

Creating Healthier Communities Through Food Justice in Kensington, Philadelphia
Chitra Parikh, Princeton University
June 3 — August 9, 2019
United States of America

More than ¼ of residents in the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia are dependent on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), a federal program for food-insecure, low-income individuals and families (in accordance with Community Characteristics found at www.fns.usda.gov). The Kensington, which has been characterized as the epicenter of the opioid crisis, faces high rates of unemployment, homelessness, and overdose deaths. While food pantry distributions and soup kitchen handouts are available options for food-insecure residents in the area, these resources can sometimes feel “dehumanizing.” Furthermore, the types of food offered through these resources are often salted or canned in fructose syrup for preservation; this is detrimental for those residents who suffer from diabetes. With food insecure adults having a risk of diabetes 3 times higher than that of normal adults, it is important to address food as a primary social determinant of health in Philadelphia, especially in the context of the abundance of unhealthy food options in the neighborhood.

In the summer of 2018, the Health Design Lab at Thomas Jefferson University, in collaboration with the Community Design Collaborative and architecture firm KieranTimberlake, launched a pilot program that used a vintage Airstream trailer to serve as a community engagement platform through an initiative entitled CoLab PHL. The trailer traveled to various neighborhoods, providing programming such as free health screenings and pop-up workshops in order to engage with Philadelphia residents and create safe, community spaces. The initiative, which was developed with community partners such as Impact Services and the New Kensington Community Development Corporation, was largely a success in engaging community residents and providing a voice to each of the CoLab’s visitors through interactive activities. By the end of the summer, the trailer had increased its engagement by 4x. Through the first summer of CoLab, the team at the Health Design Lab learned about the health needs of the community and the importance of engaging with residents in public space parks and community spaces. They heard a need to change the narrative of those civic spaces that have been overcome by the opioid crisis.

The initiative also received feedback from the community that expressed the need for healthy foods programming. My proposed project, which is a direct response to the learnings of the first summer of CoLab, is the creation and administration of a nutrition education curriculum as part of the pilot of the food access program in the summer of 2019. The educational component of the program will be actualized through paper materials as well as through programming delivered through a series of outdoor community dinners held in Kensington. The project grant will contribute to staffing of the educational program and the planning and execution of these community dinners. The dinners will serve as an opportunity to learn about the issues of food access and co-design future long-term programs around healthy living through food with residents. Other funds will be used for printing costs of materials related to the educational programming as well as for marketing and promotional materials.

This project seeks to address peace-making in the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia by changing the narrative of civic spaces and cultivating community through food. For food insecure residents, peace would be sought through outdoor weekly community dinners held in civic spaces that have overrun by the opioid epidemic. Alongside these curated, made from scratch dinners, we will empower the residents to make informed nutritional choices by providing the aforementioned educational programming on nutrition and preparing culturally appropriate and healthy meals. Activities for this summer’s food access program will include meal preparation demonstrations (providing subsidized, healthy ingredients) and nutrition education conversations. Additionally, we will directly capture the voices of the community through audio and video interviews and photographs.

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The execution of my project will be rooted in the mindsets of design thinking (a creative problem-solving framework). Design thinking, which is based on the central idea of human-centered design, involves not only a mindset of putting the user first but also a mindset of constant iteration and feedback. The project would involve numerous intervals of feedback, and I would work to incorporate this feedback as the summer progresses by synthesizing qualitative data through design tools. The research portion of the program — led by Dr. Bon Ku, a nationally recognized leader on health design thinking — will seek to capture the needs, perceptions and desires of the Philadelphians living with food insecurity.

For this project, I will work under the expertise and supervision of Dr. Bon Ku, Executive Director, Health Design Lab and Dr. Robert Pugliese, Managing Director, Health Design Lab. I will also be mentored by other Health Design Faculty: Dr. Kristy Shine, Dr. Geoffrey Hayden and Dr. J Matthew Fields. In addition to continuing the partnership with community partners such as New Kensington Community Development Corporation and Impact Services that was instrumental in creating CoLab, I will work with a team of other undergraduate and medical students working at the Health Design Lab to actualize this initiative. CoLab has already partnered with the Community Design Collaborative (an organization based in Philadelphia) as well as architecture firm KieranTimberlake. Moving forward, we will continue to build on the local community's assets by partnering with community-based food organizations that have already have a proven history and relationship with local residents.

In terms of continuity, the Health Design Lab hosts interns and students each summer that would be able to continue the program past the summer of 2019. This project will continue to fill a gap that emerged when the Farm to Families produce box program (run through New Kensington Community Development Corporation) concluded in July of 2018. Anticipated outcomes include less aversion (on a community scale) to healthy food due to cost deterrents, increased awareness and education about nutritional choices, and a co-design of long term scalable food programming in residents with Kensington.

In order to measure the impact of my project, I plan to collect data from the education component such as attendance rates and the quantity of paper materials distributed. I will also hold a pre/post-programming survey for my component specifically -- gauging the level of knowledge and awareness of healthy eating. The surveys will include both qualitative components and quantitative components (through Likert scales) and will be administered via paper. Questions for the pre- and post-programming survey will be specific to the Kensington neighborhood and will assess any changes in residents' decision-making surrounding healthy food choices. For the larger food access program, I will gather feedback from community collaborators on their perceived impact of the project through qualitative interviews. Throughout the course of this project, there would be a constant conversation that would involve numerous intervals of feedback, and I would work to incorporate this feedback as the summer progresses by synthesizing qualitative data through design tools.

Challenges that I anticipate for this project include overcoming the negative perceptions that residents may have towards external organizations coming into their community. We plan to overcome that challenge by partnering directly with non-profit organizations that have already have an established relationship with the community and amplifying the existing efforts around healthy food in Kensington. Another challenge that the project may face is criticism of the temporary nature of pop-up summer events. However, meetings with community based organizations have already identified a lack of food programming during summers. CoLab will seek to fill this gap between spring and fall programming of existing food-based non-profit organizations.