INVEST HEALTH community profile

Akron, Ohio

Once home to four major tire manufacturers, Akron was known during most of the 20th century as the “Rubber Capital of the World.” In recent decades, however, manufacturing in this mid-sized, northern Ohio city has declined significantly, just as it has all across America’s rust belt. Today, only the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company has retained its world headquarters here. As this once-thriving industrial center works to reinvent itself, the focus is now on building up the polymers industry through the University of Akron, which is a national leader in polymer science and engineering. Local leaders have rebranded Akron the “City of Invention,” and increasing examples of urban renewal and community revitalization are appearing across the cityscape.

One of Akron’s oldest neighborhoods, however, has been largely overlooked by revitalization efforts until now. Middlebury is a drive-through community dissected by busy thoroughfares and featuring large empty lots dotted with dilapidated industrial, commercial, and residential buildings. These long-neglected properties serve as daily reminders of the services and amenities that are largely missing from this neighborhood, which lies sandwiched between rebounding communities that have received more capital investments in recent years.

"I grew up not far from Middlebury in the 1960s, and I remember it very differently than it is now," says Terry Albanese, the mayor’s assistant for education and health initiatives. “There were a lot of storefronts and small businesses then, but they’re gone now, and most people just drive through on their way to somewhere else. It’s time to bring Middlebury back and re-connect it to surrounding communities.”

Today, several local leaders, including Ms. Albanese, are helping to jumpstart sustainable revitalization efforts in Middlebury. Together, they comprise Akron’s Invest Health team, which is working to improve conditions in the community. 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 sectors to work together in mid-size cities such as Akron on new initiatives aimed at improving health and well-being, especially in neighborhoods like Middlebury that are facing the biggest barriers to better health.

Middlebury is a diverse, mostly lower income neighborhood of approximately 5,800 residents, 51 percent of whom identify as white, 40 percent as black, 3 percent as Asian, and 7 percent as other ethnicities. The average annual household income here is $27,478, compared to $49,392 for the City of Akron. In Middlebury, 40 percent of residents live in poverty, and 62 percent of those residents are unemployed. Among Middlebury residents aged 25 or older, 24 percent did not graduate from high school, compared to 15 percent for Akron residents.

Further, of the nearly 2,700 housing units in the neighborhood, 78 percent are occupied, and of those, 68 percent are occupied by renters, while only 32 percent are owner-occupied. Mostly built prior to 1940, neighborhood housing is old and has not been well-maintained. The average Middlebury home is valued at $53,139, compared to $107,041 for the average Akron home. In Akron, only 7 percent of owner-occupied units are valued at $40,000 or less—a stark contrast to 33 percent in Middlebury.

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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.
Neighborhood statistics like these often correlate with health disparities—as is the case in Middlebury. Here, the average life expectancy is 67 years, compared to 77 years for residents of Summit County, in which Akron is located. Middlebury residents are more likely than Summit County residents to experience a late-stage cancer diagnosis, particularly for prostate and colon cancers, and to suffer from heart disease, diabetes, and obesity. Cancer and heart disease account for nearly half of all deaths in Summit County, but more than 60 percent of Middlebury deaths. Further, across Summit County, blacks are more likely than whites to develop obesity (39 percent and 26 percent, respectively) and diabetes (21 percent and 10 percent, respectively), and these disparities have worsened in recent years. The community also suffers from shortages of primary care and dental care providers.

The Invest Health team hopes to interrupt these health disparities by working with residents to prioritize, plan, and develop programs and assets that promote physical, social, and economic health. While just beginning to identify the best ways to engage residents in their efforts, the team anticipates that its primary focus areas are likely to include attracting economic investments and recreating the old central business district, increasing and improving housing options, and implementing workforce development initiatives to help residents launch and manage local businesses. There also is significant interest in turning an abandoned railroad track into a community hike and bike path and connecting it to similar efforts in adjacent neighborhoods.

The team emphasizes the fact that, despite the statistics, Middlebury has a lot going for it. According to Albanese, there is a strong sense of community in Middlebury, including very active churches and community groups. There’s a new elementary school with a new community center attached, as well as a grocery store that has erased the community’s previous status as a food desert. There is access to public transportation, with interest in possibly creating a small transportation hub as part of the central business district development.

And there is space—buildings to rehab and parcels of land to work with—which is often limited in urban areas. “The challenge here,” says Kyle Julien, a member of the Invest Health team and director of urban planning for the East Akron Neighborhood Development Corporation, “is bringing city planners and private property owners, who likely don’t live here, together with the residents who do, and engaging them in a decision-making process that examines how best to use the space to create what community members really want and need—from housing and infrastructure to services and amenities to green spaces and more pedestrian-friendly streets. What are the options that will make this a healthier place for people to live and work?”

To help bring residents into the process, the Invest Health team includes Marissa Little, neighborhood revitalization coordinator for the Neighborhood Network, a program of Habitat for Humanity of Summit County. Marissa spends much of her time on the front stoops and in the living rooms of Middlebury residents talking about the neighborhood. Recently, she has begun describing Invest Health’s efforts and the connections between a vibrant community and better health. She also connected the Invest Health team to the Middlebury “Better Block” event she organized in summer 2016. It was a celebratory weekend event that brought together local residents and representatives from 20 community-based organizations to explore ideas for community improvements. From that event, the “What’s Next?” committee, which includes Invest Health, was launched, and in January 2017, a planning retreat was held to figure out next steps.

“There’s so much potential here to create something wonderful,” says Little. “The residents care about this community. I hear from them all the time. They might not be making the connections yet between their own health and their concerns about the traffic or the trash that gets dumped in the empty lots. But they know they want things to be better. They want better housing and to be able to walk to a coffee shop, and those things are the foundation for building a healthier community.”

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