

# Creating Vibrant Communities

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The task of creating vibrant communities asks us to understand root causes and structures in such communities and to collaborate across community sectors. It is our tendency to “break things down” and single-focus – to say, “we need better education,” for example. However, better academic performance is not just a function of teacher quality, school budget, or operation, but also of a child’s readiness to learn. A child who shows up with their prefrontal cortex “offline” due to lack of sleep, hunger, and/or household insufficiency and instability is *physiologically* deterred from entering learning. At best, the teacher’s task is great. Worst case, the education system alone will be considered to have failed. Seeing holistically and solving for vibrancy focuses on multiple causes and has the capacity to shift the odds significantly in favor of success for children, families, teachers, schools, and communities.

Vibrant communities are the product of many components. While the topic asks us to think holistically, this report is structured to introduce elements of a vibrant community through an exploration of current models, existing data on emerging issues and trends, current systemic barriers faced by communities, and ways in which community action and policy change can create a healthier Arizona for all.

## What are the Components of a Vibrant Community?

Community vibrancy is dependent on community well-being and health. This big picture view of health includes multiple domains, of which medical care is a small part – by most estimates, somewhere between 10 and 20 percent of – what determines a population’s health, and in turn, vibrancy.<sup>1</sup>

This report examines community vibrancy through Vitalyst Health Foundation’s Elements of a Healthy Community – a framework built by statewide community partners using data and science from national and international sources. Fourteen elements are identified that are present and robust in vibrant communities.

When all these elements are intentionally cultivated, coordinated, and mutually aligned, communities thrive and prosper.

- Access to Health Care
- Affordable Quality Housing
- Community Safety
- Economic Opportunity
- Educational Opportunity
- Environmental Quality
- Quality Affordable Food
- Community Design
- Parks and Recreation
- Social/Cultural Cohesion
- Social Justice
- Transportation Options
- Health Equity
- Resiliency

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<sup>1</sup> Magnan, S. (9 Oct 2017). *Social Determinants of Health 101 for Health Care: Five Plus Five*. Retrieved from: <https://nam.edu/social-determinants-of-health-101-for-health-care-five-plus-five/>. Access date: 5/30/2020.

## Why Is It Important to Build Vibrant Communities?

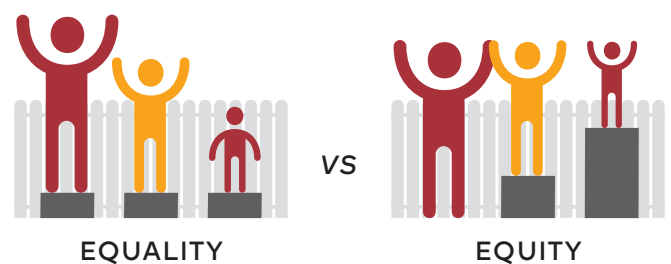
To put it simply, the places we live, work, and play matter. In Arizona, a child born in zip code 85256 has a life expectancy of 65.8 years; meanwhile, a child born in the adjacent zip code of 85251 has a drastically longer life expectancy of 80.89 years.<sup>2</sup> As that child grows, the ability to make healthy decisions throughout life depends on availability and accessibility of healthy choices. Communities are vibrant for all only when they have fairly offered options for different kinds of development, mobility, and autonomy, such as: (1) supportive spaces for community and development, (2) a diverse array of affordable, quality foods, (3) livable, supportive, and affordable housing, (4) educational attainment, and (5) economic opportunity.

Crucial building blocks to a vibrant community also include pivotal social elements like equity, civic engagement, social cohesion, and community safety. Furthermore, they include air, water, and community elements both inside and outside of household living spaces. When community infrastructure is planned for sustainability, social connections, and well-being, then all Arizonans have the opportunity to thrive.

## How Do We Create Vibrant Communities?<sup>3</sup>

Driving change that creates resilient, equitable, and thriving communities takes time and intentionality. The following list details the ingredients necessary to create effective and sustainable change:

1. **Shift the Paradigm:** Elevate thinking about vibrancy beyond individual sectors and individual behaviors to include holistic social conditions, systems issues, and structural inequities.
2. **Change Policies, Systems, and Environments:** Transform problems by concurrently understanding issues “on the ground” and at the systems level - and develop transformational changes to address both.
3. **Support Community-Driven Solutions and Build Trust:** Work with a community rather than for a community. This includes a power-building, assets-focused approach that fosters community ownership and leadership from the outset. It all starts with trust.<sup>4</sup>
4. **Utilize Multi-Sector Partnerships:** Engage stakeholders from multiple sectors to improve vibrancy innovatively, efficiently, and effectively.
5. **Embed Equity:** Recognize that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to a vibrant community. Some of the most effective solutions have historically come through the voices of communities experiencing the largest vibrancy gaps.



