

# CONNECTION AND LEADERSHIP COUNT:

## Creating a Network to Help Dissolve Homelessness



Launched and led by Community Rebuilders, the Gather Resources & Align Community Efforts (G.R.A.C.E.) Network is an alliance of community-based organizations (CBOs) in Kent County working to provide social services, healthcare and educational support services to individuals experiencing homelessness.



### ABOUT THE EVALUATION

The health sector has increasingly focused on the need to address **social determinants of health (SDOH)** – the environmental conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. Stakeholders agree that addressing SDOH requires collaboration and integration among health plans, health systems and CBOs.

G.R.A.C.E. Network was one of three such collaborations evaluated by NORC in the report *Social Determinants of Health Data Sharing at the Community Level*. The initiative's efforts to **break down silos and connect CBOs** is leading to greater collaboration, efficiency and quality of people-centered care.

[Read the full report.](#)

*The evaluation found **common beneficial features** across the initiatives. These can help guide policymakers, CBOs and others pursuing SDOH efforts.*

## 1. Strong Leadership

Initiatives benefit from a strong leader who can build connections among the community, help solve problems and keep everyone invested and committed.

### G.R.A.C.E. NETWORK EXAMPLES

- Participants from three organizations explicitly credited **Community Rebuilders** for G.R.A.C.E. Network's success to date.
- Community Rebuilders is a small and agile leader – helping the network **respond quickly to today's needs**.
- Participants appreciate that G.R.A.C.E. Network has created a culture where all organizations have a **shared investment in its success** and a voice in decision making.



"[Community Rebuilders Executive Director Vera Beech] has been very patient throughout... articulating her vision for G.R.A.C.E. Network... recognizing where each of the individual organizations are coming from, and that our needs and our desires may be a little bit different."

G.R.A.C.E. NETWORK PARTNER

## 2. “Homegrown” Mission

Combined with local culture, this mission provides motivation for change and brings people together in support of an initiative.

### G.R.A.C.E. NETWORK EXAMPLES

- G.R.A.C.E. Network finds that the shared mission of **addressing homelessness, food insecurity and health equity** motivates organizations from many sectors to join.
- A shared mission helps **keep organizations in G.R.A.C.E. Network engaged**, since it can take time to see a full return on investment.



### Many G.R.A.C.E. Network partners now screen for other SDOH factors

A 10-question Health-Related Social Needs tool helps broaden organizations’ views to better serve those receiving care.

## 3. Robust Network

A strong, engaged network of organizations who trust each other is essential for a referral program to be useful.

### G.R.A.C.E. NETWORK EXAMPLES

- Participating organizations update and help the G.R.A.C.E. Network referral resources **keep current**, so no dead-end referrals are made.
- Some G.R.A.C.E. Network participants use the system to **track whether individuals follow their referrals** to receive services – and if so, where.
- A majority of interviewees feel the network is **breaking down silos** between organizations that serve the same populations but were previously not communicating.



### Partners are choosing G.R.A.C.E. Network for its resources

Community hospitals that had previously invested in other systems were impressed by the network’s strength. Another health system tried to develop its own network for five years – then discovered that G.R.A.C.E. Network met its needs.

## G.R.A.C.E. Network Partners

**20 cross-sector organizations** are connecting housing, health, early education, transportation, employment and more.

- Arbor Circle Youth Development
- Cherry Health
- Community Food Club
- Community Rebuilders
- EuzenConnect
- Fair Housing Center of West Michigan
- Family Promise of Grand Rapids
- Goodwill Industries of Greater Grand Rapids
- Grand Rapids Urban League
- Great Start Collaborative of Kent County
- Head Start for Kent County
- Health Net of West Michigan
- Hope Network Housing Community Development
- Hope Network Transportation
- Kent School Services Network
- Literacy Center of West Michigan
- Mel Trotter Ministries
- Priority Health Choice, Inc.
- Spectrum Health West Michigan
- Wellhouse

The evaluation also found **important challenges** for SDOH networks to address.

**Managing the diverse needs of participating organizations** from different sectors is complex.

Some network participants may not have access to their usual referral partners.

**Competing networks at state and local levels** can complicate the work of community-level initiatives.

Multiple similar efforts lead to confusion, diffusion of efforts and inefficiencies.

**Workflow changes and duplicative data entry** can make adopting the referral platform challenging.

Community-based organizations (CBOs) may be federally required to report in other systems, or an initiative's system may not capture CBO-specific data.

**Long-term sustainability** requires long-term funding.

All three report initiatives rely on private sector grants and government funding – CBOs with small budgets can't afford a monthly network access fee.

## What's Next for G.R.A.C.E. Network

### ✓ Expand the network of organizations and populations served

For example, identifying high users of emergency departments and connecting them with supportive services that can reduce their reliance.



### ✓ Help more network organizations participate in closed-loop referrals

When organizations follow up and report the services they provide in response to referral, patients' future care is improved.



### ✓ Continue tracking outcomes and impact

Data shows which aspects of SDOH are well-supported – and which gaps can be met.



### ✓ Secure additional funding

This allows more CBOs to engage in the network without the barrier of a membership cost.

