin Green

When BOOM Concepts co-founders Thomas Agnew and DS Kinsel learned at the end of last year that their Garfield-based “cultural hub” had been named as one of Pittsburgh’s Cultural Treasures, part of the Ford Foundation’s national America’s Cultural Treasures initiative, the news provided a special type of affirmation.

The selection of the multifaceted workspace, art gallery and studio — along with 15 other groups — didn’t just mean a \$150,000 boost to the organization’s budget.

“We have gotten a good amount of press and have done a good amount of work in Pittsburgh,” Mr. Agnew said. “But to be acknowledged by an organization that is bigger than Pittsburgh, outside of Pittsburgh, that is connecting with other cities and organizations ... it meant a great deal.”

That kind of recognition beyond the local scene “doesn’t always happen,” he said.

Now, other cultural organizations in Western Pennsylvania also will have new opportunities for growth and support through the Pittsburgh’s Cultural Treasures Initiative’s second phase, which focuses on building the organizational capacity of Black-led cultural groups in the region.

The Ford Foundation launched America’s Cultural Treasures in fall 2020 as a way to support and celebrate arts organizations that serve and represent marginalized communities by partnering with philanthropies across the country to provide the type of assistance the organizations deemed helpful. The Heinz Endowments was selected as Ford’s partner for the Pittsburgh region, and the Endowments, in turn, formed a collaboration with the POISE Foundation in Pittsburgh, one of America’s oldest Black community foundations, to manage the local initiative.

The \$10 million Pittsburgh’s Cultural Treasures Initiative (PCTI) was established in 2021 to support Black-led arts organizations in Western Pennsylvania and awarded a total of \$5.4 million to 16 such organizations last year. The initiative is continuing to move forward with new activities for the first group of “cultural treasures” and the \$3.2 million Phase 2 expansion that includes a different group of organizations that will receive organizational development assistance.

For Mr. Agnew, inclusion as a cultural treasure among organizations in and beyond Pittsburgh opened the door for establishing the kind of connections that have shaped BOOM’s growth from



J. Thomas Agnew, above, and DS Kinsel, below, are co-founders of BOOM Concepts, which offers co-working and community arts spaces in Pittsburgh that promote and support Black, brown, queer and femme artists.



its beginning. It also led him to have a whole string of questions: “What opportunities can we create? What other resources can we build upon? How can we connect with some of the cultural treasures in other cities?”

The “we” in those questions referred to the community of Phase 1 awardees. The desire to build connection on their behalf led him to join Shaunda McDill, the Endowments’ Arts & Culture program officer, and others on the committee administering PCTI.

He led the group in creating a survey to send to the Ford Foundation’s regional partners in other cities to ascertain their interest — and the interest of the arts organizations named as cultural treasures in their areas — in creating opportunities together.

Those opportunities might involve collaborative programming or inviting organizations to convene in Pittsburgh. The Ford Foundation also announced this fall that it would provide matching funds of \$50,000

to create a pipeline to these other cities for artists in Pittsburgh.”

That pipeline may extend to the next cohort of local arts organizations as the Endowments moves forward with PCTI’s second phase.

Phase 2 of the initiative seeks to assist as many as 30 Black-led arts organizations in the 10-county Pittsburgh region, beginning with a list of some 160 such organizations that was developed during Phase 1. An open application process began in September with a pair of informational meetings, and as with Phase 1, members of the public can nominate organizations through the Endowments’ website.

From the beginning, PCTI was intended to shift the paradigms in arts funding by moving away from short-term funding, usually for specific programs, to providing unrestricted support and helping organizations grow their capacity.

PACE Program Manager Sharon Jefferson dubbed the programs as “capacity-building light” and “deep-dive.”

In the one-year, “light” program, organizations “will have the opportunity to identify singular projects or areas of interest or need that they can take a more tactical approach to in terms of building their capacity,” she said.

In the “deep-dive” program, organizations will have three years to engage in long-term strategic planning.