Source: Image adapted from Annie E. Casey Foundation's interpretation of Craig Froehle's original illustration.

2 National Center for Health Statistics. U.S. Small-Area Life Expectancy Estimates Project. (2018). Retrieved from: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/usaleep/usaleep.html>. Access date: 5/30/2020.

3 Adapted from Build Healthy Places Network, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Voices for Healthy Kids' *Messaging Guide for Policy Advocates*, and Vitalyst Health Foundation's *Ingredients for Change*.

4 Vitalyst Health Foundation. (2019). *Pre-Community Engagement: Setting the Stage for Authentic Community Engagement*. Retrieved from: <http://vitalysthealth.org/wp-content/uploads/VitalystSpark-PreCommunityEngagement.pdf>. Access date: 5/30/2020.

## The Price of Breaking New Ground

It is important to note that, by choosing to pursue the topic of “Creating Vibrant Communities,” Arizona Town Hall has opted to explore important work that is nonetheless relatively new. It is emergent in three key ways:

1. Cross-sector collaboration focused at the community level has not been a standard practice historically. Case studies are not abundant, and most examples are more regionally located in larger population areas.
2. While 14 elements are recognized as key, not all of them have deep wells of data, research, or cross-collaborative experience in Arizona. Some of the key elements also lack clear champions in the state. As such, this report includes chapters with more developed elements and others discussed much less.
3. Research and data collection are at early stages. While work is aggressively being done in the areas of research and data, no widely accepted measure of vibrancy has yet been adopted. Further, key qualitative data and case study results demonstrate the efficacy and importance of this work, but the list of data gaps at the zip-code level is long.

In short, being early means being patient. It also means accepting what we have as compelling emergent evidence and using that evidence to develop vibrant communities robustly and consistently for all in Arizona.

It should also be noted that “element overlap” occurs frequently in this report. Housing and education are discussed in the food chapter for example. Equity and Economic Opportunity do not have separate chapters. Instead racial inequity and income statistics are found in multiple chapters. This is not a mistake. It is a key reminder of the interdependent nature of these elements. Over time, it is important to have more such data overlap, not less. For many chapters, you will find a short sidebar noting these interdependencies that are currently most often recognized.

## The Amplifying Power of COVID-19

As of this document’s publication, we still have a great deal to learn about the novel coronavirus’ impact on our cities, state, country, and the world.

What is abundantly clear from the start of the pandemic, however, is that this Town Hall topic, its holistic approach, and underlying elements of community vibrancy all need our attention, comprehension, and innovation now more than ever.

The COVID-19 pandemic has deeply tested Arizona’s economic, housing, food, education, and health systems. It may also be showing us changes to the ways we live, work, learn, and play. The current pandemic has exposed significant issues and disparities that can be transformed into key opportunities for more vibrant communities. It is impossible to predict in these pages what is rapidly being discovered and learned about Arizona communities’ capacities for resiliency, but it is crucial that we view what does happen in coming weeks, months, and years through the prism of 14 contributing elements and recognize the potential for cross-sector, community-driven solutions to make our communities better and stronger going forward.

## Vibrancy, Elements, and Funding

This Town Hall topic proposes holistic discussion of community vibrancy – and that can be good news when it comes to funding. Rather than “single source” investments and wondering where we could possibly find enough money to do it all, what if we could help identify root community elements that could result in “an ounce of prevention” over a “pound of cure?” What if supportively housing people turned out to cost much less than providing health care for those experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness? A great example of healthcare and housing working collaboratively can be seen in efforts made by Circle the City, an organization that provides healthcare services to people experiencing homelessness, and assists them in the journey out of homelessness.<sup>5</sup> In addition, more material on housing–healthcare partnerships will be explored later on in the chapter, “The Intersection of Housing and Vibrant Communities.”

What if the answer to helping a child show up at school ready to learn is simultaneously the key to improving a school’s academic performance and a big part of why a community is becoming more resilient and vibrant across all generations? Later, in this report in the chapter, “The Intersection of Education and Vibrant Communities,” the story of the Heart of Isaac will showcase how enhancing a child’s surroundings can foster an environment that allows for educational success. These are not what-ifs. They are the returns on investment of breakthrough projects in Arizona that you can read about in this report.

One of the key opportunities for the 113th Arizona Town Hall topic is identifying and championing transformative, collaborative, and cost-effective strategies. With the right stakeholders at the table, effective solutions to challenges are not always about more money.

This report invites you to explore and discuss the elements that create vibrant, resilient, and equitable communities, through data, through emergent research and examples, and through lived experience and thus lived expertise, so that we can collectively help to ensure a healthier and more vibrant Arizona for all.

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5 For more information visit: <https://www.circlethecity.org/>.