



The home pictured was built by BHC and is located in Church Hill, a neighborhood in Richmond’s East End.

Richmond—Virginia’s capital city—is a thoroughly modern metropolis with deep, historical roots. Where once tobacco was king, Richmond’s economy is now focused around financial, legal, and government services. Today, this once small southern city is in a thriving and expanding region. But growth brings growing pains, and some of the region’s residents are concerned about being left behind.

Today, several local leaders, including Ms. Garland, are helping to jumpstart equitable redevelopment efforts across the Richmond region. Together, these leaders comprise Richmond’s Invest Health team. Invest Health is a collaboration between the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Reinvestment Fund that provides opportunities for local leaders in the public and private

Take the East End neighborhood, for example, which is home to four of the city’s six large-scale public housing developments. The city has plans to help curb the effects of concentrated poverty by revitalizing the oldest of the four developments and turning it into mixed-income housing.

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“My parents grew up in the East End,” said Sheryl Garland, vice president for health policy and community relations at VCU (Virginia Commonwealth University) Health System. “My family goes back generations in that community, and so do the families of many people who still live there. But some of them don’t feel like the changes in the community support them and the needs of their families.”

As an example, Garland mentioned an abandoned old house in the East End, recently bought with a low-interest loan by a developer for \$16,000, rehabilitated, and put back on the market for \$160,000. “The numbers look great on paper,” she said, “but that money doesn’t go back into the neighborhood. The folks who’ve been living there their whole lives don’t benefit. They can’t afford their own neighborhood anymore. Until they see an effort being made to balance the affordable and unaffordable, many may feel they’re being pushed out.”

sectors to work together in mid-size cities such as Richmond on new initiatives aimed at improving health and well-being, especially in low-income neighborhoods that are facing the biggest barriers to better health.

Several neighborhoods across the Richmond region are experiencing such barriers. In particular, low-income, largely minority communities—including 13 census tracts where child poverty exceeds 60%—are deeply affected by the lack of affordable housing, access to healthy foods, and sustainable employment opportunities. According to U.S. Census data, 48% of Richmond qualifies as a food desert, and low-income residents suffer disproportionately high rates of heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and obesity compared to more affluent residents.

Returning to the East End, for example, individuals live in concentrated poverty in public housing developments and the surrounding neighborhood amidst a landscape of deteriorating buildings and vacant lots with very little

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INVEST HEALTH is a new initiative that brings together diverse leaders from mid-sized U.S. cities across the nation to develop new strategies for increasing and leveraging private and public investments to accelerate improvements in neighborhoods facing the biggest barriers to better health. Learn more at investhealth.org.



Officials with Virginia Commonwealth University meet with the Reinvestment Fund team.

green space. An analysis by the VCU Center for Society and Health, found that residents of Richmond’s large public housing complexes have a life expectancy as much as 20 years less than residents of more affluent neighborhoods.

The city has been focused in recent years on disrupting pockets of concentrated poverty. Its Office of Community Wealth Building is identifying ways to do so successfully—in a manner that increases socioeconomic and racial/ethnic diversity, reduces disparities, and doesn’t simply relocate poverty—by working with the communities themselves, taking the views and needs of long-time residents into account. Richmond’s Invest Health team intends to build on that foundation by working with residents to understand their perspectives and the policy changes they seek to support equitable redevelopment in their neighborhoods.

One very important lesson the team has learned: everyone comes to the table with different knowledge, perspectives, and priorities. Forming a citizens advisory board, for example, does not necessarily mean the citizens serving on it feel equally empowered to participate in the discussions. And language matters—a lot. As Sheryl Garland

explained, “We have to agree on the definitions of the words we’re using to be sure we’re all talking the same language. What constitutes ‘affordable housing’ to me, may not be the same for you.”

While working to identify the best ways to engage residents, the Invest Health RVA team also is focused on conducting a Market Value Analysis (MVA). The MVA is a way of mapping Richmond’s existing housing market, using a statistical cluster analysis, to identify the best opportunities for investing limited capital resources in ways that will spark revitalization and redevelopment in economically challenged neighborhoods. Its findings will create a baseline for stakeholders to understand which investment options are most likely to allow resident to stay in place, for example, or which areas are ripe for

increased affordable housing, and it provides a way to measure change going forward.

“We see the MVA as a tool to spark deeper and richer conversations among stakeholders around what kind of city and region we want to be,” said Mark Constantine, president and CEO of Richmond Memorial Health Foundation and an Invest Health RVA team member. “Right now, we can see that there’s a kind of reverse urban flight happening where the city is growing more affluent and the suburbs less so. Assuring equitable redevelopment in the city as well as the surrounding counties will help us to avoid displacing people and instead create more choices for residents of every income level all across the region—for more affordable housing, for increased employment opportunities, and certainly for better health.”

The plan is to complete the MVA by the fall of 2017, so that the Invest Health RVA team can convene people around the results and influence public housing policy and private capital investment. The team already has brought together a wide variety of stakeholders from across the region, including city and county policymakers and representatives from a variety of local government agencies, business and industry leaders, academics, and representatives from philanthropy and community-based organizations to lay the groundwork for the MVA. The team plans to bring those same stakeholders, plus others, back together to determine the path forward, including identifying existing housing, zoning, transportation, and other types of public policies that must be modified to better support equitable redevelopment and attract strategic private investment.

“Social justice is the smartest, most efficacious, most cost-effective public policy we could pursue, and the data backs me up on that,” said Laura Lafayette, chief executive officer of the Richmond Association of Realtors. “Take education. The right thing to do is to make sure that all children have equal access to high-quality educational opportunities. But it’s also the best thing to do for a community’s bottom line because a thriving economy needs an educated, healthy workforce. And that’s what we’re doing with Invest Health and the MVA—figuring out together how to equitably develop the built environment across our region so that it elevates peoples’ lives and improves their health.”