Ms. Jefferson said that both tracks of programming will offer training and development opportunities to help organizations sharpen their skills and improve their service delivery. Perhaps no less important, PACE will offer customized assistance to organizations as they express needs that neither track of programming may directly address.

“This could take the shape of self-care, organizational well-being, things of that nature that have yet to be determined, because that will be largely prescribed by those organizations,” she explained.

For participants in both “light” and “deep-dive” tracks, PCTI will provide a final dose of funding upon program completion to help the organizations execute the strategy they have designed. Between the initial grant, the funds needed to pay consultants, and the final boost, a Phase 2 grantee’s total award could be as much as \$150,000.

“It’s a non-traditional level of investment for those that are not already in relationship with philanthropy,” Ms. McDill said.

PCTI also is providing a boost to the participating partners as well as the grantees. The POISE Foundation was tasked with housing the \$10 million for the initiative, which nearly doubled its assets under management, increased its management fee revenues, and raised its profile as a community foundation leader. PACE was able to expand its staff to hire a program associate and a data strategist whose responsibilities include supporting the organization’s role in the initiative.

Still, the core of Phase 2 is helping grant recipients to make well-informed decisions about what they want.

“What opportunities can we create? What other resources can we build upon? How can we connect with some of the cultural treasures in other cities?”

Thomas Agnew, co-founder, BOOM Concepts

to \$100,000 to arts groups participating in the America’s Cultural Treasures initiative that arrange to convene across regions to advance common program goals.

“I’m proud that Pittsburgh organizations were the first to formally reach out to other artists and arts organizations in partner [America’s Cultural Treasures] cities,” Ms. McDill said. “It is exciting to think about Pittsburgh serving as the place for the first convening of national treasures, and equally exciting to think that the effort is artist-led, generating from a Phase 1 awardee who not only wanted to get involved, but who is seeking

Phase 2 will offer the selected organizations an opportunity to participate in either a one-year or a three-year capacity-building program. All participants will receive an initial unrestricted grant of \$10,000, and be matched with a consultant provided by the Program to Aid Citizen Enterprise (PACE), which joined the Endowments and the POISE Foundation this year as an organizational partner in the Pittsburgh’s Cultural Treasures Initiative. The consultants will help groups figure out whether to enroll in a one-year engagement or to commit to a more in-depth development process for three years.

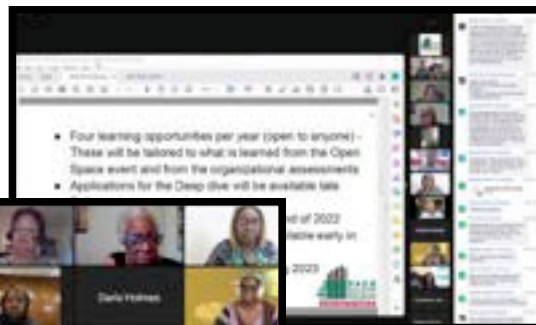
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Beth Barbis

PITTSBURGH'S CULTURAL TREASURES INITIATIVE

2



Phase 1

Chandler Bingham performs in "Synchronized: with Soy Sos with Buscrates," a production of PearlArts | STAYCEE PEARL dance project & Soy Sos, which was presented at the Kelly Strayhorn Theater in April. PearlArts was one of the 16 Black-led organizations that received a total of \$5.4 million in the first phase of the Pittsburgh's Cultural Treasures Initiative.

Phase 2

Lucille Dabney, president and CEO of the Program to Aid Citizen Enterprise (PACE), moderates a virtual information session in September for representatives of cultural organizations interested in learning more about Phase 2 of the Pittsburgh's Cultural Treasures Initiative. PACE is administering the \$3.2 million second phase, which is designed to help Black-led cultural groups in the Pittsburgh region expand their organizational capacity.

