

## Healthy Places NC: Better Results through Place-Based Philanthropy

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If you were expecting company for dinner, you might decide to tidy up before your guests arrived. Your focus would likely be the living room and the dining room. Perhaps the front steps need to be swept. The bathroom cleaned. But you would not worry about the attic or the basement, even if those places could benefit from your attention, too. The orderliness of your closets would not be a priority either. You would apply your efforts where they were needed most immediately, and in doing so, accomplish your designated task with more success and speed than if you spread your time and energy over every square foot of the house.

In very basic terms, this simple analogy helps illuminate the power and appropriateness of place-based philanthropy. At The Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust (KBR), we have been evolving how we fund projects in order to have more effective and relevant impact on the communities we serve. Our new focus, called *Healthy Places NC*, centers on strategically concentrated investments in specific communities rather than following the more traditional approach of responding to broad and often unconnected agency-initiated proposals. By tending to specific areas of need with deliberate and intensive efforts, we believe we can do more good by doing it more precisely.

With guests coming for dinner, isn't it more urgent to set the table than to paint the hallway?

### HEALTHY PLACES OF IMPACT

If only improving people's health and quality of life in underserved communities was as straightforward as neatening the house! Indeed, our mission at KBR is forever complicated by so many seen and unseen forces – social, economic, political, and environmental – that we must be rigorously adaptive in our tactics, as well as our assumptions. With our move into place-based grantmaking, we are responding to past lessons learned. Like many other community-minded organizations, we have sometimes endeavored to do too much too broadly

*The power of Healthy Places NC is that we'll be responding precisely to the needs of a specific community – listening to the people, cooperating with the local changemakers – then working with them to find ways to improve the health and overall quality of life for people in that area. No more diluting our chances of success with an agenda that's too wide and not deep enough. By understanding what a community is facing, as well as what the community is capable of, we can bring focused efforts to its needs and thereby increase the likelihood that what we're doing will have positive results that can be sustained.*

– Karen McNeil-Miller, President,  
The Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust

and consequently spread our resources too thin. It is fair to say that our good intentions, manifested in isolated, short-term grants, have often stretched beyond our ability to achieve sustainable impact.

For this reason we are excited to be shifting gears as we launch *Healthy Places NC*. By rethinking how and where we allocate resources, we are now able to go deeper into communities as we help them achieve systemic and sustainable change. This means more impact, more lasting improvements, and more easily replicable work that we can take to other areas of the state.

Foundations across the country (for example, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Sierra Health Foundation, Northwest Area Foundation, Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, The Colorado Trust) have been developing place-based philanthropy initiatives for over two decades. The place-based approach typically brings together a wide range of local actors around an ambitious community-change agenda, and then the foundation provides resources to implement key

components in whatever strategy the community develops. The overarching intent is to produce fundamental changes in services, systems, and community problem solving – in ways that materially improve health and quality of life over the long run.

## A CLOSER LOOK

How does place-based philanthropy happen? Well, it is important to understand there is no single formula. Each community and issue will dictate the best way to respond to its particular needs. Some foundations provide grants only for evidence-based programs, while other foundations encourage their communities to develop innovative strategies appropriate to the local situation.

Place-based work also varies with regard to the amount and type of capacity building (training, technical assistance, networking among grantees) that the foundation supports.

But there are some all-purpose guidelines that organizations engaged in place-based work should keep in mind:

- Understand the unique context of the communities in which you work.
- Engage trusted community changemakers in every part of the process.
- Set clear expectations (including objectives and evaluation metrics) with your community partners.
- Make the focus “how much change” not “how much money.”
- Scale matters – do not reach too far at the expense of going deep.
- Plan carefully to put the right resources in the right places.
- Think long-term and about sustainability.
- Take risks, but manage them carefully.

Naturally, some place-based initiatives have proven more successful than others. High-profile disappointments can be instructive to organizations intending to venture into this highly focused and responsive grantmaking. One lesson that stands out, almost ironically, is that too much money or too many resources all at once, and without a clear directive for implementation, can actually overwhelm a community to the point of hindering its progress. It is advisable to consider carefully what a community can handle against what it needs.

Imagine trying to wash the dishes from your dinner party with a fire hose. It would be an ambitious approach, but clearly problematic.

Taking into account the hard lessons that other foundations have learned about place-based philanthropy, KBR is

carefully designing *Healthy Places NC* as an approach that will allow us to contribute constructively to locally driven work – in a manner that achieves the mutual interests of KBR and its community partners.

How *Healthy Places NC* will manifest as a community strategy is likely to vary across the counties we serve as a function of the personalities of the people and organizations involved. Local politics, community culture, and KBR’s historical relationships with local actors will be influential, as well. Also, grantor-grantee relationships are expected to evolve over time. As KBR and the funded communities gain more experience working with each other and learn more about the nature of local issues, it will become possible to hold deeper

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and more open conversations, leading to new ideas for community change. Depending on the county, we might use local or regional intermediaries, and our program officers will absolutely depend on different, more engaged approaches to their work.

Place-based philanthropy is inherently evolutionary, with early developmental phases setting the stage for more refined, targeted, and bolder strategies later. To understand and capitalize fully on emerging opportunities, KBR will use various mechanisms for evaluation and real-time learning. This will help us recognize what has been accomplished in each community while also pointing out advances in thinking, leadership, and relationships that allow for deeper layers of work.

Based on a selection process that was both statistical and evaluative – analyzing populations, health needs, the local economy, and existing organizational capacity – KBR has identified 11 counties across North Carolina that we feel are best positioned to benefit from *Healthy Places NC*. From these 11, we will choose three to five counties as pilot communities, starting small with this initiative and growing it carefully as we learn what works and what does not. These generally poor and/or rural counties all have the benefit of effective local problem solvers who are managing to do well organizing around and responding to some primary community health issues while struggling with others. Since KBR has past experiences of success within each of the selected counties, we feel confident undertaking a new strategy there as we create peer comparison groups both inside the state and nationally.

*VIEWS FROM THE FIELD* is offered by GIH as a forum for health grantmakers to share insights and experiences. If you are interested in participating, please contact Faith Mitchell at 202.452.8331 or [fmitchell@gih.org](mailto:fmitchell@gih.org).