"We really just plan on taking the time, which oftentimes people don't have, pairing the groups with someone who can walk them through the process," Ms. McDill said. "This program is going to give participants hand-to-hand care by asking, 'What are you trying to accomplish? And now that we know what you want to do, we are going to outline your traditional options, all right? And if you're going to go against the grain, push the envelope, innovate, and do something else, here's some things you should be aware of...'" she added with a laugh.

Besides the dual tracks of programming, PCTI and PACE plan to offer workshops that will be open to all Phase 2 participants and even to organizations that are not awarded grants.

Lucille E. Dabney, president and CEO of PACE, said that while her organization has more than 50 years of experience in offering workshops and other types of training for nonprofits, the workshops will not be predetermined.

"The groups will have an opportunity to tell us what they need, then we'll craft or create those workshops in concert with what we hear from the community."

Ms. McDill noted that some of the workshops may be led by Phase 1 awardees, and

that having the workshops open to all Phase 2 applicants will create opportunities for connection.

For Mr. Agnew, the connections that can happen in Phase 2 offer all participants the potential to go beyond the current phases of the Pittsburgh's Cultural Treasures Initiative itself, leading him to ponder another question: "How do we start collectively saving money to make sure that people in the future have some funds, that they don't necessarily have to go to nonprofit organizations that are giving grants?"

As for Ms. McDill, she recalled one of the PCTI roundtables, in which both Carlotta Paige, founder of the Westmoreland Diversity Coalition, and Tim Stevens, chairman and CEO of the Black Political Empowerment Project, were present.

"Ms. Carlotta was sharing some of the things that Westmoreland Diversity Coalition needed, and Mr. Stevens was sharing some of the initiatives he is working on through B-PEP, and that meeting provided the opportunity for them to conclude, 'Let's connect offline.'"

Ms. McDill hopes such interactions will help to "plant a seed and create and/or deepen networks. Hopefully, in the long term, cultural workers will have an array of resources to meet their unique needs." **h**



HEINZ AWARDS WINNERS

The Heinz Family Foundation recognized winners of the 27th annual Heinz Awards in October. The seven recipients of an unrestricted cash prize of \$250,000 each were:

vanessa l. german, a visual artist and founder of ARThouse whose assemblage sculptures, installations, spoken word poetry and community-based work address racism, violence, homophobia and hate while expressing hope.

Cauleen Smith, an interdisciplinary artist and educator whose experimental films, installations and multimedia works explore history and the future.

Rhett Ayers Butler, founder of Mongabay, a global nonprofit environmental science and conservation news platform.

Anne C. Evens, CEO of Elevate, which works to ensure equal access to clean and affordable heat, power, and water in communities and to promote energy efficiency improvements.

Chrystel A. Cornelius, president and CEO of Oweesta Corporation, which works to return wealth and financial independence to Native people and lands.

Hilary A. Abell and **Alison Lingane**, co-founders of Project Equity, a movement to create better jobs and a fairer economy by advancing employee ownership.

The Heinz Awards were established in 1993 to honor the memory of Sen. John Heinz, who was killed in a plane crash in 1991. They recognize individuals for their achievements in finding solutions to critical issues in areas that were important to Sen. Heinz, including the arts, the economy and the environment.

AN INTERNATIONAL SHOWCASE

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The 58th Carnegie International opened on Sept. 24 and will run through April 2, 2023, with the theme "Is it morning for you yet?" Established in 1896, the Carnegie International is organized every three to four years by the Carnegie Museum of Art, below. The longest-running North American exhibition of international art was last held in Pittsburgh from Oct. 13, 2018, to March 25, 2019.

The current exhibition features more than 100 international artists and collectives and is spread across several galleries at the Carnegie Museum of Art and at offsite locations. Multi-media artist and native of Braddock, Pennsylvania, LaToya Ruby Frazier won the event's highest award, the Carnegie Prize. Her photo installation "More Than Conquerors: A Monument for Community Health Workers of Baltimore, Maryland 2021-2022" highlights the efforts of Baltimore health workers and community leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Courtesy of the artist and Carnegie Museum of Art; photo: Sean Eaton



Photo by Emma Folts/PublicSource

SCHOOL DISTRICT VETERAN ELEVATED

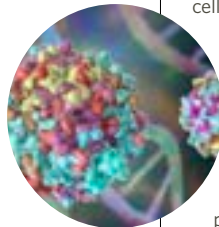
The Pittsburgh Public Schools began the school year with a new superintendent after Dr. Wayne Walters, left, who had been serving as interim superintendent since October 2021, was unanimously appointed by the school board to the top position in the summer after a national search. Dr. Walters is a more than 30-year veteran of the district, having served in the city schools as a teacher, assistant principal, assistant superintendent, and now superintendent.

Originally from St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands, Dr. Walters came to Pittsburgh at age 16 to attend Carnegie Mellon University, where he earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts in music performance/music education. His first teaching position was at King Elementary on Pittsburgh's North Side, and he later received master's and doctorate degrees at Duquesne University and Indiana University of Pennsylvania, respectively.

The district's previous superintendent, Dr. Anthony Hamlet, resigned in October 2021 after the Pennsylvania State Ethics Commission released a report detailing a series of ethical lapses by him that also had received news coverage.

ANCHORING DEVELOPMENT

ElevateBio, a Massachusetts-based biotechnology firm focusing on gene and cell therapies, has been announced as the anchor for the Pitt BioForge at Hazelwood Green. The purpose of University of Pittsburgh's biomanufacturing center is to bring new gene and cell therapies and other treatments to patients and the market. Hazelwood Green, a 178-acre former steel mill site purchased by the Endowments and three other foundations 20 years ago, is becoming Pittsburgh's latest hub of technological innovation. The property also is a high-profile demonstration of new brownfield development standards committed to raising the housing prospects of local residents instead of displacing them.





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AN AUGUST CELEBRATION

Constanza Romero, the widow of playwright August Wilson; August Wilson House CEO Denise Turner; and actor Denzel Washington, all shown above, spoke to an audience from the top of the back steps of the August Wilson House during its grand opening in August — appropriately.

The event attracted well-known celebrities such as Mr. Washington and actor Russell Hornsby along with many local luminaries and fans of the Pulitzer-winning playwright and his work. Located in Pittsburgh's Hill District, Mr. Wilson's modest and previously blighted childhood home has been renovated into an inspirational community center and theatrical venue for showcasing the creativity and resilience of the region's Black community through artist residencies, gathering spaces, fellowships and other programming for artists and scholars.

The celebration included an evening outdoor performance of Mr. Wilson's play "Jitney" followed the next day by a ribbon-cutting ceremony, music, food, dancing and tours of the property. The restoration was spearheaded by Paul Ellis, Mr. Wilson's nephew, and received considerable funding from philanthropies, including the Endowments, and celebrities. The latter's support was boosted by the involvement of Mr. Washington, who has produced two of Mr. Wilson's plays into films.

Also in August, the University of Pittsburgh library system received \$1 million from the Henry L. Hillman Foundation to prepare Mr. Wilson's archives for public use and outreach programming. In addition, the support allows the library system to hire a specifically designated August Wilson archive curator for two years. The Heinz Endowments was among the funders of the effort to develop and process the archives.



MAJOR SUPPORT FOR BLACK ARTS





Advancing Black Arts in Pittsburgh (ABAP), a joint program of The Heinz Endowments and The Pittsburgh Foundation, recently announced a slate of 49 grant awards totaling \$1.61 million. The funding — the largest annual distribution in the 12-year history of the program — will support the work of individual artists, collectives and projects and will provide planning and operating support for Black-led arts organizations and those serving a substantial or primarily Black audience.

ABAP received a \$2 million gift from philanthropist MacKenzie Scott in June 2021, and this group of grants through the program is the first to include a portion of that money. Visit www.heinz.org for a complete list of artists and organizations receiving funding.

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